

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off

-- Esther Summerson

He is so original, such a stolid creature, such an immense being for knowing all sorts of things and never telling them!

-- Charles Dickens

The narration of Esther Summerson has, since its beginnings, been maligned by some critics. One of Dickens's peers, Charlotte Bronte, perhaps best embodied the critical perception of Esther when she described her as "weak and twaddling" (qtd. in Frazee 227). This evaluation of Esther has become standard for a quantity of students of Dickens. There seems almost a contempt for her presence, an almost abusive dislike for her, as though she was not worthy of Dickens's admittedly powerful imagination. John Forster, one of Dickens's close friends admits as much, describing Esther as "A difficult exercise, full of hazard in any case, not worth success and certainly not successful" (Forster 610). Indeed, Esther, for various, and very sound, reasons does seem an inappropriate choice for narrative responsibilities in Bleak House. She looks, in part at least, the overexertion of an ambitious author. Conversely, there are those who see Esther as a saint, a perfect representation of a Victorian heroine, an idealization. As Alison Case points out in her chapter on femininity and omniscience, "At the center of the controversy is [Bleak House's] part time narrator Esther Summerson, who continues to generate a range of responses – from idealization to discomfort, to debunking outrage"

(127). Criticism of Esther appears polarized, either in blind admiration or scathing condemnation: the truth concerning Esther lies somewhere between these two poles.

Esther's perceived weakness, amplified when juxtaposed with the all-powerful voice of the other narrator, is in itself justification for her position. Her weakness stems from her role as a forgotten child; she is a representation, the embodiment, of all the lost children of the novel. Her voice reflects the voice of such a child. Her weakness complements the power of the omniscient narrator, serving, when needed, as protection from the darkness of that voice, and also as a catalyst to drive the reader into that powerful narrator's arms. Finally, it is important to acknowledge her position as a Victorian female, and notice that the very things she embodies make her, as Bronte put it, a "weak and twaddling" narrator.

There are also more pragmatic purposes for Esther's presence: her position of ignorance, of seeming innocence allows the mystery of the novel to unfold slowly; she is just ignorant enough to maintain the mystery, but not so ignorant as to bury it. Finally, Dickens's need to split the narrative (to show a light in the fog), would require another of his characters to take up the narrative reins relinquished by Esther; no one else is appropriate.

Esther is neither the ineffective, indulgent mistake of an over ambitious author, nor is she without a number of problems. Her position as a narrator grows out of necessity: Dickens needs Esther's voice, needs her innocence, her ignorance, her weakness, and her position within the mystery. Esther takes up the narrative responsibilities of Bleak House that, for various reasons, no other character could successfully embrace. Her presence as

narrator is far from ideal; she at times is cloying and self-deprecating to the point of sheer infuriation, but she is the best choice.

CHAPTER TWO. THE PROBLEMATIC FEMALE NARRATIVE VOICE

Self-Effacement

Let us examine the element that distracts and infuriates critics of Esther more than anything else: her self-deprecation. Graham Storey points out, mirroring Bronte's seminal description of Esther, that "[i]t is difficult at times not to dislike her sentimentality, her passiveness, her self disparagement, her predictability" (22). Indeed, when we first meet Esther she appears riddled with insecurity: "I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know that I am not clever. I always knew that" (Dickens 14). Esther's first contribution to the narrative is a direct plea to the reader to forgive her for her inferiorities. In fact, the bulk of Esther's first chapter seems totally consumed, totally dedicated, to her self-deprecation. It is in this chapter that Esther tells us, "I felt so poor, so trifling, so far off" that she "knew that [she] had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart," and that she "felt very ignorant" (14-18). Esther is so ingratiating, so utterly infuriating in her first chapter that this perception of her becomes difficult to shake.

Esther's self-deprecating nature subsides somewhat from these first introductions, and as the novel progresses she becomes less prone to such silly moments of disparagement. That is not to say, of course, that these moments are not still evident throughout. Slightly later in the novel she tells Jarndyce, "I am afraid it will be a disappointment to you to know that I am not clever, but it is really the truth; and you would soon find it out if I had not the honesty to confess it" (91). In a telling and slightly longer excerpt we actually see Esther use her ignorance, her self-effacement, as a crutch, a means to exit an unwanted conversation:

I then said, more particularly, that I was not sure of my qualifications. That I was inexperienced in the art of adapting my mind to minds very differently situated, and addressing them from suitable points of view. That I had not delicate knowledge of the heart which must be essential to such a work. That I had much to learn, myself before I could teach others, and that I could not confide my good intentions alone. (97)

Here we see Esther employ, on the character of Mrs. Pardiggle, the same self-effacement she lavishes so liberally on the reader. Esther hides behind her words, uses them as a means to avoid responsibility. Esther avoids conversing with Pardiggle by questioning any impact she might have on the discussion. Her self-effacement is a means, a method, for her to absolve the responsibilities given to her as a narrator. She ducks and weaves, constantly hiding behind her claims to inferiority.

Passivity

In addition to her admittedly artful claims of inferiority, a sense of passivity runs through Esther's narrative. In both the actions of Esther as a character, and the voice of Esther as a narrator, it is clear she is a passenger in her own life, her own narrative. She, like the chancery itself, seems unable to act decisively, unable to come to judgment, her indecisiveness leaving the reader as desperate for finality as poor Richard becomes in the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

The developments within Esther's life, particularly in her youth, illuminate her apparent inability to exert control. At all times it appears that others make Esther's decisions for her, that her own life is out of her hands. The earliest example of this is, of course, Esther's godmother's kidnapping and concealing of the illegitimate child. As she

develops into a young woman, she is shipped off to Bleak House, to serve as companion to Ada and Richard, and maid to John Jarndyce. She is later given her own maid, Charley, before being shipped off to Chesney Wold, at the order of Jarndyce. She agrees, without complaint, to keep Lady Dedlock's secret concealed, and agrees never to set eyes on her mother again. Esther never appears to do anything against her will, but not because she is stubborn. Quite the opposite: she is a woman defined by her acquiescence. Esther's path is chosen by others, and she seems happy to concur in their decisions; never do we see her dissent, never could we imagine Esther in conflict. Bleak House is rife with personal conflict, particularly in the cases of Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock, Richard and Jarndyce, but never do we see Esther in such a conflict.

Well, perhaps once! She is vehement in her refusal of Guppy's proposal. Guppy, like so many before him, falls at the feet of Esther, in blind adoration. Far from showing the patience she displayed with Caddy and later, her mother, Esther snaps, "Get up from that ridiculous position immediately sir, or you will oblige me to break my implied promise and ring the bell! [. . .] I cannot consent to hear another word" (116). The coldness, the anger, with which Esther speaks is unusual for her, something we see neither before nor after this interaction, and (though it pains me to admit it!) this may be an error by Dickens. At the time Guppy seems nothing more than an infatuated boy. Dickens, needing to justify Esther's outburst, later paints Guppy as a coward. But the early relationship between Guppy and Esther shows a tenacity and defiance that seem at odds with Esther's docile personality.

