

“WHEN I KISSED HER CHEEK”: THEATRICALS OF SEXUALITY AND
THE FRAMED GAZE IN ESTHER’S NARRATION OF BLEAK HOUSE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore a sexual subtext in Charles Dickens's novel Bleak House. In Esther's narrative, dramatic vignettes expose female characters expressing the simultaneous possibilities of innocent, intense friendship and lesbian encounter. The blushing, tearing, kissing, and hyperbolic use of pet names combined with rhythmic delays, repetitions, and exclamatory punctuation work to flaunt a persuasion to embrace sensibility that channels characters to act toward social good.

The gaze, magnified through a narrative frame technique, heralds these duplicitous scenes. At the same time that Dickens creates a new way of looking at the text, a special framed gaze, a multiple, crisscrossed gaze, he also deploys a theatrical voice, exclusive to Esther, that is shaped by conventions of the theatre in the narrative, and which simulates the excitement of live theatre as an imitation of recurrent rhythmic patterns of sexual experience. Synaesthesia blends the visual and aural, as Dickens invites a gendered role-reversal. Female readers through Esther's narration view the world through the eyes of men with all of the privilege and power the part endows. Dickens uses this excitement and transgender boundary crossing to construct a path of sensibility through the bleakness of the novel to lead characters toward social action.

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DEDICATION

Ron, how could I ever express your grace in my life—without you, my writing would lose its lyric. Your belief in me even when I don't know why leads me back to reason. This thesis is dedicated to you and to my grandmother Nanny, who would have loved you too.

INTRODUCTION

Bleak House swings like a pendulum in the fog between two very different narrators, an omniscient observer and the novel's protagonist, Esther Summerson. Esther, abandoned by her mother and raised by a woman she later learns is her aunt, is taken in as a ward of the court along with Ada Claire and Richard Carstone by their guardian John Jarndyce. They await judgment in the Chancery case Jarndyce and Jarndyce—an inheritance morass that crushes everyone in its path except for the vampiric lawyers that feed for generations on its claimants. Along the way, the novel reveals an aristocratic sex scandal whose secret threatens to taint our heroine Esther and succeeds in killing her parents. We encounter abused and grossly neglected children, love triangles, childish adults, feuding neighbors, ambitious law clerks, money grubbing families, and mysterious deaths. Through it all it is Esther's voice, which breathes a pulse of life and action to combat the surrounding bleakness. Esther's point of view is one of keen observation, dramatic sensibility, and veiled sexuality.

Dickens's fascination with Esther's gaze and how it teases out sensual aspects of characters' interactions is the impetus of this exploration. In the pages that follow, I will define and examine how the gaze, specifically, the altered, framed gaze, amplifies Dickens's message of sexuality in Bleak House. Building upon the foundation of the gaze as defined by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey, and others, I invite readers to envision the framed gaze as a narrative technique that Dickens employs to control Esther's point of view. The framed gaze allows Dickens to control the narrative flow, both in tone and pace, to enact a variety of synaesthetic¹ effects that blend the visual and the aural. Dickens's fusion of framed gazing and theatrical devices such as asides and exaggeration in Esther's narration evidences his intent to

¹ Synaesthesia is a condition where the senses are disordered as we see in Arthur Rimbaud's visualization of vowels as colors in his poem "Vowels" or in the writings of Vladimir Nabokov.

use sexuality in the novel to elicit action from the readers. This exploration will raise the curtain on Esther's narrative performance by proposing an understanding of Esther's theatrical voice and framed gaze and by examining how the connection between voice and gaze affects narration, gender, and sexuality in Bleak House.

Dickens, through the gaze, emphasizes theatrical aspects and apparent heightened sexuality. Numerous provocative scenes in the novel beg questions: does Dickens lose control of his experimental appropriation of the female voice through Esther's narration or does he seek a purposeful titillation with a dash of lesbian eroticism to bolster Victorian sales?² Is it possible that we fixate on sexuality and thus lesbianism due to a contemporary hypersensitiveness where sexuality lurks in every look, word, and gesture? The debate between whether the novel portrays lesbianism or Victorian female friendship has persisted to our day. Our contemporary sexual openness presents a challenge to the notion of innocent female friends, perhaps allowing the true nature of these relationships to air in open rooms. And as Dickens flirts with us through an exploration of transgender boundary crossing in Bleak House and his depictions of what contemporary readers may construe as unconventional female friendships, he also plays on conventional narrative techniques of voice and gaze. Bleak House is transgressive in more ways than one.

It is ironic that Esther's point of view helps us to see that Dickens commandeers the female voice and invites the female reader to gaze upon the world as a man, while still retaining

² Tess Cosslet warns that "we must beware of trying to read Victorian representations of female friendship. . .they are not anticipatory images of modern feminist solidarity or lesbian consciousness. Geoffrey Carter argues specifically that Dickens's writing suggests "the scandalous subject of lesbianism" (146), while Sara Putzell-Korab speaks of Victorians, stating to "recogni[ze] that the Victorians were aware that women can feel passion for each other may help. . .to clarify such ambiguous scenes in Victorian novels. She cites evidence that "French novels, schoolgirls' experiences, observation—all are means by which Victorians learned that women can love women sexually" (Putzell-Korab 184). James Eli Adams points out that sexual desires outside the norm are difficult to apprehend and assess; "this has proved a special challenge with regard to lesbian relationships. . .confined within traditionally feminine privacies. . .under the guise of 'romantic friendship' or spinsterhood" (134).

her femininity—“she may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (Mulvey, “Afterthoughts” 24). The novel, in turn, requires male readers to don the role of woman.

Dickens successfully effects this role-reversal by deploying synaesthesia, blending voice and gaze; this revolutionary narrative technique emphasizes our own bodies and our ability to act.

My discussion will illuminate Dickens’s technique of framing the gaze. I will discuss how his framed gaze (apparently paradoxically) heralds his reliance on a theatrical voice for Esther’s narration, which offers an alternative perspective to the cinematic voice of the omniscient narrator.³ Esther’s narration includes theatrical asides, soliloquies, direct address, and exaggeration of action and speech, but the cinematic voice merely observes, employing aerial shots and montage, especially evident in the opening sequence of the novel. Comparing two distinct visual voices exposes variations in tone, energy, and tempo that go farther to elucidate Dickens’s sexual intent in Bleak House than subtle charges of pornography or justifications of intense friendliness. The sensory narrative strategies of framed gaze and theatrical voice signal Dickens’s controlled message that audiences should poise themselves for a virtuoso literary performance.

Dickens’s art manifests itself in the twofold ability to permit audiences to both lose themselves in the stimulating sensation of emotional sensibility through identification with characters’ feelings and simultaneously to distance themselves in analytic pleasure. Dickens accomplishes this by juxtaposing an overflow of emotion, brought about by his transmission of

³ In Aspects of the Novel, E. M. Forster contends that Dickens bounces readers from the omniscient narrator to Esther, at times snatching the pen from Esther’s hands (79). Leonard W. Deen splits the two narrations into “the sentimental and the ironic-satiric” (216). Albert J. Guerard names the two narrators Esther and the “roving conductor” (333). Joan D. Winslow describes the difference between the novel’s main voices as largely imaginative, declaring that “Esther is straightforward, responsible, involved, while the third-person narrator is an extravagantly fantastical yet aloof spectator” (2).

theatrical conventions and energy, to a delight in analysis that allows us to view the scaffolding he has erected for our perusal. I argue against the notion that Bleak House completely follows the nineteenth-century realistic novel convention of encouraging readers to lose themselves in the story as though it were transparent. By framing the gaze, Dickens presents a device similar to the *verfremdungseffekt*,⁴ proclaiming the coming theatrics as theatrics and allowing for the conscious apprehension of his rhetoric. Critics like Frederick Karl promote the idea that Dickens was “writing with a sense of high moral purpose” (141). And through the staging of theatrical scenes, spotlighted by a framed gaze, Dickens both showcases and shrouds sexuality in the novel.

