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Writing the Wrongs of Chancery and Victorian Society: Esther Summerson of *Bleak House* and Defining the First-Person

Honors Thesis on Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

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Introduction

As humans, we are inherently concerned with, devoted to, and even obsessed with our identities. The way we present ourselves, the way others see us, and the way we see ourselves, are matters of great concern. It is a general concept, common knowledge, that we all have identities particular to ourselves. Identity can be defined simply as the condition of being oneself, and not another. Why is it so important, so fundamentally human, to have an identity separate from all others and unique to oneself? Our ability to enjoy life has become connected to our ability to define ourselves, and most importantly, to connect to ourselves.

What if one was denied the right to define or even discover herself? What if one was brought up in a stifling environment that inhibited growth and thus self-discovery? What if one was raised without understanding a pivotal part of herself? These questions can be asked of Esther Summerson, the infamous and much discussed first person narrator of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853). Upon asking these questions about Esther, it becomes easier to understand her character, actions and behaviors. If identity is the condition of being oneself, and not another, I believe that Esther was never able to fully recognize her true identity. The reasons for Esther's never doing so, and her coping mechanisms for dealing with such a devastatingly incomplete sense of self, are various and controversial.

Esther Summerson serves many purposes in *Bleak House*. Because Esther is a representation of Victorian women, and because the Victorian era is particularly notable for its suppression of women, the restraint of Esther's identity, her self-esteem problems, and her way of managing her emotional and sometimes psychological issues are of great

importance. Esther has been seen by critics both as a complex character/narrator of particular interest, as well as a simple and annoying character/narrator—a failure. Upon evaluating Esther's upbringing, her reactions to certain events, her contradictions as character and as narrator, and the marked difference between Esther pre-illness and post-illness, hidden truths about the complexities of Esther begin to arise.

In "The Lost Self of Esther Summerson: A Horneyan Interpretation of *Bleak House*," Patricia Eldredge writes that, "Facing the world with a frighteningly inadequate sense of identity, [Esther] creates the false self-image…the *idealized self*, and begins the hopeless task of molding herself to fit it" (Eldredge, 142). In creating and attempting to fit into an idealized self, Esther behaves in a way that can easily be interpreted as "simple, week…passive" (Sawicki, 209), annoying, and overly good. What creates the annoyances some critics and readers express is Esther's simultaneous and continuous striving to obtain love, affection and admiration while constantly rejecting the notion that she is worthy of such love and affection. Esther thrives in an inhibiting environment and takes comfort in her ability to hide within her connections with other people. She takes cover in an identity not her own, playing the part of a housekeeper and a caregiver while acting as guard of her own psychological prison.

I believe that the "idealized self" Eldridge writes about fits into a more complex and highly developed plan by Dickens. The idealized self was developed by Esther so that she could avoid becoming her mother and succumbing to the fate her godmother laid before her. Esther's complex relationship with her mother is emblematic of the relationship all of Dickens's characters have with an unjust society. Esther is oppressed and abandoned, and though she fears her mother and becoming her mother, she cannot

ultimately separate from her mother. The illness Esther suffers is a physical manifestation of Esther's separation from her mother and resulting realization of her idealized self. I will argue that Esther is not only a complex character/narrator, but is also a crucial part of Dickens's overall thematic issues related to the relationship we all have with society. Dickens develops Esther's coping mechanisms, idealized identity and rebirth through illness in relation to Esther's therapeutic writing process. Because Esther as narrator is always Esther post-illness, the reader gets a sense of Esther's identity problems even when viewing Esther pre-illness. Esther's slips into her present sense of self are crucial to understanding her coping mechanisms and her true identity and abilities.

Though Esther is consistently a good writer and narrator, there is a marked shift in narrative style, voice and authority following the illness. Esther proves her intelligence and her "noticing way" (*BH*, 28) throughout the novel. The moments when Esther confronts and lectures herself, finds solace in her house keys, or cries for no apparent reason, can be seen as references to Esther's true unhappiness, low self-esteem, and lack of real identity. Though after her illness Esther is able to confront her true self and recognize that she had assumed an idealized identity, she continues to portray herself to others as she always had. The novel presents a series of reasons why Esther is unwilling to fully commit to her true identity: because Jarndyce, Woodcourt, and Bleak House are inhibitors to her doing so, because she is unable to confront her mother and thus her imaginary guilt, and because she is never able to make her own decisions.