In concurrence with her passivity as a character, Esther also seems very passive as a narrator. She is as transparent as a pane of glass; she serves as no obstacle, no obscuring

view, to the world which she inhabits. Esther's descriptions seem so bereft of judgment, so utterly without prejudice, that it is often difficult to know what she thinks, what her judgment is, of characters. We do not sense we are seeing these characters through Esther's eyes; we believe we are seeing them through an objective lens, totally without discrimination. In fact, so unwilling to pass judgment is Esther, that, when the moment requires judgment, she can often be found quoting others. When describing Mrs. Jellyby's eyes, she channels Richard: "[They were] as if -- I am quoting Richard again -- they could see nothing nearer than Africa" (34). She repeats the trend when she describes Mr. Jellyby as (according to Richard) a "non-entity" (32).

Her interactions with Harold Skimpole, whose own words, not Esther's, fill this reader with contempt for the man, again show a willingness to let others evaluate, and again she offers no judgment. When Jarndyce first describes Skimpole, it is as follows: "He is at least as old as I am -- but in simplicity and freshness and enthusiasm and a fine guileless inaptitude for all wordly affairs, he is a perfect child" (63). For the remainder of the novel Skimpole, at least within Esther's narrative, is defined as a harmless, if perhaps unwise, companion of the family. His complete lack of regard for humanity is clear, but it is his actions reported by Esther, rather than Esther herself, that condemn the man. Esther is the transcriber, the reporter, the eyewitness.

The Need To Please

Her passivity stems in no small part from her need to please, and that trait is never more evident than in Esther's relationship with the reader. There is a sense that Esther is pleading, begging for leniency, from the reader. This is especially noticeable in her opening remarks in Chapter 9:

I don't know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible, and I am sure, when I find myself coming into the story again I am a really vexed and say 'dear, dear you tiresome little creature, I wish you wouldn't!' but it is all of no use. I hope any one who may read what I write, will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them, and can't be kept out. (104)

Esther turns to the readers, appeals to them for forgiveness for her own inadequacies, describing herself, in words that echo Bronte, as a "tiresome little creature." It is difficult at times to disagree with her assessment! Esther seems keenly aware of the readers' gaze, fearful of scathing condemnation, totally terrified of their disapproval, which, given the critical response to her, is bitterly ironic. Her need for approval resembles that of a small child in need of a watchful and proud parent.

Self-Aggrandizing

A further element of Esther's narrative that seems particularly akin to the neediness of a neglected child is her incessant need to report others' approval of her. It is what, after calling Esther the "central defect" of Bleak House, Angus Wilson complains of in his study The World of Dickens, accusing her of "reporting to us with almost intolerable coyness all the praises that others give her" (qtd. in Storey 22). It is what Leonard Deen describes as follows: "Other characters admiring devotion to her is presented in her own narrative, not only through dialogue, but (and this is much more damaging) through her own summary. The result is that she appears to be convinced of her own saintliness, and to be at the greatest pains to dissemble her opinion" (54).

Examples? Oh the examples! So copious are the amounts, so very common is this tendency in Esther's narrative, that to narrow to only a few is like picking only the reddest tomatoes from a ripening vine. The gem of them all comes in Chapter 35, when Esther reveals to the reader, "The old conspiracy to make me happy! Everybody seemed to be in it!" (459). The members of Bleak House, it seems, are around simply to serve Esther. For another example, we return to "A Progress," our introduction to Esther: "Whenever a new pupil came who was a little downcast and unhappy, she was so sure -- indeed I don't know why -- to make a friend of me, [. . .]. They said I was so gentle; but I am sure *they* were!" (24). Another fine example can be found in Chapter 23, where we find, "Everybody in the house, from the lowest to the highest, showed me such a bright face of welcome, and spoke so cheerily, and was so happy to do anything for me, that I suppose there never was such a fortunate creature in the world" (311). In Esther's little world, she is universally adored. From maid to master, they all appear fond of Esther.

There seems a trend of people falling at the feet of Esther in wild admiration. First is Caddy, who "knelt on the ground at my side, hid her face in my dress, passionately begged and wept. I comforted her, and would have raised her, but she cried, No, no; she wanted to stay there!" (42). Much later, we see Lady Dedlock perform the very same action: "Covering her face with her hands, she shrank down in my embrace as if she were unwilling that I touch her; nor could I, by my utmost persuasions, or by any endearments I could use, prevail upon her to rise. She said, No, no, no" (474). Esther reports on characters quite literally throwing themselves at her. Esther's description of Caddy's and Lady Dedlock's crumbling at her feet seems to reemphasize her saintliness, her complete

goodness. What makes these episodes problematic, though, is that Esther reports them as though wallowing in her own powerful holiness.

Later, when she meets Mrs. Woodcourt, Esther notes not only the old lady's admiration, but also her own discomfort: "She took very kindly to me and was extremely confidential: so much so that sometimes she almost made me uncomfortable" (382). Esther, according to her own writing, is so adored, so worshipped that it can at times become a hindrance. We need look no further than her early interactions with Guppy for further evidence of just how troublesome Esther finds all this attention. Her trip to the theatre shows such indignancy on her part: "It was in the theatre that I began to be made uncomfortable again, by Mr. Guppy. [. . .] 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. It quite spoiled my pleasure for that night" (159). While Guppy is hardly well balanced, he is clearly lovesick and besotted. Esther's subsequent treatment of him, both acknowledging his admiration and damning it, does little to endear her to readers. Esther, throughout Bleak House, appears happy to report upon her own saintliness, an element of her character that critics like Deen and Wilson find so troublesome, an element that helps to define her as "weak and twaddling."

Esther the Woman

There is something disconcerting about the perceived weaknesses in Esther's voice, many of which seem spawned from her position as a Victorian woman. Alison Case, in her chapter entitled "Femininity and Omniscience," argues, "the most troubling features of Esther's narration are also those most closely associated with the conventions of

feminine narration, and much of the response to her is in keeping with the dichotomy between artfulness and artlessness that has dogged feminine narrators” (127). It is her femininity, then, that makes Esther a narrator seemingly rife with flaws: self-effacement, passivity, and helplessness.

The scathing criticism of Esther extends further than Esther to the entire issue of female narration. Esther, then, does not represent a mistake by Dickens; she represents the critical inability to embrace a female narrator. Case points out that most criticism centers on the idea of “Esther as an aesthetic mistake, in that the feminine ideals she represents are at odds with her authoritative role as retrospective narrator” (131).

Indeed, they are. Esther’s infuriating need to apologize, the constant undercutting of her own narrative has long angered her critics, and yet it is the very definition of what Case calls the “conventionally deferential and apologetic” nature of female narration. Esther herself feels uncomfortable with her role as a narrator, and appears sure, as several of her critics do, that she does not deserve the role assigned to her. Esther is apologetic for her role, embarrassed almost, while the other voice appears born for the task, sure-footed and confident at every stride. So sure is Esther that she belongs in no such position of power that her narrative presents itself as compulsory, as though some unseen power forces Esther’s hand. That Esther says, “I am obliged to write all this” (26), would imply unwillingness on her part. Esther, then is subservient, weak, and under rule of some other force. Her apologetic nature is an extension of the conventions of female narration, and it is this nature, coupled with the feeling that she is being coerced, that perpetuates her negative image.