Given his own passionate involvement in the theatre, an art form most closely related to the expression of the energy of human interactions, it is not surprising that Dickens should deploy theatrical conventions in his novels. According to Edgar and Eleanor Johnson, Dickens’s “imagination and personality were steeped in the stage; the world in which his spirit dwelt was a world brilliant in theatrical hue and violent in theatrical movement, crammed with a huge cast of fantastic actors” (3). As I will illustrate, Dickens’s use of theatrical conventions attempts to convey through his writing the energy and pleasure of the sexual experience without being overtly sexual. As Ronald Pearsall notes, “Of all the writers that could have explored the sexual nexus between man and woman, none was better equipped than Dickens, but like his contemporaries he fought shy of the explicit. . .using analogies to indicate. . .sexuality” (68). Dickens’s ability to both amplify and mute sexual, perhaps lesbian, scenes in Bleak House has

⁴ The German term for alienation effect where specific devices are used to limit audiences’ ability to involve themselves emotionally during a performance with the assumption that emotional identification blocks pedagogical aims.

led to scholarly contemplation.⁵ In particular, I believe that when we examine the framed gaze and theatrical voice of Esther's narration, we witness the directed rhythms and patterns of sexuality. Certainly, patterns of rising action and rhythmic delays are not unique to Dickens's writing; however, in Dickens, we find an emphasis and showmanship that directs us to these scenes and their artful mimicry of sexuality. Dickens encourages his audience to become voyeurs—but then the writer goes a step beyond voyeurism by also eliciting social action.

The framed gaze demands our notice and once Dickens has our attention, he presents a theatrical, cathartic session that dispels the gloomy problems that afflict the residents of the world of Bleak House. Dickens doesn't want us to melt into the novel, entertained and spent—he has pedagogical concerns. Throughout the novel he sets up intense scenes of gazing and drama, characters meet other characters and are instantly delighted and courteous—so full of emotion that it overflows in them, enacting an interaction that makes the importance and humanity of others foremost. Characters see how loved, appreciated, and respected they are—this in turn causes emotion in them and the generation of energy is meant to cycle powerfully in the reader. The energy, in turn, is released outward in the form of social action—it is this energy that may inspire characters and readers to act compassionately. Esther's sensibility empowers her attempt to save the orphaned boy Jo by nursing him back to health despite some characters' fears of his contagion. The overflow of emotions that Esther and Ada bring forth mimics conventions of the human sexual experience. Dickens manipulates sexuality for social good. This is the way, in Dickens's estimation, to stamp out the bleakness of the world he envisions—the exchange of energy at the level of excitement that live theatre and the sexual experience reach to transform the reader. This transformation through the devices of the framed gaze and

⁵ Refer to footnote two for the discussion of representative critical views of sexuality and lesbianism in the Victorian era.

theatrical voice encourage characters like Esther to work for social good and to ease suffering and illness exemplified in her surrogate mothering of Caddy Jellyby, her attentions to the pitiful Peepy Jellyby, and her attempt to provide Jo with nursing care.

THEATRICAL VOICE

Following a long tradition of Bleak House critics viewing the omniscient and first-person narrations as dichotomous, as noted in the introduction, I propose that the omniscient narration resembles the cinematic in scope and tone, while Esther's first-person narration presents a theatrical model. By theatrical voice, I posit that the writing that follows theatrical conventions (asides, direct address, and exaggeration) is intended as spoken performance rather than solely silent reading. It exists as composition so filled with the energy of performance that the subjective reader yearns for its oral fulfillment. Theatre performance holds forth the prospect of more potential interaction and engagement between the spectator and the players than cinematic performance. The cinematic voice is a flatter reproduction of a live performance, and its perfection through editing separates itself from the delightful "mistakes," second thoughts, and improvisation that make live art wonderful and energetic; these possibilities, even in a perfectly performed, scripted, theatrical performance, loom in the air of the playhouse, but less in the editing cuts of the cinematic work. In Bleak House, theatrical audiences may exist as partners to the conventions of the theatre, poised to act out, especially when *verfremdungseffekt* and fourth wall conventions are broken, while cinematic audiences serve as a receiver of consciousness raising, setting up but not necessarily partaking in the action. Viewed this way, the cinematic and theatrical voices work together to inspire characters to act toward social good, but it is only in Esther's narration that this inspiration translates itself to deed.

The best example of cinematic omniscient narration occurs at the opening of the novel, in a sequence which critic Robert Alan Donovan likens to an image of a "roving eye, which, like the movie camera mounted on an overhead crane, can follow the action at will" (103):

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

(Dickens 1)

This establishing shot sets the voice of the omniscient narrator as an uninvolved spectator—he or she notices the mud, the smoke, and the frustrations of the beings it views, but takes no action to alleviate the bleak scene. The cinematic voice and eye surveying the scene raises consciousness but does not act. The most pronounced evidence of this lack of action reveals itself through the absence of verbs throughout the passage. The sufferings “accumulate” and “compound,” yet the emotional concern, sympathy, or sentiment remains flat. Just as in the narration, there is no sense in the description of meaningful interaction by characters, only “jostling” and “ill-temper.” The narrator’s move from “London” to “Smoke,” “Dogs,” “Horses,” and “Footpassengers” acts as a cinematic montage of associative editing—a series of contiguous shots materializing a

metaphorical and symbolic relationship. The “smoke” of “London” settles on all beings, where “footpassengers” are as “undistinguishable in mire” and as “splashed to their very blinkers” as their pitiful beastly counterparts.

In contrast to this cinematic voice, Esther’s narration blossoms as theatrical. In her introduction, three chapters into Bleak House, her vibrant voice rings out as if from the stage: “I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages for I know I am not clever” (Dickens 15). This aside to the reader announces Esther’s subjectivity, her characterization; she has the floor even as she pretends not to. Her self-effacing comments so abhorred by some critics⁶ read like asides to a live audience with the effect of dividing and compartmentalizing them from the rest of her narration. Set off parenthetically, Esther’s asides reveal a desire to speak to her audience and clarify possible misunderstandings. In the midst of the introductory soliloquy quoted above Esther states, “I have mentioned that, unless my vanity should deceive me (as I know it may, for I may be very vain, without suspecting it—though indeed I don’t) my comprehension is quickened when my affection is” (Dickens 16). Esther’s awareness that she requires emotional attachment to enact understanding contrasts sharply to Dickens’s depiction of other characters like Lady Dedlock who “by suppressing [her] true feelings follow[s] the path to self-destruction” (Karl 133).