In closely reading and evaluating Esther's upbringing, one can understand her subsequent behavior. By examining Esther's writing style, the differences between Esther as character and narrator, and the differences between post and pre-illness Esther, one can

recognize the complexities of Esther and the purposes Dickens meant for her to serve. The subtle differences the post-illness Esther, or the Esther we know as narrator, creates in her own character and representation, display the complexities of her true self. After her illness, Esther recognizes that she is imprisoned within a self-created idealized identity; however, this awareness does not allow her to reject that idealized self and the life and relationships she created at Bleak House that have become structured around it. In using the illness as a physical manifestation of Esther's separation from her mother and recognition of her identity crisis, Dickens created a character whose self-questioning renders her individuality and reveals her narrative function as a connecting point between every other character. Through Esther, Dickens was also able to make a profound and effective statement about the society to which he belonged. As in the image from Esther's dream during her illness, like beads on a necklace we all must remain strung together, but at the same time a layer of separation must be maintained between each bead, allowing us both to work together *and* individually in order to create positive change in a bleak world.

Esther's Childhood as the Catalyst that Causes her Behavior

Having been raised by a woman who constantly told her that "'It would have been far better…that you had never been born'" (*BH*, 30), Esther Summerson had to develop coping mechanisms in order to survive. Though she desires love and affection, she began at an early age to remind herself that she didn't deserve it. The affects of her childhood abuse are long lasting—Esther never is able to completely admit to herself that she deserves to be loved. The behaviors that many critics have considered annoying, overly

good, or odd, are directly related to the coping mechanisms Esther uses to survive when she herself believes she should be dead.

Esther warns us at the very beginning of her narrative that she "…never dared to open [her] heart" (*BH*, 28). Her narrative will serve as the first time she sincerely opens her heart to another. The reader must keep in mind that Esther as character has admitted to not opening her heart, and in consequence, not revealing her true self or innermost feelings and emotions to other characters. In order to protect her self, Esther develops an idealized sense of self—an identity not her own. Denied an identity from the start, not having known who her parents were, and raised in an environment where she was discouraged from discovering herself, Esther takes on a persona that will allow her to keep her distance from others while still gaining their affections. McCusker writes: "I would like to suggest that Esther is not a model of perfection and that her irritating conscious naivety is in fact carefully presented…as a protective maneuver developing out of her childhood oppressions" (163). Esther's perfect self is used as a "protective maneuver" against the world that has harmed her from the start. The defensive tactic Esther acquires is too safe, and she remains too inhibited and fearful to shed her idealized self upon fully recognizing it for what it is after the illness.

Alienated from the rest of society as a child and completely deprived of an identity, Esther promises herself "to try to be industrious, contented, and true-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love if I could" (*BH*, 39).[1] Her promise is to create an idealized self and hold true to that self. In making the promise, Esther forces herself into an idealized role, into the perfect image of a Victorian woman, and into a life in which she is not able to develop her own identity. Fearing both that she has

[1] McCusker, 165

taken on the identity of her mother, as her "godmother" frequently suggests, and her imagined guilt (that which she inherited from her mother), Esther creates a new identity that is so perfect she cannot become her mother—but unfortunately, she also cannot become herself.

Upon leaving her "godmother's" house, Esther has allowed the pendulum to drop. Monotony ensues as she promises to maintain her perfect identity. The idealized self annoys many critics and readers. Esther the narrator, however, allows us to see beyond the idealized self, and provides us with vital information, informing us that she has created this perfect do-gooder, and that the true Esther lies beneath, or is caged by the ideal she has created. In fact, the only thing Esther takes from her "godmother's" is a caged bird: "I had no companion left but my bird, and him I carried with me in his cage" (*BH*, 36). She begins her new life as a caged bird and reminds herself of this throughout her narration.