If self-contradiction, as Case believes, is a hallmark of female narratives, Esther exemplifies this quality perfectly. Her contradiction lies in her ability to appear simultaneously overtly humble, yet incredibly self-absorbed, artful and artless. Her position as narrator, as teller of her own story, means that she is again forced to report her own saintliness, her own goodness. In Esther's example, though, the need to report her immaculate soul seems more pressing than normal. This need can be, at least in part, justified through two facets of Esther's character: the child and the woman. Not only is Esther's gender, particularly in the Victorian era, defined by its apparent weakness and subservience; her given role as the embodiment of lost children seems to further her inadequacies. Esther is the pleading child, demanding attention from the reader, interrupting adult conversations with her neediness. If the reader converses with the other narrator, Esther is the child who keeps interrupting, keeps trying to sit at the "grown-up table."

Some critics I surveyed, many use Esther's childish inclinations as justification of her role, applying psychoanalytic methods to uncover Esther as a person irrevocably wounded by her upbringing. Much of her life and narrative lends itself to such an assessment, particularly her relationship, or lack thereof, with her parents. Furthermore, if Esther is indeed a person damaged by the institutions, destroyed by the conventions of Victorian London, she embodies a theme that runs throughout Bleak House: that of the wounded innocent. In Esther we see the effects of the institutional powers, powers that destroy Gridley, Flite, Krook, Lady Dedlock, and Richard Carstone. Her narrative becomes a testament to damage, a firsthand account of psychological wounds. What makes Esther's wounds all the more sympathetic, what makes her all the more a correct

narrative choice, is that these wounds were incurred in her youth, in her childhood. Many of the problems in Esther's narrative can be explained, if not totally justified, by psychoanalytic criticism, as well as her gender.

Esther the Boy

But it is in his choice of gender for his narrator that Dickens makes an ambitious, bold, and difficult choice. In choosing his voice to be female, Dickens creates a series of problems that potentially could have been avoided. First is the problem of his own gender. In attempting to cross genders, to anticipate the deepest thoughts of the opposite sex, he leaves himself open to charges of sexism, idealism, and over-simplification. An early reviewer said of Esther, “[she is] proof how unable Dickens is to enter into the real depths of a human mind, and draw a genuine character,” and another called her “thoroughly idealized” (qtd. in Frazee 228). Esther, as we have seen, embodies the values placed upon Victorian woman, at all times passive, demure, apologetic, eager to serve. Such a character may have been more acceptable when penned under the name Jane Austen or Charlotte Bronte, but the name of Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy immediately raises questions of intent. A male author who creates a female voice as passive and weak as Esther's is inevitably going to face charges of idealization. Perhaps if he had created Esther as a Becky Sharp or a Jane Eyre, a woman with purpose and resilience, instead of an Amelia Sedley, an Ada, he would have been spared from such charges. But Esther's weakness, her innocence is vital to the novel. For various reasons she simply had to be passive and simpering. But did she have to be a woman?

The things that make Esther the appropriate narrator for Bleak House (the innocence, the themes she embodies) do not rely on her gender but on her character. The problems in

Esther's narrative, the self-effacement juxtaposed with boastfulness, the overt apologies, seemingly stem from her gender, from the history of female narrative. In addition to those problems, Dickens could have saved himself from accusations of idealization, had he only made Esther male. The switching of her gender would have been fruitful in many areas, but would it have been possible?

Would these dissenting critics have accepted a male narrator as weak as Esther? Esther already suffers from charges of weakness; these charges would have escalated had she been male. Esther's voice, even without the apologies and boasts, is overtly feminine, and as such would have seemed incongruent with a male character. In addition, and far more pragmatically, a male character would simply not be allowed to live the life Esther lives. She is a housekeeper, a maid, and a companion to Ada; a male character would have been allowed no such career path. We see in the scene where Richard is asked to choose a career that the men of the novel are expected to enter the world, the world Esther is protected from. Richard, unlike Esther, is forced to deal with the Vholeses and the Tulkinghorns firsthand, while her innocence is allowed to exist because she is female. The male equivalent would have been forced into the world of the omniscient narrator, rather than be sheltered from it. Esther, in order to maintain the innocence and naivety that become a vital part of her narrative, must be female.

CHAPTER 3. FORGOTTEN CHILDREN

Damaged Youth

There is an argument, that Esther's neediness, her insecurities, can be justified through psychological scars developed in her childhood. The movement is what Frazee describes as "the rehabilitation of Esther Summerson." Even members of the restoration - of - Esther camp are forced to acknowledge the Bronte definition, but they dig and search for reasons to rationalize her apparent weaknesses. Two of the prominent members of the movement are Alex Zwerdling and J. Hillis Miller, both of whom attempt to justify, rather than eliminate, the problems in Esther's voice. Zwerdling leans heavily on psychoanalytic criticism in his vindication of Esther, challenging the views of many critics, arguing that "she is not the sentimental, insipid, character she is usually taken to be" and that "her inhibited intelligence and self-effacement are products of her upbringing" (qtd. in Frazee 227). Indeed, Esther at times resembles a child, and seems to relate to and befriend the children of Bleak House with far more ease than the elders of the novel. Esther appears as almost an overgrown child: in a novel full of images of neglected children, she is their patron saint, their embodiment. Thomas Linehan points out the value of Esther's common ground in relation to other characters: "there are enough decisive resemblances to indicate that Esther's situation partakes of the general human condition disclosed pervasively in Bleak House [. . .] Esther's condition provides solid basis for a discussion of the lives of other characters" (132). It is her position as a lost child, as the epitome of lost children, that helps justify her presence as the novel's part-time narrator.

A Few Examples

It is perhaps appropriate that I provide a few examples of lost, neglected, or forgotten children in Bleak House. We may first look at an interaction between Jo and Guster. “What’s gone of your father and mother, eh?” Guster asks Jo. “I never know’d nothink about ‘em,” he replies (337). “No more didn’t I of mine,” Guster tells Jo tearfully. Here we have two examples of children bereft of parental influence, but we could argue that is to their advantage; many of the children in the novel are forced to deal with parenting so acutely inept that it is a wonder they function at all! In Bleak House, the sins of the parent descend quickly, and without sympathy, onto the shoulders of the child.

Perhaps the guiltiest of the parents is Mrs. Jellyby, a woman so absorbed with aid and charity that she simply forgets she has children. Peepy both benefits and suffers the most; he is given outrageous freedoms most children can only dream of while provided with none of the affection, love, and attention that every child needs. The reader and Esther first meet Peepy as he attempts to wedge his head through railings, a predicament Esther helpfully remedies. Later he falls down the stairs, cutting his knees. His mother’s response? A dismissive, “Go along, you naughty Peepy” (36). If Mrs. Jellyby’s response to Peepy’s ills is negligent, her actions towards Caddy verge on downright cruel.