We see many instances of this theatrical soliloquizing and the asides throughout Esther’s narration. Later in the novel, Esther comments on Richard’s well-being and the unfortunate effects of the Chancery on his character. At the conclusion of her matter-of-fact oratory she

⁶In a 1965 essay entitled “The Trouble with Esther,” William Axton raises scathing criticism of Esther’s character, calling her “ambiguous, if not repugnant” and stating that “Esther’s portion of the narrative has...a disingenuous ring” (545). Axton also notes Esther’s “ironic commentary; she damns with faint praise, employs paraphrase with devastating effect” and to this he argues that “many readers find in Esther a dreadful parody of the ideal Victorian woman” (545). Robert Garris positively seethes concerning Esther’s performance, calling it “actively detested and quietly ignored” and “a clumsy mistake which does not damage the book as a whole” despite how “disastrously unsuccessful, irritating, and repelling its heroine actually is” (141).

perorates: “I write these opinions, not because I believe that this or any other thing was so, because I thought so; but only because I did think so, and I want to be quite candid about all I thought and did” (Dickens 227). Although some readers may view Esther’s comments as awkward or paranoid at being watched, my analysis points to Esther’s theatrical perspective and how this perspective indicates a sophisticated awareness of the world and her role in it—an awareness that other characters in the novel seem to lack. She evidences this awareness by her direct address to readers, confirming that she recognizes her audience and wishes to ensure that they grasp her motivations. The impact of Esther’s theatrical voice lends her narration not only more humanity, but also an energy and excitement less present in the plodding, divorced omniscient narration that in its cinematic model is once removed from the energy of live human interaction with which Dickens imbues Esther’s voice.

Dickens’s use of theatrics through Esther’s narration emerges strikingly in a private scene between Esther and Ada where Ada confesses what Esther has already surmised—that Ada and Richard are secretly in love. This passage remains one of the best examples of Dickens’s dual ability to mesmerize his audience in excited sensibility and concurrently to distance the audience to allow for scrutinized analysis and interpretation. Dickens sets his frame through Esther’s gaze:

Now I observed that evening, as I had observed for some days past, that Ada and Richard were more than ever attached to each other’s society; which was but natural, seeing that they were going to be separated so soon. I was therefore not very much surprised, when we got home, and Ada and I retired up-stairs, to find Ada more silent than usual; though I was not quite prepared for her coming into my arms, and beginning to speak to me, with her face hidden. (Dickens 176)

Starting the scene sedately, Esther's calm can be seen in her report that she is "not very much surprised." Esther and Ada "retire" and, their interaction is described as "silent." In the continuing passage, Dickens quickly moves to histrionics sparked by the close intimate proximity of Esther and Ada. Once Ada's face is "hidden" in Esther's breast as Esther hugs Ada, we enter the realm of the body. The narrative pace increases rapidly with short rhythmic bursts copying sexual intensity as masterfully as live theatrical performance. The vacillation between exclamations and questions quickens and excites as the repeated "O"s mimic a clichéd lover's surprise of desire.

If Dickens flaunts sexuality between these two women for sensationalistic reasons, we might ask whether his writing becomes pornographic. Or could Dickens be using sexuality as a theatrical tool, as Esther hints in her opening soliloquy, "my comprehension is quickened when my affection is" (Dickens 16)? The scene's intense titillation begs attention:

'My darling Esther!' murmured Ada. 'I have a great secret to tell you!'

A mighty secret, my pretty one, no doubt!

'What is it, Ada?'

'O Esther, you would never guess!'

'Shall I try to guess?' said I.

'O no! Don't! Pray don't' cried Ada, very much startled by the idea of my doing so.

'Now, I wonder who it can be about?' said I, pretending to consider.

'It's about,' said Ada, in a whisper. 'It's about—my cousin Richard!'

'Well, my own!' said I, kissing her bright hair, which was all I could see. 'And what about him?'

‘O Esther, you would never guess!’

It was so pretty to have her clinging to me in that way, hiding her face; and to know that she was not crying in sorrow, but in a little glow of joy, and pride, and hope; that I would not help her just yet. (Dickens 176-77)

Ada murmurs exclamations while burrowed in Esther’s arms, discussing a secret about which it seems impossible for audiences not to venture guesses, and mumbling murmurs that turn to whispers, kisses, and clinging. In my view, to see the exchange without knowledge of Dickens’s aim to use theatrics as a spectacle for the simultaneous expression, sublimation, and manipulation of sexuality is to leave the audience in a position of unexamined voyeurism. Yet I believe this teasing volley is a self-conscious performance on Esther’s part complete with all the necessary vigor of live action. Esther occupies a decidedly male position, inviting audience members to try out the role. She exists as the strong protector of Ada’s secret and physicality, acting as a brace for Ada to lean upon as she confesses the secret that Esther, through her mastery of observation and assessment, has already gleaned.

We learn of Esther’s delight in her privileged position through her direct address to the audience that disrupts the fourth wall, starting with “It was so pretty to have her clinging to me in that way.” This position is one she desires to sustain, as Dickens milks the scene in repetitions and delays that enhance sentimental pleasure. Dickens allows Esther the complete freedom to express her desire for Ada, and she does so with oral professions of love, visual delighting, and physical enthusiasm:

‘He says—I know it’s very foolish, we are both so young—but he says,’ with a burst of tears, ‘that he loves me dearly, Esther.’

‘Does he indeed?’ said I. I never heard of such a thing! Why, my pet of pets, I could have told you that weeks and weeks ago!’

To see Ada lift up her flushed face in joyful surprise, and hold me round the neck, and laugh, and cry, and blush, and laugh, was so pleasant! (Dickens 176-77)

Dickens’s mastery of sublimated sexuality, in a scene that has nothing literally to do with sex, seems most pronounced here, as Ada’s speech, broken by dashes and description poises breathy before her orgasmic “burst of tears” followed by “joyful surprise” with the requisite physical manifestation of the blush. The evidence of theatrics exist in Esther’s aside to the audience “To see Ada lift up her flushed face.” Esther’s theatrical voice lends some credence to the argument that the scene contains lesbian overtones, yet at the same time, if we view dramatic art as an attempted mimicking of sexual rhythmic motifs to enact a recognition of human interactions, we find Dickens to be not simply a tantalizer but an enactor of social good. This dual purpose promotes emotional love and the passion often inextricably connected to love as a vehicle for social good, allowing characters and urging readers to act in both a performative and real sense.

The speed with which the continued scene moves with its ubiquitous exclamatory punctuation, marks a sexual pattern, evidenced by the women’s clipped dialogue, which crescendos, not to diminish until after several bursts of tears and cries when “Ada was soon quiet and happy” (Dickens 177):

‘O, that’s not quite the worst of it, Esther dear!’ cried Ada, holding me tighter, and laying down her face again upon my breast.

‘No?’ said I. ‘Not even that?’

‘No, not even that!’ said Ada, shaking her head.

‘Why, you never mean to say—!’ I was beginning in joke.

But Ada, looking up, and smiling through her tears, cried, ‘Yes, I do! You know I do!’ and then sobbed out, ‘With all my heart I do! With all my whole heart, Esther!’

I told her, laughing, why I had known that, too, just as well as I had known the other! And we sat before the fire, and I had all the talking to myself for a little while (though there was not much of it); and Ada was soon quiet and happy.