Upon arriving at Bleak House, Esther is immediately given the house keys:

> A maid brought a basket into my room, with two bunches of keys in it, all labeled…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' (*BH*, 88)

Bleak House is to be the inhibiting force that will help Esther to remind herself of her promise. She becomes both the prisoner and the guard. The keys not only give Esther an element of control, but they represent her entrapment at Bleak House and within her idealized self. Esther takes on the role of prison guard herself since Miss Barbary, the original guard has died.[2] Whenever things become difficult, or Esther is tempted to

[2] Linehan, 136

relieve herself from her painful idealized identity, she jingles her keys and reminds herself of her promise and her duty.[3]

In proving that Esther's various roles are a crucial part of her idealized identity, I must point out why Esther adopted and maintained such roles. Kennedy suggests that:

> Esther originally adopts her role of busy housekeeper and helper as an antidote to her childhood sense of being unwanted. It is a role which enables her to come to terms with the impossible situation of being unloved by making her self necessary, and hence wanted and loved. (338)

Discussing Esther's role as housekeeper, some critics suggest without even realizing it, that she is *playing* a part.[4] Esther's roles as housekeeper and caregiver are part of her coping mechanism, and I contend that she *is* "playing," or pretending. Esther's roles are in fact elaborate productions. She subconsciously creates her idealized roles and maintains them to protect herself from her inherited fate. By taking on the duties of a housekeeper, Esther has separated herself from other people; by taking on the duties as caregiver, Esther has developed and maintains throughout the narration, even post-illness, a role typically held by those twice her age. Some critics have found that Esther fears connection to others; however, I feel that Esther takes comfort in connections to others and hides within those connections.[5] Instead of threatening Esther's sense of self, her connections to others help her keep away from her true identity. Though Esther does love those she connects with throughout her narration, she is often inhibited by them, is kept from developing her identity because of them, and sometimes the connections are related only to Esther's idealized self and not her true self.

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[3] *Bleak House* 117-120
[4] Deen, 46
[5] Goodman, 155

While Esther is in her dreamlike state at the Jellyby household, she warns us that she is in fact "no one" (*BH*, 63). Her childhood has enforced the belief that she is no one, that she should be dead, and that she has no separate identity for herself. This inherent belief holds Esther back from ever truly developing her own identity. Esther as narrator allows the reader to see Esther's true torment and the underlying causes of her odd behavior. Esther's perfection and general goodness are annoying if one cannot or does not observe the obvious shadow of discontentment and melancholy that lies over her actions and thoughts. Simple confirmations to herself and repetitions of the good others see within her can confuse readers and critics. Linehan suggests that:

> With her sense of personal unworthiness comes a need for constant approval from others—given her upbringing, who would not be insecure? —and an equally strong need to reject such approval as completely undeserved. Gratitude is the most common emotion she feels, as she routinely acknowledges her inferior relationship to almost everyone else in the novel. (136)

Esther needs constant validation. She needs to be reminded that she is loved; yet she can never truly believe it. The inability to believe in other's love for her forces Esther to maintain her protective tactic of a projected idealized self even post-illness when she has discovered her true nature, abilities and potential.

In coping with her past and with her beliefs about herself, Esther gives herself up for others. She gives up things she wants, betrays emotions she feels, or does things she doesn't wish to do, just so others can be happy. Her self-sacrificing habits confirm that she feels she is unworthy of her own happiness. One example of the many times Esther gives herself up for others is when she remains in sight of Guppy at the theater so that Ada and Richard can speak with each other (*BH*, 203). Esther's selfless actions and behaviors cannot be divorced from her past.

To contend with her miserable upbringing, to survive while believing she should be dead, and to deal with her lack of identity, Esther thrives in an inhibiting environment and in inhibiting roles.

> It was all gone now, I remembered, getting up from the fire. It was not for me to muse over bygones, but to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart. So I said to myself, 'Esther, Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!' and gave my little basket of housekeeping keys such a shake, that they sounded like little bells, and rang me hopefully to bed. (*BH*, 103)

Esther continues to be her own guard, and a prisoner in an idealized identity. In order to stay safe and protected, Esther gives herself up for others, she keeps busy and maintains a strict housekeeper and caretaker role, and she constantly reminds herself of her promise to "win some love" and remain content as a chirping bird in a locked cage. Even post-illness in her state of self-recognition, Esther is faithful to her promise, and faithful to Dickens's line of reasoning about the oppressive society in which he lived.