Caddy’s nervousness in announcing her marriage to her mother turns out to be ill conceived, given that her mother shows little interest in the development of her daughter’s life. Mrs. Jellyby’s reaction to Caddy’s announcement is perhaps the most overt example of parental negligence in the entire novel. A sobbing Caddy gushes, “I am engaged Ma [. . .]. I beg and pray you’ll give us yours [consent], Ma because I never could be happy without it. I never, never, could” (308). Jellyby responds with wild

disregard for Caddy: “If my public duties were not a favorite child to me, [. . .] these petty details might grieve me very much” (309). Even the usually passive Esther observes “the perfect coolness of this reception” (309). Jellyby finally tells Caddy, “Don’t delay me any longer in my work” (309). Both Caddy and Peepy suffer because of their mother’s negligence.

Another relation of Caddy, her fiancé Prince Turveydrop, also suffers at the hands of a parent: the intolerable English gentleman Mr. Turveydrop. Turveydrop’s only requirement for the newly engaged couple is a simple one: they must take care of the aging gentleman for the remainder of his life. Of course, the elder Turvedrop wraps his selfishness in the guise of generosity: “My son and daughter, your happiness shall be my care. I will watch over you. You shall always live with me.” Once again Esther seems more observant than we have grown used to, knowing that this, of course, means, “I will always live with you” (305). Old Turveydrop cares little for his son’s marriage. His intrusive presence in it favors his own means, his own comfort, his own desires. Turveydrop, like Jellyby before him, is an example of parenting gone awry, and the children -- Caddy, Peepy, and Prince -- are left to suffer the consequences.

Another less obvious, though no less relevant, example of the consequences of negligence is the small, stunted, bitter young figure of Egbert Pardiggle. Left to follow his mother around, sit impatiently in the shadows of the rooms of “the needy,” Egbert and his four brothers are less than happy. Esther observes, “We had never seen such dissatisfied children, [. . .] ferocious with discontent” (94). So dominant is Pardiggle’s input into her children’s lives, so absolute is her will upon them, that the sons seem to exude bitterness and discontent from their very pores. Nothing could anger or embitter

children more than the expropriation of pocket money against their will. We need look only to Esther for proof: “The face of each child, as the amount of his contribution [to the Tockahoopo Indians] was mentioned, darkened in a peculiar and vindictive manner, but [Egbert’s] was by far the worst” (306). Pardiggle’s resemblance to Jellyby is far from incidental; both are exemplars of parental incompetence, their children representations of neglect. Parental incompetence, at least, involves parents, but in Bleak House parents are sometimes non-entities.

A final example of the lost child is the character of Charley. Despite Skimpole’s claim as a guardian, an angel, to Charley and her young family, she is very much an orphan, another lost child in a novel brimming with them. “Do you live here alone with these babies?” Jarndyce asks Charley, “Since father died, sir, I’ve gone out to work, [. . .] mother died just after Emma was born” (195). Charley, Tom, and company, far from suffering from the influence of parents, instead have no influence at all.

Esther, like these other children, suffers the cruel blow of an absent parent, and is forced to live her early life in the shadow of parental sins. Her godmother insists, “It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had no birthday; that you had never been born!” (16). Shortly after, following a dramatic outburst from the young Esther, the godmother concludes, “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers [. . .]. For yourself, pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head” (16). Esther’s mother, as it slowly becomes revealed, is indeed disgraced by Esther’s presence, and likewise Esther is disgraced by her status with relation to her parents. Esther, like Caddy, Jo, Prince, Charley, Egbert, and Guster, is a forgotten child; in fact, in Bleak House she is *the* forgotten child.

The Mother of Forgotten Children

Not only does Esther embody lost children, but she seems to have an almost infantile need to mother the other children in the novel. The children, we could say, are comparable to the doll she waits on so adoringly within the novel's early chapters. It is this doll that first illuminates Esther's penchant for motherhood as well as her childlike manner: "My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else. It almost makes me cry to think what a relief it used to be to me, when I came home from school of a day, to run upstairs to my room and say, 'O you dear faithful Dolly, I knew you would be expecting me'" (14). A girl to whom a doll is both confidant and comfort is a girl who dreams of motherhood. Throughout the novel Esther gathers herself a series of "dolls" upon which she can pour her affections and her attentions; and it is this aspect of her character, the mother of lost children, that makes her position of narrator more acceptable. Esther's narrative position is, in part, justified by the theme of forgotten children.

One of Esther's favorite "dolls" is Peepy. Peepy seems, at all times to be circling Esther, sitting at her feet as though a loyal dog. Her affection toward the rather unfortunate creature begins early: "I ventured quickly to stop poor Peepy as he was going out, and to take him up to nurse [. . .]. I was so occupied with Peepy" (41). Later in that same chapter Esther (in her gratingly boastful way) points out the love she has extracted from the Jellyby children: "Peepy and the other children came flocking about Ada and me in a corner [. . .]. As Peepy cried for me to take him to bed, I carried him upstairs" (41). Later Caddy brings Peepy to Bleak House, where Esther proceeds to smother the youngster with affection: "Peepy retired behind his elbow at first, but relented at the sight

of sponge cake, and allowed me to take him on my lap, where he sat munching quietly.” Later he is found, literally at Esther’s feet: “Peepy, happily unconscious of the defects of his appearance, sat on the carpet behind one of the legs of the piano, looking calmly out of his den at us, while he ate cake” (172). Peepy is not the only Jellyby, however, that benefits from the maternal instincts of Esther Summerson. Caddy, too, reaps the rewards.

Caddy, like Peepy, is comforted, supported, and aided by Esther the way her mother should. Mrs. Jellyby, with her distant glare firmly focused on Africa, leaves a gap in her children’s lives; a gap Esther seems all too willing to plug. When we first see Caddy, she, like Peepy before her, falls to the feet of Esther: “She knelt on the ground at my side, hid her face in my dress, passionately begged my pardon, and wept. I comforted her, and would have raised her, but she cried, no, no; she wanted to stay there!” (42). Once again, we see Esther’s eagerness to report her own loveliness; nevertheless, that she serves as a surrogate mother to Caddy and Peepy is clear. Later on, of course Caddy asks Esther to accompany her when seeking approval for marriage from her distant, careless, and dismissive mother. Prince Turveydrop, another neglected child, asks Esther to perform the same task for him.

Close examination will show that almost all of the characters that represent lost children do, at one time or another, shelter themselves under the maternal wing of Esther Summerson: Charley as a maid, Peepy as a doll a toy upon which to lavish affection, Caddy and Prince as appreciative lovers, and Jo as a sick and dying child. Esther is a “Mother Hubbard,” a “Dame Durden” (both nicknames she happily embraces), to them all. Her position, not only as a lost child herself, but also as a surrogate mother for all the lost children of Bleak House, makes Esther a reasonable choice for narrator.