(Dickens 177)

The scene winds down with a tear-filled confession masked in ambiguity, as the women remain entwined. In my examination of the language of Ada’s actual confession, the object of her affection, though easily assumed to be Richard, remains unclear. Ada clearly states to Esther that Richard has made his love for her apparent. She relates to Esther: “‘he says,’ with a burst of tears, ‘that he loves me dearly, Esther’” (Dickens 177). However, the language moves from clear to ambiguous when Ada pleads her own feelings. Esther, without naming Richard, questions Ada: “‘Why you never mean to say—!’ And Ada replies, ‘Yes, I do! You know, you know I do!’ and then sobbed out, ‘With all my heart I do! With all my whole heart, Esther!’” (Dickens 177).

Some may argue that the subsequent plot movements confirm that the object of Ada’s affection is indeed Richard; however, why in the midst of the scene in question, as Esther “kisses [Ada’s] bright hair, which was all [she] could see,” does Dickens choose to cloak the love object in ambiguity? Esther and Ada’s interactions play out through their bodies—touching, voicing, and tearing. Note how Ada, described by Esther, in the above scene “look[s] up,” orienting her body, in this case her head, to Esther’s position. Ada looks “through her tears” focusing attention to her gaze and to how her tears may veil the view and the way of seeing as she voices

with her cry, “Yes, I do!” It is this connection of body, voice, and gaze that holds the key to comprehending questions of sexuality and possible sublimation of heterosexuality. Esther’s theatrical voice and performance announces the synaesthetic link of the visual and aural to the “acting” body, clarifying for her audience Esther’s ability to act to relieve Ada’s ambiguous anxiety and confusion. Social action on this personal, micro-level buffers larger social catastrophes like the Chancery and exist as first movements in meaningful social change.

THE FRAMED GAZE

My discussion of the gaze is informed by the insights of critics like Mary Devereaux and Laura Mulvey. Devereaux asserts that “the gaze has both a literal and a figurative component. Narrowly construed, it refers to actual looking. Broadly, or more metaphorically, it refers to a way of thinking about, and acting in, the world” (337). This adds to the foundation set by Lacan, who states that “in our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (73). Dickens uses the gaze (in some scenes in the place of dialogue) to transmit drama and power. This slippage creates ambiguous gaps that demand interpretation.

Building upon Lacan and Devereaux’s definitions, Mulvey’s theory of the gaze assumes a masculine observer and is informed by Freud’s theory of scopophilia, the voyeuristic “pleasure in looking” that he describes as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (qtd. in Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 1446). Freud’s gaze suggests that part of the transmission of the gaze involves pleasure and power; we will see this presence of sexuality, further developed through Mulvey’s theory, emerge through the gaze. Exploring cinematic representation of the gaze, Mulvey argues that “by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. . . .the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look. . .giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” while “the man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power. . .as the bearer of the look of the spectator” (“Visual Pleasure” 1449). Mulvey connects the slippage and sexual pleasure to gender, situating the gaze as male and setting up Dickens’s

construct of a male gaze through female eyes as an agency of rebellion. And as the audience is situated by the film Mulvey discusses, so also are they constructed by Dickens.

In relation to Bleak House, peering through the framed gaze schema, the first frame invites the reader to gaze at Esther's narrative performance through her asides, qualifications, and the quirks that have driven some critics, not recognizing Dickens's theatrical modes, mad.⁷ The second frame highlights Esther gazing at another character, and at times a third layer materializes where we gaze at Esther gazing at another character who is gazing at yet another character. These layers call special attention to the gaze and how its specific frames inform the coming theatrical scene.⁸ Esther and other characters in these framed scenes exhibit the elements necessary for a staged performance that emphasize the increased energy, histrionics, and melodrama.

In Bleak House we witness an example of the triple-layered framed gaze described sequentially above, when Esther, Ada, Mr. Skimpole, and Mr. Jarndyce attend a small church service while visiting Mr. Boythorn. In this exchange, Esther first encounters the "pretty girl" Rosa, the Frenchwoman Mademoiselle Hortense, and Lady Dedlock, yet Esther's parentage remains a mystery at this point in the novel. Esther narrates:

The pretty girl, of whom Mr. Boythorn had told us, was close by her. She was so very pretty, that I might have known her by her beauty, even if I had not seen how blushing conscious she was of the eyes of the young fisherman, whom I

⁷John Forster in a 1853 review of the novel doubts Dickens's control over Esther's voice when he states: "Mr. Dickens undertook more than man could accomplish when he resolved to make her the naïve reader of her own good qualities. We cannot help detecting in some passages an artificial tone, which, if not self-consciousness, is at any rate not such a tone as would be used in her narrative by a person of the character depicted" (644). James H. Broderick and John E. Grant perceive that "Dickens frequently allows the surface of his narrative, especially in connection with Esther, to become openly sentimental" and that "such sentimentality must finally be judged a stylistic flaw" (252).

⁸ While admittedly ironic, the use of film to discuss stage conventions may help contemporary readers come to better understand how Dickens employs these techniques.

discovered not far off. One face, and not an agreeable one, though it was handsome, seemed maliciously watchful of this pretty girl, and indeed of every one and everything there. It was a Frenchwoman's. (Dickens 249)

Already gazing at Esther, we follow her to the church and in the second frame of the gaze we stare impressively at the beauty of Rosa through Esther's narrative direction. Dickens has our complete attention as Esther's exaggerated enamored attention of Rosa and her blushing beauty present evidence of erotic scopophilia—blushing and staring. The second frame intensifies the energy and the voyeuristic “pleasure in looking” in the scene significantly as Esther watches the fisherman admire both Rosa's prettiness and Rosa's uncomfortable consciousness that she is being surveyed. The third frame presents an element of danger as Esther notices Mademoiselle Hortense gazing not only at Rosa, but also at “everyone and everything.” Why does Esther describe the Frenchwoman's gaze as malicious when she, too, has been ogling the entire congregation?

Dickens excites our gaze and frames our attention in this memorable scene by using theatrical conventions that increase energy and mimic conventions of seduction and sexual tension. The above scene, set in a church audience, uses the gaze in place of dialogue to convey dramatic action. Emphasis remains on the erotic look that slips between characters amidst “close” bodily proximity and blushing. The gaze transmits a link of desire from Esther and Rosa, Rosa and the fisherman, and Mlle. Hortense and “everyone” through the repeated description that Rosa is “pretty.” Rosa's “beauty” contrasts sharply with Mlle. Hortense's “handsome” controlling male gaze that to Esther seems “malicious.” Esther's gaze upon Mlle. Hortense and her identification of Hortense's face as “not an agreeable one,” along with Esther's power to pronounce the French maid's watch “malicious” combines to condemn “the

Frenchwoman” in Esther’s narration. At the same time, the gaze and theatrics call attention to class and xenophobia—the menacing French maid dares to transcend class barriers that would normally prohibit lower, especially service class members from eyeballing those of the upper class. The scene’s energy multiplies through forbidden notions of sexuality and hints of its transmission between distinct classes.

Dickens, unable to express any overt sexual events, yet desiring to capture the whole of the truth of human experience⁹ must, in the Victorian sense, sublimate sex to the unspoken level of the pre-symbolic. William A. Cohen in Sex, Scandal, and the Novel, argues that in Dickens’s work “literary language functions simultaneously to connote and to obscure sexual meanings,” and that “by locating the collection of rhetorical techniques. . . a sexual pulse can be felt beating subcutaneously in a novel that does not overtly represent sex” (23). Dickens mimics nature by framing a stage of sexual rhythms and the reading (or hearing, when we consider how often Dickens’s novels were read aloud) of cadenced language allows sensual enjoyment and titillation in scenes of apparent innocence.