Illness as a Rebirth: Esther Realizes her True Identity

After her illness, Esther is able to recognize her idealized identity. Though Esther comes to realize that she is imprisoned within a self-created identity, her ability to fully recognize and pursue her own identity is limited, and she is still unable to make others aware of her identity crisis. The transformation of Esther's face represents the re-birth that Esther experiences during and after her illness. Esther no longer looks like her mother, and is no longer immersed within her idealized self. Because post-illness Esther writes as pre-illness Esther, we can often see slips of true identity peaking through; however, these slips are far more frequent post-illness. Esther as character continues to project her idealized self but allows her true self to slip through as she continually

struggles with forming her own identity and with the potential effects of exposing her true self.

Many critics find that Esther's newfound authority and more assertive behavior post-illness are unrelated to her illness and are instead signs of her growth and gained strength owed to her writing process. There is no doubt that Esther grows because of her writing; however, I argue that the obvious changes in post-illness Esther are directly related to the rebirth marked by her illness that awakens her to her identity crisis, poor self-esteem and maneuvers developed to deal with her horrid past. Esther's shift in narrative style, voice and authority post-illness is not merely growth while writing—if it were, we would see more growth pre-illness. There is an immediate shift post-illness that leaves no doubt that the illness serves as a marking point in Esther's awareness of her identity and projected self. Sawicki notes that "In earlier chapters…she is inclined to use a subtle irony to criticize some of the people she meets, but she begins to be less timid and indirect in assessing the characters and actions of others" (215). I believe that Esther's "subtle irony" in the beginning of the text is her true self slipping through, due to the fact that post-illness Esther is writing about pre-illness Esther. As for Esther becoming "less timid and indirect" towards the end of the novel, I argue that her behavior changes are primarily grounded in her realization of her suppressed self during and following the illness.

Before the illness, upon seeing her mother, Esther feels as if she is looking into a mirror, and that Lady Dedlock is "like a broken glass" (*BH*, 292). Esther is immediately reminded of her horrid childhood, and of her days as "a child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing" (*BH*, 292). The deeper lack of emotional

connection and love that Esther has experienced since her childhood is brought to the surface by the recognition of the physical similarities between herself and her mother. Esther's changed appearance caused by the illness marks a separation from her mother, and thus a separation of identity. After the illness, Esther says:

> I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us. (*BH*, 579)

The separation from her mother is both an occasion of joy and sadness; it helps Esther to both gain more of her own identity, and yet lose some of the most solid identity she had ever known. The severance of the connection allows Esther to consider her self as separate from her mother's guilt, and thus it leads her to begin establishing her own identity.

Esther fears to confront her true self, claiming that she "wish[es] to be a little more used to [her] altered self"(*BH*, 561). She is in denial about her looks because she is insecure in her new self, not because she is vain and deeply upset by the loss of her beauty. Though Esther deals with self-esteem issues and the trauma experienced over her looks changing so drastically, it is the connection between her mother and her idealized self that she fears losing all the more. Esther is too afraid of the loss of connection to her mother, and of the prospect of discovering herself, to immediately take advantage of her newfound wisdom. Esther's illness is a physical manifestation of her separation from her mother. Post-illness Esther says of her looks:

> Very soon it became more familiar, and then I knew the extent of the alteration in it even better than I had done at first. It was not like what I had expected; but I had expected nothing definite, and I dare say anything definite would have surprised me. (*BH*, 575)

Esther is confronting and complicating the changes in her physical appearance as well as the changes in her mental appearance. The growth and changes that Esther begins to

undergo would not be put into motion without the illness, the separation from her mother, and the final rebirth within her true identity.

The illness, connecting her to Jo, the most obvious parallel to Esther's lack of freedom and identity in an oppressive and uncaring society, marks Esther's re-birth and sudden consideration of her idealized identity. Jo completely lacks an identity, claiming constantly that he knows "nothink" (*BH*, 310); he was raised by no one, cannot recall his past or ever having learned anything, and the only person he ever speaks to is Nemo or "no one." Jo is not only connected to both of Esther's parents, but he is also the source of Esther's illness. The illness, which comes from Tom-all-Alone's and the socially abandoned who live there, the least free and most oppressed of all, brings Esther both closer to and farther away from her mother. Esther meets Lady Dedlock because she is at Boythorn's recovering and is thus provided with the opportunity to fully confront her mother, a vital step in the process of self-discovery, yet the illness also serves as a separation from her mother, physically and mentally. The illness triggers the delirium that causes Esther to reconsider her identity, her childhood and her connection to her mother and society—it is no coincidence that the illness comes from Jo, the most forgotten of all children.