CHAPTER 4. THE VOICE OF POWER

The Appropriateness of Voice

While it is obvious that a major theme of Bleak House is the plight of forgotten children, and that Esther is a functional, even necessary element of that theme, it is difficult, practically impossible, to say that Bleak House is about Esther Summerson. Esther is not the center of the novel in the same way that David dictates David Copperfield or Pip is embedded in Great Expectations. So much of the novel happens outside of Esther: there are functional and developed characters she never meets, revelations she never hears, lies and truths she never bears witness to. As readers, we are far more familiar with characters like Bucket, Tulkinghorn, Krook, and Smallweed than Esther could hope to be. So much of the plot exists outside of Esther that she becomes caught in the shuffle as much as any of the documents of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The story swirls around Esther, periodically swooping her up, only to drop her, windswept, with the same frequency. Bleak House is a novel without a center, without a single focus; it seems more a snapshot of a time and place, nineteenth-century London, than it does a character examination. Bleak House is not an insular, little, novel but an ambitious, sprawling attempt at literary opera. Yet we have a narrator who embodies the insular and little girl, a limited, flawed, and childish voice in a novel that seems to be reaching, stretching, for the opposite. Bleak House's other voice, a voice I shall call Dickens's, seems far more appropriate, far more in collusion with the thematic and operative nature of the novel.

Bleak House's plot is panoramic, and the voice that stands in opposition to Esther's seems acutely appropriate for such a story. Dickens's voice, time after time, resembles a

camera on a crane, surveying all it sees while slowly, steadily, focusing in on its subject. Dickens sets this tone from the first words of Bleak House. The now famous opening of the novel seems to descend from the sky upon the lumbering dinosaur, trudging through the filth below, continuing through the fog and filth, through the streets, through the houses and pubs before settling, with unwavering focus, on the center of all this, “the very heart of the fog,” the High Chancellor. Dickens’s voice seems so powerful, so utterly aware, and so thoroughly indignant here. A narrative tone is set, one that seems in tune with the conventions of the plot, in which the focus shifts from one situation, one character to another. The narrator, like the plot, swoops in, seemingly at will, observes with focus the characters and their surroundings before once again flapping its wings and flying away, in search of a new subject.

A further example of the broad narrative strokes of Dickens’s voice comes at the beginning of Chapter 40. The voice begins, with little focus, overseeing the whole country, all of England. Slowly, sure footedly, it weaves through the political climate, filled with Doodles and Coodles, through the English countryside, through the doors and windows of Chesney Wold (being sure to be polite and meet all of the inhabitants within), before focusing on the commanding figure of Sir Leicester Dedlock. The voice surveys the land, the world, before focusing, with brutal clarity, on a subject of its choosing.

The operatic voice is evident in the omniscient narrator’s introduction of Tulkinghorn. The reader is again whisked through the streets of London, from “the Eastern boards of Chancery Lane,” through “the churchyard of St Andrews” (122), before finally settling on its subject, the “Oyster of the old school” (122), Mr. Tulkinghorn.

Once again, the omniscient narrator weaves through the darkness of London, before finally settling on what it sees as the cause, the heart of the darkness, but instead of finding the High Chancellor in his chair, we find Tulkinghorn in his study. The study and explanation of the characters' surroundings seem to suggest their responsibility, or guilt for the nature of these surroundings. By descending through filth and darkness towards these characters, Dickens's voice seems to be holding them responsible for these conditions in which they exist.

The Judge

The voice is so scathing, so condemning that it seems almost a judge or executioner of the characters it observes. The voice's description of Vholes, a figure of almost demonic traits, is a fine example of judgment: "[Vholes is] quiet and unmoved, as a man of so much respectability ought to be, takes off his close black gloves as if he were skinning his hands, lifts off his tight hat as if he were scalping himself" (511). Shortly before this, the voice compares Vholes to a cannibal: "Make man eating unlawful and you starve the Vholeses" (510). But Dickens's voice is doing more than condemning the individual; it condemns the society that allows destructive parasites to survive, even prosper. The voice shows us how celebrated, and accepted, Vholes's lifestyle and his predatory instincts are: "Mr. Vholes is respectable man. He has not a large business, but he is a very respectable man. He is allowed by the greater attorneys who made good fortunes to be a most respectable man. He never misses a chance in his practice; which is a mark of respectability." (509). The voice is sure to let us know how valued those he condemns are.

The omniscient narrator, then, is as dark and condemning a force in the novel as the Chancellor, Vholes, or Tulkinghorn. If the voice of Esther is the transcriber, the eyewitness, the voice of Dickens's narrator, is the judge of the novel.

Fluidity

Continuing with the description of Vholes, we may discuss the apparent fluidity, the ease with which Dickens's voice can move, not only from one subject to another, but from one voice to another. The voice seems capable of dissolution, disappearance in order to allow testimony, inner thoughts, to be expressed. In the case of Vholes, we see the voice suddenly disappear, replaced with testimony: "Now you cannot afford -- I will say the social system cannot afford -- to lose an order of men like Vholes. Diligent, persevering, steady, acute in business" (510). Here Dickens's voice slips seamlessly into the voice of Mr. Kenge. Shortly afterward it becomes the voice of parliament: "Question. Mr. Vholes is considered in the profession a respectable man? Answer [...] Mr. Vholes is considered a, in the profession, most respectable man" (510). If the voice seems momentarily suspended here, it simply vanishes in a passage where the voice identifies with Jo:

It must be strange to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes and in utter darkness as to meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops and the corner of the streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language -- to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands and to

think (for perhaps Jo does think at times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, and how come it that it means nothing to me? To be hustled and jostled and moved on and really to feel it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I am here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I was became the creature that I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human, but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life. To see the horses, dogs, and cattle, go by me, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend. (205)

Dickens's voice is fluidity personified. It is able to slip in and out of the plot as well as different voices. In this example it gives voice to the voiceless; it sees what Jo sees, but speaks for Jo in a way that he cannot ("I know nothink"). Jo is incapable of voicing his own plight; his situation and education make him impotent. The voice, fluid enough to shift form, turns into an educated Jo. The voice of Esther's opposite is so all-powerful, so all-knowing, so all-capable, that in comparison Esther appears nothing more than a trifling little thing.

The Shadow of Power

Esther's voice is so far removed from that of the other narrator that it is difficult to believe they were conceived by the same author. Esther seems overpowered, bullied, and dominated by the other voice, a voice which seems so sure of itself, so supremely self confident, that Esther's already hesitant, oftentimes childish, voice seems ever weaker, ever more transparent. The strength, therefore, of the other narrator, fuels the notion of the weakness of Esther's voice. If Dickens's voice is that of the opera, Esther's is that of

the shy girl in the audience. In addition to her lack of apparent strength, Esther seems less than an appropriate choice for narrator, given the story Dickens is trying to tell. Bleak House, I have argued, is Dickens's attempt to survey all of London, to condemn the institutions that cause the fog and darkness that plague the great city. The limited, personal, and sheltered voice of Esther seems less than appropriate. Her description of London, for example, is, when compared with that that put forward by Dickens's voice, simply insufficient. Esther's first impressions of London are stated thus: "London was a great wonder to us, and we were out for hours and hours at a time; seeing the sights; which appeared to be less capable of exhaustion than we were" (159). Esther's London is not the same city that the megalosaurus plods through at the novel's introduction; it is less a filth-ridden, foggy, poverty-stricken metropolis and more a place of wonder, Esther's emerald city.