The following passage increases the sexual tension, not only by its histrionic description of Esther’s autonomic nervous system, but also by the lull of one paragraph of subdued description of the church inserted between the above and below scenes. This lull relaxes the energy yet sustains it enough for the next round of theatrical excitement—a masterful mimicking of the sexual experience. My analysis inserted between these two passages should have a similar

⁹I build here upon Edgar Johnson’s “anatomy of society” argument, the belief that Dickens “reflects experience” and serves as a “penetrating vision of modern life” (7). Commenting upon Johnson’s ideas, J. Hillis Miller states that “the network of relations among the various characters [in Bleak House] is a miniature version of the interconnectedness of people in all levels of society” (11-12). In Q.D. Leavis’s estimation of Dickens’s aims, she posits that “it is not therefore the Law as such, but the laws of human nature and the society that man’s nature has produced as the expression of our impulses” (131).

effect in delaying the excitement from this excerpt of the scene until the next as Esther's narration erupts suddenly:

Shall I ever forget the rapid beating at my heart, occasioned by the look I met, as I stood up! Shall I ever forget the manner in which those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring up out of their languor, and to hold mine! It was only a moment before I cast mine down—released again, if I may say so—on my book; but I knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time. . .the lady was Lady Dedlock. But why her face should be, in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances; and why I should be so fluttered and troubled (for I was still), by having casually met her eyes; I could not think.

(Dickens 250)

Despite the scene's delicate foreshadowing of Esther's eventual discovery that Lady Dedlock is in fact her mother, Dickens presents us with an exchange drenched in sexual excitement. Lady Dedlock's eyes "spring up" and "hold" Esther causing her to "flutter" and lose her ability to project her gaze outward suggesting the power to move and control and the power of self-conscious reflection, which we find in the sexual experience and in its transmission to the realm of dramatic art. Lady Dedlock's "broken glass" face acts as a mirror in which Esther views herself with excited fascination. Bleak House's subjective reader, Esther, and Lady Dedlock form a framed gaze tripod signaling the theatrical excitement gleaned from the energy of human interaction that Dickens captures so vividly—the rapid heartbeats and locked gazes known so well in a live theatrical performance.

The last passage of this framed scene occurs, again after an interlude, allowing us to recover; and before Esther brings us back to the overt staring, Dickens circles our attention back

to our heroine with a pronounced “I—I, little Esther Summerson” (250). Through the exaggeration of Esther’s physical state and hence the body in the upcoming passage, the statement focuses our attention on the framed gaze:

It made me tremble so, to be thrown into this unaccountable agitation, that I was conscious of being distressed even by the observation of the French maid, though I knew she had been looking watchfully here, and there, and everywhere, from the moment of her coming into the church. By degrees, though very slowly, I at last overcame my strange emotion. After a long time, I looked towards Lady Dedlock again. It was while they were preparing to sing, before the sermon. She took no heed of me, and the beating at my heart was gone. Neither did it revive for more than a few moments, when she once or twice afterwards glanced at Ada or at me through her glass. (Dickens 250-51)

Now it is Esther who is occupying Rosa’s original position in the church scene, distressed by the scopophilic gaze, trembling in a histrionic fit of “unaccountable agitation.” Gazing highlights Esther’s sexual sensibility as she is again examined by the French maid and by Lady Dedlock. Left without the explanation of Dickens’s theatrical aim, readers may wonder why Esther seems so concerned by the gazing for which she is equally responsible. Dickens strives to dramatically emphasize key scenes through sexual subtext and to lend a more emotional, interactive bent to Esther’s voice. Dickens wants his readers to feel—as much as they can—*with* Esther because her subjective human communication is one key to compassionate acting.

The framed gazes and theatrical voice of Esther’s narration draw readers to the realization that Dickens offers sentimentality and emotion as barometers for social action. Dickens allows Esther to interact with other characters in a more emotional and thus more

realistically human way than the cinematic omniscient narrator who coldly records events and interactions from an aerial view seemingly above the range of human existence. It is the cinematic narrator who reports Jo's death and all of the events that lead up to the tragedy, but it is Esther who feels Jo's predicament and *acts* to save him. The cinematic and theatrical narratives work together—the cinematic voice allowing the distancing necessary for analytical pleasure and Esther's voice allowing a sentimentality that urges action.

To view this dynamic let us examine the novel's first meeting of principal players: Esther, Ada, and Richard. In this convergence of characters at the law office of Mr. Kenge, Dickens frames his theatrics through the gaze of Esther. Mr. Kenge leads Esther "along a passage, into a comfortable sort of room, where a young lady and a young gentleman were standing near a great, loud-roaring fire. A screen was interposed between them and it, and they were leaning on the screen, talking" (Dickens 29). Esther focuses immediately on the young lady, Ada, and by depicting Esther as the watcher of another female, Dickens imbues her with traits commonly associated with masculinity allowing female readers to dramatically imagine themselves possessing the power and privilege of men. The gaze signals this role-play as Esther, upon first meeting Ada, a fellow ward of the court, exhibits the penetrating gaze normally employed by men when viewing women. According to Mulvey, "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" ("Visual Pleasure" 1448). Through the gaze, Esther punctuates her description of Ada with exclamations: "I saw in the young lady, with the fire shining upon her, such a beautiful girl! With such rich golden hair, such soft blue eyes, and such a bright, innocent, trusting face" (Dickens 29). It is difficult to ignore such a burst of enflamed desire coming from Esther and as the meeting progresses she quickly takes possession of Ada with her first pet name—"my darling" (Dickens 30).

Recognizing the historically testosterone-soaked literary canon that Gilbert and Gubar expose in Madwoman in the Attic, female critics and readers alike are no strangers of the necessity to identify with a male narrator, despite its incongruence, at times, to their own feminine sensibilities. How novel that Dickens empowers female readers with the ability to cross gender lines and imagine the other's sphere. To interpret this as lesbian overture or attempt to explain it away as intense friendship, misses the profound invitation to act in the role Dickens intends—for his female audience, retaining their femininity through identification with a *female* narrator to see the world through the eyes of a man with all the transfer of power and possession the role bequeaths. Dickens writes through a female narrator in order to transfer feelings of power and privilege enjoyed by men to his female audience. Ellen Moers's accentuation of Esther's freedom of motion "far from the confines of Bleak House" and Esther's outspokenness throughout the novel evidence this narrative dynamic (20).

The catharsis Dickens offers women readers through role-play, the identification with maleness through a woman's eyes that allows them to behold power, and the requirement that men play the role of women could explain the difficulty some male critics have had with Esther's narration.¹⁰ As the group grows with the addition of the Lord Chancellor, we witness another male trait in Esther—sizing up the competition for her newly claimed possession. As Ada is presented to the Lord Chancellor, Esther narrates: "That he admired her, and was interested in her, even *I* could see in a moment" (Dickens's emphasis, 31). Esther is keenly aware of the position in the room of "her" Ada at all times, noticing both when Mr. Kenge and Richard exit and when her "pet" is finally "released" by the Lord Chancellor (Dickens 31-2). As the group of three, Esther, Ada, and Richard are left alone, Esther stamps her possession of Ada more

¹⁰ See footnote six.

powerfully with a diminutive name calling her “my love.” Any threat to Esther’s possession of Ada by Richard is dismissed, for he is simply a “youth” and a “light-hearted boy” in Esther’s calculation (Dickens 30).

Along with a gendered role reversal, crucial to our understanding of the gaze and the framed gaze in Bleak House is the required presence of an audience. The significance of the framed gaze becomes manifest only when an audience forces an alienation of the gazing, causing a self-reflexive consciousness ripe for “acting” toward social good. This is why the connection between the framed gaze and Esther’s theatrical voice, with its awareness of being watched, is so important; it highlights Esther’s position in the novel as both spectacle and spectator.

VOICE AND GAZE

Dickens does not limit the theatrical voice and framed gaze to scenes involving only women. The following passage occurs a few pages before the preceding example of Ada's confession to Esther. In this scene at a theatre in London, Esther narrates that she is hounded by Mr. Guppy, who several chapters previously proposed marriage to her at only their second meeting and was promptly but politely rejected:

I was sitting in front of the box one night with Ada; and Richard was in the place he liked best, behind Ada's chair; when, happening to look down into the pit, I saw Mr. Guppy, with his hair flattened down upon his head, and woe depicted in his face, looking up at me. I felt, all through the performance, that he never looked at the actors, but constantly looked at me, and always with a carefully prepared expression of the deepest misery and the profoundest dejection.

(Dickens 171)

Again, we see the framed gaze present, focusing our attention on the upcoming dramatic scene; it is no coincidence that the exchange unravels at a theatrical performance adding another layer to the complexity of the interaction. Dickens winks at readers here, providing a scene implementing theatrical conventions set at an actual theatre performance attended by Esther, Ada, and Richard where more drama unfolds between Esther and Mr. Guppy in the theatre's audience than on the actual stage. The scene follows the framed gaze formula: we gaze at Esther gazing at both the actors in the play and at Mr. Guppy. He, in turn, directs his male gaze, complete with all the oppression inherent in its visage, upon Esther. Here the theatrics are transferred from Esther to Mr. Guppy with his "carefully prepared expression." The contrast

between this heterosexual gazing and theatrics and the homosocial exchange between Esther and Ada that follows reveals a frozen Esther, unable to act, unable to emote.

I really cannot express how uneasy this made me. If he would only have brushed up his hair, or turned up his collar, it would have been bad enough; but to know that that absurd figure was always gazing at me, and always in that demonstrative state of despondency, put such a constraint upon me that I did not like to laugh at the play, or to cry at it, or to move or to speak. I seemed able to do nothing naturally. . . .So there I sat, not knowing where to look—for wherever I looked, I knew Mr. Guppy's eyes were following me— (Dickens 172)

Contrasted with the previous scene between Esther and Ada, Esther suffers from a form of blindness “not knowing where to look” that drains her sensibility and her reason and leaves her unable to “laugh,” to “cry,” “or to speak.” Here we see the oppressive nature of the gaze, the control and power of Guppy's gaze renders Esther unable to act “naturally.” Yet this oppression of the gaze also renders Esther self-conscious; the gaze she normally directs outward toward others now beams back upon herself, bestowing upon her important powers of self-reflection that she learns from and uses in her future intercourse with Ada. Esther's blindness and muteness in the face of Mr. Guppy draws attention to the free gazing and the voiced narration that launches desire and social action in her interaction with Ada.

As the play ends, Esther continues describing her voluntary blindness in relation to Guppy:

After we got home, he haunted a post opposite our house. The upholsterer's where we lodged, being at the corner of two streets, and my bedroom window being opposite the post, I was afraid to go near the window when I went up-stairs,

lest I should see him (as I did one moonlight night) leaning against the post
(Dickens 172)

Throughout the scene, Esther remains oppressed, avoiding her normal behavior in the fear of additional gazing and action by Mr. Guppy who leans against the phallic post, stalking her from the street. Yet, the emotions and theatrics of the passage with all of the hints of sexuality expressed through energy allow Esther to act with her true convictions when she next encounters Mr. Guppy later in the novel. When she next interacts with Guppy, she seeks him out and she remains composed enough to accept Mr. Guppy's withdrawal of the engagement. Mr. Guppy's action reinforces Esther's fears that the facial scarring she receives during a life-threatening illness, she contracts from her care of the orphan boy Jo, impacts the way others view her. However, Esther learns through the course of the novel that while some characters may see the scars on her face as evidence of a taint to be avoided, other characters like Allan Woodcourt, equally invested in acting for social good, discern Esther's scars as a badge of honor representing her performance of good works.

At the novel's end, Dickens recalls Mr. Guppy's proposal scene when he describes another proposal, this one from Allan Woodcourt to Esther. The scene where Allan first confesses his love to Esther contrasts sharply with the earlier excerpts of framed gazing, theatrics, and sexual subtext. Esther narrates:

We were standing by the opened window, looking down into the street, when Mr. Woodcourt spoke to me. I learned in a moment that he loved me. I learned in a moment that my scarred face was all unchanged to him. I learned in a moment that what I had thought was pity and compassion, was devoted, generous, faithful

love. O, too late to know it now, too late, too late. That was the first ungrateful thought I had. Too late. (Dickens 832-33)

Gone are the intense gazing sessions prominent in the church scene with Esther, Mlle. Hortense, and Lady Dedlock. Here Esther and Mr. Woodcourt look away from each other as the emphasis leans toward reason rather than emotion with the repetition of “I learned” and “thought.” The emotional and profuse touching and tearing we witness between Esther and Ada is replaced with a businesslike calm with no tactile action.

As Esther and Mr. Woodcourt discuss the matter of love, the only similarity to earlier examples of Esther’s interactions with women is her duplication of exclamatory statements. Mr. Woodcourt, as she refers to him formally throughout the entire exchange despite the revelation of their mutual love and her penchant for nicknames, disjointedly speaks of Esther in the third person, creating an emotional distance not present even with Mlle. Hortense or Mr. Guppy. Again, Mr. Woodcourt’s dialogue shuns love and emotion, privileging “the truth” over “lover’s praise.”

‘When I returned,’ he told me, ‘when I came back, no richer than when I went away, and found you newly risen from a sick bed, yet so inspired by sweet consideration for others, and so free from a selfish thought—

‘O, Mr. Woodcourt, forbear, forbear!’ I entreated him. ‘I do not deserve your high praise. I had many selfish thoughts at that time, many!’

‘Heaven knows, beloved of my life,’ said he, ‘that my praise is not a lover’s praise, but the truth. You do not know what all around you see in Esther Summerson, how many hearts she touches and awakens, what sacred admiration and what love she wins.’

‘O, Mr. Woodcourt,’ cried I, ‘it is a great thing to win love, it is a great thing to win love! I am proud of it, and honoured by it; and the hearing of it causes me to shed these tears of mingled joy and sorrow—joy that I have won it, sorrow that I have not deserved it better; but I am not free to think of yours.’ (Dickens 833)

Their interaction unfolds so formally that when Esther reports she is crying, readers must wonder whether the couple has taken their eyes from the street throughout the entire conversation. The conspicuous visual fixation of previous scenes is replaced with an emphasis on audition. As if the pair were indeed still peering out the open window, Esther states she “heard his voice thrill” before he “broke the silence.”