CHAPTER 5. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF NARRATIVES

A Light in the Fog

But it is perhaps in her weakness, in her juxtaposition with the other narrator, that we can find reason for Esther's inclusion in the narrative dialectic. Esther, it could be argued, is the voice of innocence; Dickens, the voice of cynicism. Esther's voice serves as a ray of light, a flickering candle slowly burning, occasionally emerging through the fog so vividly presented by the other narrator.

A reviewer for Bentley's Monthly Review, a publication emerging around the time of Dickens, raved about the apparent purity and innocence of Esther's narrative:

Anything more simple and modest than her account cannot be imagined. There is not a grain of self-praise in her autobiography, nor is there on the other hand that mock-depreciation of herself which a person of real vanity, but pretended humility, would assume. All is perfectly natural and easy [...]. She does not once give us her intellectual or moral portrait, yet we recognize the clever head and the noble, generous, single-purposed, sympathizing heart which is all that a woman's heart should be, and all that a man's seldom is. (qtd. in Case 130)

While the reviewer's assessment of Esther seems a little gushing, a little naïve, it is important for the following: its emphasis on Esther as a figure of purity and innocence. This reviewer seems smitten with Esther, viewing her as the most perfect projection of feminine innocence. If we are to agree with this critic concerning the purity of Esther, the juxtaposition of her voice with that of the cynical, jaded, and frankly bleak voice of the other narrator, is a perfectly reasonable argument in an attempt to justify Esther's lofty

position. Her role in the structure of Bleak House is one of relief, warmth, and relative safety. Esther is a safe haven from the dark, dangerous world of the other voice.

Esther lives in a world removed from the filth and dirt; it seems unlikely that she would be crushed under the feet of the megalosaurus that dwells in the filthiest part of the city. While Esther makes frequent excursions to the city, the majority of her time is spent in the safety and comfort offered by Bleak House and Chesney Wold. It is in her description of one of these havens, Chesney Wold, that we see how much her own voice differs from that of the other narrator; the landscape makes her feel “as if heavenly wings were sweeping on benignant errands through the summer air; the smooth green slopes, the glittering water, the garden where the flowers were so symmetrically arranged in clusters of the richest colours, how beautiful they looked!” (229). Now, let us see how the other voice describes the same scene: “extremely dreary. The weather for many a day and night, has been so wet that the trees seem wet through [. . .]. The deer, soaked, leave quagmires where they pass [...]. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves” (8). Esther presents Chesney Wold as Eden, a beautiful utopia; Dickens, as a decaying, death-filled swamp. Earlier I noted that Esther’s lack of centrality led to many characters in the novel simply brushing against her; clearly, she is not exposed to the characters in the same way the reader is. It is no coincidence that the bulk of these characters are the demons, the dark forces of the novel. Esther does not witness Wholes give his desk a rap that makes it sound “as hollow as a coffin” (512). She does not behold Mrs. Snagsby, “so perpetually on alert, that the house becomes ghostly” (330). She has no perception of Bucket’s “ghostly manner of appearing” (286). She meets

the High Chancellor, “the very heart of the fog” (2) only briefly. She is never asked to shake old Smallweed “like a great bottle” (269). Tulkinghorn, perhaps the darkest of all the demons, so much so that we half expect him to throw his long coat aside to reveal hooves, has little exposure to Esther. Esther is protected from these dark forces, and, as a consequence, when readers are in the arms of Esther’s narrative, so are they. Her ignorance is, at least for some time, our bliss.

Esther is a respite from the dark, hard, sinister world so vehemently presented by the other narrator. When all is lost, when our will is crushed by the likes of Vholes, Tulkinghorn, Bucket, and the High Chancellor, we can scurry away into Esther’s motherly arms, like one of the forgotten children, one of her dolls. Similarly, when the simpering, overtly affectionate voice of Esther becomes too much, too sweet for us to bear, we are thrust once again into the dark streets of London, the dark corridors of the Chancery, alone, shuffling with mud caked upon our shoes. Storey perhaps explains it best: “Esther is deliberately subjective, deliberately absolute. Formally the alternation of the double narrative compels her to be so: her subjectivity is the opposite swing of the pendulum from the omniscient, detached, confident voice of the impersonal narrator” (22). Esther’s voice, then, is weak and quiet in order to offset the brash, almost God-like voice of the other narrator.

Subjectivity or Objectivity

There is a problem in Storey’s explanation, however: his use of the word subjectivity. In fact, Storey appears to fall into a trap deliberately set by Dickens. Through use of Esther, and her weakness of voice, Dickens allows his other narrator to completely dictate the truth. The more readers view Esther as subjective, the more they view the

other voice as objective. The other voice, however, is anything but; in fact, it is more prone to judgment, more quick to condemn, and, at one specific moment, more empathetic, than Esther could possibly be. Esther's palpable desire to avoid evaluative comments has been established in Chapter 2, the other voice's desire to judge in Chapter 3. It is rare that we find an omniscient narrator as subjective and a first person narrator as objective. Dickens employs the politics of narration to his advantage. Bleak House is a novel written as a condemnation, a judgment, a sentence upon nineteenth-century institutions. Dickens's voice serves as the executioner of the sentences, and the more he can push the reader toward his own voice, the more ferocious the execution.

Dickens's impersonal narrator does not declare the truth, although there is little question that he is in possession of it. The other voice knows the truth, of that there is little question. But he is so coy in revealing, so happy to conceal, that what he says must be read with some degree of mistrust. The voice even seems to want the reader to draw mistaken conclusions. We live off scraps of information, stolen moments of truth, and are forced to draw our own, often-inaccurate conclusions. The reader becomes Mrs. Snagsby, convinced we "see it all," as the narrator sits back and delights in our inadequate assumptions.

Look no further than the ambiguous relationship that develops early in the novel between Lady Dedlock and Tulkinghorn for evidence of the Dickens voice's delight in misleading the reader. We know immediately that their relationship conceals a secret; Lady Dedlock seems unusually interested in the figure, the presence, of Tulkinghorn. The nature of this secret is so unclear, so shrouded, that anything, including an unlikely romance is possible. The language the voice uses lends itself to such an assumption:

“During the utterance of every word of this short dialogue Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn [...] have looked very steadily at one another” (154). The voice furthers the ambiguity at the chapter’s conclusion:

They appear to take as little note of one another, as any two people, enclosed within the same walls could. But, whether each evermore watches and suspects the other, ever more mistrustful of some great reservation; whether each is evermore prepared at all points for the other, and never to be taken unawares; what each would give to know how much the other knows-- all this is hidden, for the time, in their own hearts. (154)

Dickens’s voice knows what lies in the hearts of Dedlock and Tulkinghorn, but the reader is left to speculate. Love? Hate? Passion? The voice is not at pains to reveal the truth.