I said it with a stronger heart; for when he praised me thus, and when I heard his voice thrill with his belief that what he said was true, I aspired to be more worthy of it. It was not too late for that. Although I closed this unforeseen page in my life to-night, I could be worthier of it all through my life. And it was a comfort to me, and an impulse to me, and I felt a dignity rise up within me that was derived from him, when I thought so.

He broke the silence. (Dickens 833)

The speech that breaks the silence reads more like a letter than a heartfelt admission of love in the direct presence of the lover. “Truth” and “dignity” replace crying, blushing, and burying faces in breasts. Gone are the physical expressions of desire we see in Esther’s relations with Ada.

‘Dear Mr. Woodcourt’, said I, ‘before we part to-night, something is left for me to say. I never could say it as I wish—I never shall—but—’

I had to think again of being more deserving of his love, and his affliction, before I could go on.

‘—I am deeply sensible of your generosity, and I shall treasure its remembrance to my dying hour. I know full well how changed I am, I know you are not unacquainted with my history, and I know what a noble love that is which is so faithful. What you have said to me, could have affected me so much from no other lips; for there are none that could give it such a value to me. It shall not be lost. It shall make me better.’

He covered his eyes with his hand, and turned away his head. How could I ever be worthy of those tears? (Dickens 834)

Just as Esther finally begins to work up some sentiment evidenced by her faltering dashes, she stops herself “to think” and the polite composure in her subsequent speech reads more like a declining of an invitation. Why are the theatrics and the honest communication of desire present in so much of Esther’s narrative so hollowly absent here? What could account for Dickens’s sudden, striking lack of energy between two characters enamored of each other from early in the novel? The answer dwells within the lovers’ near miss fate. As a result of this cold scene between Esther and Allan, they almost tragically end up apart. Esther, already obligatorily engaged to John Jarndyce, fails to mention the specifics of her promise while speaking with Allan, simply stating that she is “not free to think of” Allan’s proposal (Dickens 833).

Dickens uses sexual energy as the quintessence of sentimental, extemporaneous relations between human beings to teach us, through the characters in the novel, how this kind of interaction leads to the action and expression of what will make us and those around us happy.

The coded, scripted interactions of Esther and Allan cause a dishonesty that subjugates emotion and causes an inhibition of action that nearly leads to tragic unhappiness.

Absence of the framed gaze and its ability to express desire, to exert power, and to reflect upon ourselves and others honestly, saps Esther and Allan's energy to perform both as spectacle and spectator. This depletion of energy to act interpersonally (resolved when Esther and Allan marry happily at the novel's end) potentially impairs characters' ability to act on a social level for the good of others.

SEXUALITY

No discussion of the sublimation of sexuality in Bleak House could be complete without the recognition that Esther herself teems with an unspoken sexuality. The dramatizations of touching, tearing, blushing, and professions of love, the nicknames she acquires, the constant jiggling of her household keys, and the ubiquitous communications of her observations all connote desire.

Esther generates energy in the novel while many of the other characters like Mr. Skimpole, Mr. Wholes, and Mr. Tulkinghorn as well as the Chancery and other institutions drain energy. As the representation of a generation of energy, it is only fitting that there be sexual innuendo scenes embedded in Esther's narrative. A particularly apt example of a scene charged with sexual subtext occurs after Esther recovers from the life-threatening illness that leaves her with facial scarring. Because of the contagious nature of Esther's illness, Esther prevents Ada from coming close to her. The scene that follows reunites Esther and Ada for the first time since Esther's illness. Esther narrates:

There were more than two full hours yet to elapse, before she could come; and in that interval, which seemed a long one, I must confess I was nervously anxious about my altered looks. I loved my darling so well that I was more concerned for their effect on her than on any one. . . .When she first saw me, might she not be a little shocked and disappointed? (Dickens 516)

The framed gaze signals the drama to come, as it teases out sexuality in what seems like a purposed titillation. Esther spends the time in anticipation of reuniting with Ada worrying that when Esther gazes upon Ada gazing back upon Esther, Ada will find fault in Esther's altered visage. Note the emphasis on delay, "more than two full hours to elapse" in an "interval, which

seemed a long one” as the dramatic voicing of Esther’s confession harkens back to the sexually charged and ambiguous scene of Ada’s confession to Esther that Ada and Richard are in love. Here Esther’s confession focuses on her nervous anxiety, a tell-tale awareness of her own excited state that builds in intensity to mimic conventions of human sexuality. Esther’s nervousness pivots on her body—her “altered looks”—that threaten to compromise her performance as a spectacle for Ada’s pleasure. We see this evidenced by her worried question that Ada may be “shocked” or “disappointed” as opposed to pleased. Esther’s mention of love, “my darling” and Ada’s prominence in Esther’s esteem more than “any one” further suggests a romantic reunion.

Esther, in exaggerated anticipation of Ada’s arrival, contemplates the “various expressions of my sweet girl’s face,” walks along the road looking for her coach, and runs back to the house in an awkward display that sounds more like romance than friendship. Finally, the scene produces Ada’s arrival:

At last, when I believed there was at least a quarter of an hour more yet, Charley all at once cried out to me as I was trembling in the garden, ‘Here she comes, miss! Here she is!’

I did not mean to do it, but I ran up-stairs into my room, and hid myself behind the door. There I stood trembling, even when I heard my darling calling as she came up-stairs, ‘Esther, my dear, my love, where are you? Little woman, dear Dame Durden!’ (Dickens 517)

The suspense of the scene has worked Esther up to a “trembling” in her garden—the most fertile and sexually potential setting on the grounds of Bleak House. The delay is finally satisfied with the announcement of the coming climax, “at last” and its erupting cry “all at once.” At her maid Charley’s excited announcement punctuated by exclamation points, Esther bursts into a running

dash to her room, where she tries to hide, trembling behind the door in sexual sensibility. Esther's flight represents a pre-symbolic gesture. Esther reverts back to pre-voice and pre-spectacle as she silently and secretly watches Ada searching and calling for her, echoing Esther's pet name for her "my love."

Ada also reintroduces the persistent nicknames that Ada and her lover/husband Richard have assigned to Esther: "little woman," "Dame Durden," and "little old woman." According to Cohen, "the homology between proper names and sexual discourses is one of the crucial junctures of indeterminacy that enable the erotic and the literary mutually to generate each other. The names of characters, . . . are loaded with provocative suggestion, and in some cases they overlap with sexual meanings" (22). Esther's nicknames while spinster-like, may also reveal an un-virginal quality—the older, experienced (perhaps sexually experienced) woman. This connection with sexuality links itself to Esther's taint from her mother's sexual indiscretion and impacts Esther's dealing with men and the possibility of marriage. Esther's facial scarring could represent a physical manifestation of this taint—marking her as potentially unmarriageable. Only characters who view Esther's scarring as emblematic of her work toward social good continue their relations with Esther undaunted.

As the flight/chase scenario continues, further evidencing conventions of human sexual experience, Esther and Ada freely express their sensibility, unlike the stilted interaction between Esther and Allan Woodcourt that leaves them unable to act. Esther persists:

She ran in, and was running out again when she saw me. Ah, my angel girl! the old dear look, all love, all fondness, all affection. Nothing else in it—no, nothing, nothing!

O how happy I was, 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, rocking me to and fro like a child, calling me by every tender name that she could think of, and pressing me to her faithful heart. (Dickens 517)

The scene epitomizes the body, voice, gaze compendium that frames a stage of sexual rhythms through cadenced language patterns. Ada presses Esther to her body as she holds, bathes, rocks, and voices her call to Esther of “every tender name.” This made possible by “the old look”—the gaze that enables self-reflexive consciousness. Ada’s gaze mirrors Esther’s acceptance of her “altered looks.” The cadenced language beginning with “Ah, my angel girl!” produces a rhythmic pattern marked by regular punctuated stress most commonly achieved through comma placement.

The culmination of the scene seems at its most climactic with lesbian overtures, frustrating critics like Geoffrey Carter who worries that “what upsets us here, perhaps, is that in the guise of portraying an innocent girl’s sisterly altruism, Dickens is, in fact titillating us with a scene of sexual hysteria, set up by weeks of subtly sadistic postponement of gratification” (144). Yet when understood through Esther’s unspoken sexuality with its framed gazes and theatrical devices, we view a sensibility that allows Ada to accept Esther despite any possible taint in the eyes of society. This acceptance enacts such overflowing relief in Esther that a circuit of energy pulses, imitating sexual rhythms and carrying with it Dickens’s message of sensibility and social action. Esther and Ada’s extemporaneous interaction breaks codes and scripts allowing a dress rehearsal for kind action—a practicing of behavior that will allow them to act to help others when called upon.

Another aspect of Esther's unspoken sexuality is alluded to in Cohen's suggestion of a correlation between women's sexuality and objects of material value (175). He discusses jewels specifically and their representation of genitalia, positing that jewels manifest male genitalia and jewel boxes, female genitalia.¹¹ Bleak House is conspicuously absent of jewelry; however, there exists an abundant reference to keys. Near the beginning of Esther's narrative in the sixth chapter of the novel, Esther's first moment alone, upon her arrival with Ada and Richard to John Jarndyce's home, she is approached by an unknown maid and given two sets of keys.

Our luggage having arrived, and being all at hand, I was dressed in a few minutes, and engaged in putting my worldly goods away, when a maid (not the one in attendance upon Ada, but another whom I had not seen) brought a basket into my room, with two bunches of keys in it, all labeled.

'For you, miss, if you please,' said she.

'For me?' said I.

'The housekeeping keys, miss.'

I showed my surprise; for she added with some little surprise on her own part: 'I was told to bring them as soon as you was alone, miss. (Dickens 68)

If we view houses as representations of their owners, then the bestowing of all the keys of Bleak House to Esther to unlock every room is significant. As Esther begins the scene, alone in her room dressing and thus undressing, suggesting a subtle connection to sexuality, it is her surprise that seizes our attention. The connection of these household keys to male Freudian symbolic sexuality and power culminates when Esther, after reading her guardian's letter of proposal and deciding to obligatorily accept, relinquishes her keys and "gave them a kiss" (Dickens 612).

¹¹ See William A. Cohen's Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction for a more in depth discussion of unspoken sexuality and an application to several Victorian novels including Dickens's Great Expectations.

Esther's resignation of the keys that unlock her power provide a symbolic representation of her temporary folly. She denies the gazing that would warn her not to silence her voice to refuse the engagement as she touches the keys to her lips and denies her body's desires.

How do we account for Esther's lack of power in relinquishing her keys and accepting the proposal of marriage from her "guardian," thereby blocking the expression of her desire for Allan? As a father-figure for whom Esther believes she is deeply in debt, John Jarndyce complicates her agency temporarily. Here we see a glimpse of the limits of Dickens's experiment. Esther enjoys her view of the world through the eyes of a man, but she is not a man and her situation as a subordinate female in Victorian society calls for her to marry. Now her desire must work indirectly as another aside hints at her revised agency.

The morning after Esther receives the proposal letter from Mr. Jarndyce, after crying for most of the night, she describes her guardian's demeanor, "there being not the least constraint in his manner, there was none (or so I thought there was none) in mine" (Dickens 613). Still partially blinded to her situation with her eyes "red and swollen," her aside suggests the return of her agency despite societal limits (Dickens 611). Her deep connection to her emotions prevents her from being without constraint, signaling to Jarndyce her true feelings through the performance of her body. Even as she accepts his proposal verbally with a kiss, Jarndyce has already guessed her true answer as the acceptance "made no difference presently" (Dickens 613). Regaining her power (though this time through her own feminine lens), she is next heard "jiggling about with [her] keys" (Dickens 614).

Perhaps it is Esther's bold comments of opinion and judgment throughout the novel that reveal most pointedly her sexual position. If we accept the argument that sexuality is indeed closely tied to power, then the outward expression of distinct opinion and judgment connotes

desire. The ability to express desire promotes a calculable power and signals sexuality. Esther's ability to communicate her desire with characters like Ada and work through her temporary blindness with Mr. Guppy, John Jarndyce, and Allan Woodcourt, allows her to assert her thoughts to troubling characters like Mr. Skimpole and transform herself from a passive observer to an actor.

CONCLUSION

Bleak House represents one of Charles Dickens's virtuoso literary performances.

Through his use of a unique synaesthetic narrative technique combining visual and aural devices through framed gazing and theatrical voicing in Esther's narration, voice and gaze combine to deploy an emotional sensibility of self-conscious reflection, revealing erotic desire through the body that builds a foundation for acting with empathy in interpersonal circles. This agency, buttressed by a gendered role-reversal that allows Esther and female readers through identification with Esther to enjoy a male perspective, encourages a first wave of movement toward social action and the alleviation of the bleakness of inhumane characters and institutions populating Bleak House.

When the symmetry and harmony between cold reason and flaming emotion is broken, favoring reason devoid of sensibility, Dickens suggests that it is sensuality which leads us to action and on the path back to balance. Sexuality expressed artfully empowers characters and potentially readers. Dickens's synaesthetic blending of the visual and aural senses, through the framed gaze and the theatrical voice, manifests a subtext of sexuality that seduces characters and readers toward action on personal levels that ripple toward social reform.

Esther's framed gazing creates a mirror through which she excitedly peers at herself through others' eyes. In her scenes with Ada, this consciousness of self (an inherently intellectual endeavor) constructs Esther as both a spectator and a spectacle in a performance that casts her in the role of a compassionate actor. Esther is instrumental in improving the lives of many of the characters she meets, including Caddy Jellyby, Charley, and Miss Flite.

Sexiness and its inherent charisma enhance Dickens's art; it demands and holds attention, stimulates thought, and provokes emotion. In the case of Bleak House, the realization that

emotional, sensual IQ—the ability to express sensual aspects of one’s being—gives individual characters the agency to act is what constitutes Dickens’s crowning design. Characters’ and readers’ evolution of consciousness through the expression of sensual sensibilities frees them to enhance their communities and work toward overturning crippling institutions like the Chancery and constraining gender ideologies. Dickens’s appropriation of the female voice through Esther effects a role-reversal pivotal to the success of his design, empowering female readers through Esther’s narration and inviting male readers to discover feminine consciousness.

What makes this feminine rhetoric so rebellious in Dickens’s time, and yes, even in contemporary times, is its emphasis on a feminine hero, rounded by her desire, triumphing despite her subjugated position and using emotion and sensibility in the context of familial and social circles to leave the world a better place.

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