For another example, look at the way the voice almost toys with the reader in Chapter 16:

What connexion can there be between the places in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had the distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of the great gulfs, have nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (204)

Again, the voice here appears uncooperative, coy, almost mocking. Like a poker player, he holds the best cards, but speculates that he has little.

As a final example, consider this from chapter 28:

[M]y lady’s eyes are on the fire. In search of what? Of any hand that is no more of

any hand that never was, of any touch that might have magically changed her life?
Or does she listen to the Ghost's Walk, and think what step does it most resemble?
A man's? A woman's? The pattering of a little child's feet, ever coming on-on-on?
Some melancholy influence is upon her; or why would should so proud a lady
close the doors and sit alone upon the hearth? (372)

Dickens's voice here seems joyful in its ability to deceive the reader, seems complicit in our confusion, a distributor of the fog. The voice, of course, knows the links, the ties that bind these characters, knows all of Esther's mother, her father, the deceit of Tulkinghorn; yet the reader does not. The reader is allowed to know only what Dickens's narrator is at pains to reveal. I have made the effort throughout this essay not to refer to this voice as omniscient, for, while it does see all, it does not reveal all. There is a moment of description, voiced by Dickens's impersonal narrator, that, despite describing Tulkinghorn, could as easily apply to the voice itself: "He is so original, such a stolid creature, such an immense being for knowing all sorts of things and never telling them!" (529).

Esther, conversely, seems to know little but reveal all; only on rare occasions does she appear coy. In fact, so strong is Esther's need to reveal all to the audience, that the one secret she is asked to keep (and does keep from all but Jarndyce) is told to the reader in explicit detail: the identity of her mother. She herself admits, "I shall not conceal, as I go on, the weaknesses I could not quite conquer" (469). Esther's need to please the reader, a trait she is widely, and correctly, criticized for, feeds her reliability as a narrator.

There is only one interaction, one event in Esther's life, about which she seems guarded: her relationship with Alan Woodcourt, which appears to develop outside of the

novel. There are clearly moments between Esther and Woodcourt that remain private from even the reader. The first mention of Woodcourt, at least in Esther's narrative, is found at the conclusion of Chapter 13, and the passage embodies the way Esther guards the relationship: "I have omitted to mention in its place, that there was some one else at the dinner party. It was not a lady. [. . .] It was a gentleman [. . .]. He was rather reserved, but I thought him very sensible and agreeable" (168). Shortly afterwards, Esther again admits to forgetting to mention Woodcourt:

I have forgotten to mention -- at least I have not mentioned that -- the Mr. Woodcourt was the same dark young surgeon, whom we had met at Mr. Badger's. Or, that Mr. Jarndyce invited him to dinner that day. Or, that he came. Or, that when they were all gone and I said to Ada, 'now my darling, let us have a little talk about Richard!' Ada laughed and said --

But I don't think it matters what my darling said. She was always merry. (188)

Esther goes so far to acknowledge her own coyness here when she admits, "I have not mentioned" Woodcourt. Furthermore, it appears that a conversation with Ada has been omitted, and it is fair to say, given that Richard is courting Esther, that the conversation was about who was courting Esther: Alan Woodcourt. The way in which Esther reveals her blossoming romance is the way in which an innocent girl would: through a fan, while she attempts to conceal her blushing face! It is this innocence, this feminine embarrassment, that rescues Esther (somewhat) from charges of unreliability. It is Esther's innocence, her childishness, that makes her narrative important, and that innocence is never better expressed than in her discomfort in talking about Woodcourt. So, while we can find a moment of concealment in Esther's narrative, it can be

understood, even justified, by her innocent nature. The same cannot be said of the other narrator, a voice that is far from innocent.

Esther is subservient to the reader, and the reader is subservient to the other narrator. The reader is left in a difficult dynamic with the narrators; we know more than Esther, but less than the other voice. It is on this dynamic that the mystery that drives Bleak House is built, and here we find the justification of Esther as a narrator.

CHAPTER 6. THE MYSTERY OF BLEAK HOUSE

Unveiling the Mystery

It could be argued that, above all else, Dickens, in Bleak House, is attempting to write his first mystery novel. In fact, given Dickens's later work in Edwin Drood, it appears that the author was slowly heading in this direction. If we are to read Bleak House as a mystery novel, then, we can find further justification for Esther Summerson's role as part-time narrator.

The mystery novel relies on revelation, shock, a feeling of tension; and perhaps the best way to achieve these effects is to split the narrative. In dividing the narrative, in having two different voices slowly weave through the story, you can create tension. Dickens leaves Esther and the other voice at opposite ends of the mystery, each working their way closer to the other, each slowly revealing more to the reader. The previous chapter showed the difference in the way the voices reveal information. Esther reveals what little she knows, while the other voice holds back the great deal that it knows, gradually feeding the reader. The result is an off-balance reader. It is Esther's lack of knowledge and of awareness that makes her voice ideal for the mystery novel. Critics like the one mentioned in the Frazee article who chastises Esther, claiming that "when she has only herself to talk about, [we] are glad to be done with her complaisant history" (227) are missing the point. By necessity, for the structure of the mystery to be sustained, Esther must have "only herself to talk about." If she knew any more than her own, insular world, the mystery would collapse. Esther's inexperience with the world outside Bleak House and Chesney Wold, her sheltering from that world, leaves the reader with small amounts of information. The reader is forced, through Esther's narrative, into a position

of ignorance, so much so that many of Esther's discoveries become our discoveries. This is not always the case, however.

There are times in the novel when the reader, along with the other narrator, is privy to information concealed from Esther. Perhaps the finest example of this is the revelation that Lady Dedlock is Esther's mother. The reader discovers the identity of Esther's mother, when, in Chapter 29, the other voice feels at ease to let us in on the secret. Lady Dedlock gushes, "O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!" (381). Esther finds out this truth much later in Chapter 36, when Dedlock this time tells Esther, "O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me!" (473). Dickens creates an anticipation; the reader reads on, waiting impatiently for Esther's moment of truth. We have an example here of how the innocence and the ignorance of Esther become vital parts of the narrative. A narrator more aware, more involved, would not be nearly as prone to revelation.

In an earlier chapter I mentioned Esther's lack of interaction with many of the characters the reader knows through the other voice. That said, we should acknowledge that the reader's privileged position, in contrast to Esther's, adds to tension and anticipation. When Esther meets Tulkinghorn, the reader knows the man, his darkness, the secrets that dwell within him; Esther does not. The reader waits, with bated breath, for something, some snippet of information, some malignant intentions, to emerge. There are times within the novel when it is easy to become confused as to who knows what, who knows whom. The cast of characters is so broad, stretching from Bucket to Ada, Tulkinghorn to Miss Flite, Esther to Bucket, that it becomes difficult for the reader to

place them in the narrative. As a consequence, the reader is often surprised to discover Esther's lack of knowledge about certain characters. The reader easily forgets that, while we met a character 200 pages ago, Esther meets him now for the first time. Again, we are put off balance, never certain of what we know, never sure of what Esther knows, and only certain that the other voice knows more than both. The narrative split, then, is necessary, and leaves Dickens in a position where he must choose one of his cast to be the juxtaposed voice. He chooses Esther.

Other Choices

But if we justify Esther's presence on the basis of her ignorance and her innocence, surely there are other, more appropriate choices for narrator. Jo, for example, possesses the same characteristics that justify Esther's position. This may initially seem true, but there are problems with Jo as a narrator that would dwarf those with Esther.

Jo does, and, for the sake of the novel, must die. His death serves as the moral highpoint of the novel, the center of the injustice Bleak House is so determined to illustrate; to keep Jo alive in order for him to fulfill narrative duties would have lessened the feeling of injustice which seeps through every pore of the novel. The narrator must live to tell the story, and the death of Jo prevents him from being a reasonable choice for narration.

There is a far more pragmatic purpose for the exclusion of Jo as a narrative voice: his language. Having never learned to read or write, how could he have penned these words, and even if he had, how would they have sounded? When we hear Jo talk it is in such broken English, such dreadfully difficult dialect. This, for example, is how he describes his encounter with Lady Dedlock: "out of a sovring as wos give me by a lady in a wale as

sed she was a servant and as come to my crossin one night and asked to be showd this ere ouse and the ouse wot him as you giv the writin died at, and the berringround wot hes berried in” (248). Four hundred pages of such language would be a nightmare to contend with. For these two reasons, Jo’s assignment as narrator is out of the question. Dickens does seem to acknowledge the need to hear Jo, and in fact gives voice to the wretched orphan, in that famous passage, mentioned earlier in the essay, where the narrator channels his own voice through Jo. For a brief moment, Jo receives quasi-narrative responsibilities, responsibilities handled by the other voice.

So if Jo is an ill-advised choice for narrative voice, are there not other characters to choose from? Surely the corruption of Richard at the hands of the institutions of London makes him a reasonable choice. The constant furrowing of his brow surely makes Guppy a very real possibility. Why not Lady Dedlock? All are inappropriate. While each would solve some of the problems found in Esther’s narrative, each would also present new, and greater, problems.

Lady Dedlock would be an impossible choice. She is, after all the architect of the mystery, the guardian of secrets, and as a result she must remain a shadowy, slippery, figure, holding information we do not know, hiding behind her fashion, her petticoats. Given the role of narrator, Lady Dedlock would reveal too much to the reader; so much of the novel’s mystery hinges on what she knows that the reader does not.

Perhaps Richard would serve as a better narrative option, but again a series of problems present themselves. With Richard in the narrative seat, Bleak House would no longer be a novel about London, about lost children, about the cruelty of institutions; it would be narrowly confined to Richard’s two obsessions, Ada and Jarndyce and

Jarndyce. Richard becomes so embroiled in this lawsuit, so totally consumed by it, that his narrative would be dominated with talk of it. His relationship with Ada would turn Bleak House into a love story (the relationship between Esther and Woodcourt hardly seems that). Richard's voice would be a distraction from the themes of the novel, instead of helping to focus them. Dickens gave voice to Richard's concerns -- the pursuit of a woman, the distractions of London -- later in the form of Pip in Great Expectations.

Ada is no Estella, but perhaps she could have been Esther. Like Esther, she seems to embody innocence, and she is female; but she is not right for the role of narrator. Her life is too untroubled; her only major concern, the well being of another, Richard. Ada's life is simply too safe, too protected; she suffers none of the slings and arrows of misfortune that befall Esther: the illness, the illegitimacy, the childhood scars. While it has been acknowledged that Esther is well protected from the world, relatively hidden from it, Ada stands even further away, only occasionally peeking over Dame Durden's shoulder.

The only other reasonable choice left is John Jarndyce, but he is just too involved, too complicit and too aware of the world of the other narrator. He knows much of the Chancery, of orphans, of lawyers, of dark corners; oh how the wind blows east at the mention of them!

There is a cast of characters as sprawling as any you are likely to meet, but the majority of them are completely inappropriate choices for narrative responsibilities. Many of the characters of the novel are simply representations of the institutions of nineteenth-century London. We have the demons: Tulkinghorn, Vholes, Smallweed, Skimpole, and Krook. We have the forgotten children: Jo, Charley, Peepy, and Caddy. We have the absent mothers: Jellyby, Pardiggle, and Dedlock. We have the downtrodden:

George, Gridley, Miss. Flite, and Phil. The novel brims with caricatures like these, whose role, by definition, is too narrow, too flat, too shallow, to make them eligible narrators.

Dickens, serving the mystery of Bleak House, wisely split the narrative. In doing so he created a tension, a constant feeling of uncertainty, a dynamic between reader and narrators. In splitting the narrative he had to find a character amongst the many he creates to take on the narrative responsibilities of half the novel. Given his choices, Esther becomes the only real candidate, the only appropriate choice.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Despite the vehement and constant arguments to the contrary, Esther Summerson is, suitably, one of the voices of Bleak House. Her problems are overtly evident, and some are inevitably difficult, even impossible, to resolve. Her incessant desire to report her perfection is perhaps the most troublesome of all the flaws in her narrative, but it is not without reason. The same can, of course, be said of her self-effacement and her passivity. These traits in her narrative, traits that she has been vilified for, are the very traits that define femininity in the Victorian period. That this projection of the quintessential Victorian woman has been penned by a male author of the time is the truly difficult element of Esther's narrative.

In spite of what might be viewed as Dickens's overly ambitious attempts at female narrative, there is so much in Esther's voice that justifies her lofty position within the novel, her juxtaposition with the other narrative voice being perhaps the strongest argument. Esther is a relief, a shelter from the constantly satirical, often scathing, and forever-superior impersonal voice. She is the voice of innocence next to the voice of cynicism. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of narratives sets up a dynamic within the novel that lends itself perfectly to mystery and suspense. Esther is deliberately sheltered, deliberately naïve, and deliberately ignorant; she must be all of these things in order for the dynamic to succeed. A character of superior knowledge, exposure, and power would collapse the mystery – a mystery that is allowed to exist only through Esther's ignorance and the other voice's subjectivity. Esther's ignorance and innocence are preserved through her position in the novel as a woman and child. Indeed, it is her presence as a

child that helps greatly in justifying her presence; she is, after all, the embodiment of forgotten children.

These facts combined, I hope, save this critic from the accusation put forward by Frazee about other defenders of Esther, whose arguments he believes, “appear to have the virtue of rescuing a beloved author from the charge of failing to achieve his artistic purpose by proposing a revised description of what that purpose was” (228). Dickens’s purpose was to create a narrator innocent and objective enough to counteract the other voice of the novel; in that he succeeded. Furthermore, he managed to find a narrator who epitomized some of the foremost themes of his sprawling masterpiece. Esther, in spite of, and indeed because of, many of her problems belongs within the narrative conversation of Bleak House.

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