During her illness, Esther has telling dreams about her connection to society, and her ability to find her own identity and personal freedom. The most discussed dream is of the necklace:

> Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing? (*BH*, 562)

Esther is a part of the "starry circle," she is a bead on the necklace. *Bleak House* is a novel of connections, and Esther serves as not just one of the beads in the necklace, but also as the clasp that holds the necklace in a continuous loop. Esther's desire to be removed from the necklace is synonymous with her inner desire for personal freedom and identity. Society is oppressive, and personal freedom and identity are difficult to achieve and maintain. The "agony and misery" Esther experiences in connection to being attached to society and to others who constantly undermine her identity, is part of her re-birth as someone who can recognize her true self and potentially separate from the unjust and uncaring world. Esther never fully separates from the necklace because Dickens knows that one cannot do so. What Dickens proves through Esther is that one can make positive change and create a unique identity in a world of "agony and misery."

Esther also dreams about "…labor[ing] up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and laboring again" (*BH*, 555). Esther's inability to reach the top of the stairs is representative of her inability to fully separate from her idealized identity and define a place of her own separate from the identities of others. The obstructions in her path are her own promise to herself, her inhibiting environment, her abusive childhood, and of course, the inhibiting relationships she enters after arriving at Bleak House. After recounting her dreams for her readers, Esther says: "if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be better able to alleviate their intensity"(*BH*, 556). Esther is speaking not only of her sickness and how it forces her to confront herself, but also of her trauma since childhood.

After the illness, Esther begins to hint to the reader that she is unhappy. Post-illness Esther is Esther as narrator, who at a distance of seven years is still unhappy. Esther refers to the "conspiracy to make [her] happy" (*BH*, 562). She calls it a "conspiracy" because she no longer feels one hundred percent grateful, but rather, she is able to admit to her self, though not completely to us and definitely not to other characters, that she is unhappy. Eldridge writes: "We begin to see the inconsistency that points unmistakably to her conflict—she feels simultaneously exalted and oppressed, undeservedly happy and secretly miserable" (141). I believe that the behavior described by Eldridge is directly related to Esther's illness. Though the conflict exists in pre-illness Esther, it lies dormant. Miss Flite, one of the first people to visit Esther after her illness, says: "'Very wearing to be always in expectation of what never comes…wearing, I assure you'" (*BH*, 566). Esther is in expectation of a happy relationship with Woodcourt, of a true identity, of connecting with and yet separating from her mother, of facing her imagined guilt and of separating herself from inhibiting environments and relationships. Miss Flite is right—it is "wearing," and Esther during and after her illness has been worn down.

Post-illness Esther is worn down, but she is also newly conscious of her idealized identity. Though she is unwilling and afraid to commit outwardly to her inner thoughts, Esther is more vocal about her thoughts and more precise and decisive in her actions after the illness. Whereas pre-illness Esther subconsciously criticized her world and the moral wrong around her, post-illness Esther is able not just to hint at her judgmental thoughts, but is also able to blatantly speak them. In her first visitation with Miss Flite following her illness, Esther speaks up about Woodcourt and about society in a way that Esther as

narrator may have previously spoken to the readers, but as Esther as character would never have spoken to other characters, especially Miss Flite (*BH*, 569).

Esther is very blunt about Mr. Turveydrop and the others she has hesitantly criticized in her mind all along. Post-illness Esther is not only more critical, I would argue, but she is also more aware of her true feelings, and slightly more willing to express those feelings while putting aside her idealized self who would never say or admit to thinking such harsh things about others. The callous observations and comments post-illness Esther makes are often described as, or appear to be, "striking" her or coming about suddenly:

> It struck me that if Mrs. Jellyby had discharged her own natural duties and obligations, before she swept the horizon with a telescope in search of others, she would have taken the best precautions against becoming absurd; but I need scarcely observe that I kept this to myself. (*BH*, 610)

Esther's true feelings and judgments rush upon her, as unfamiliar appendages to her true identity and abilities. Though Esther admits she would never speak this out loud, her observation of the fact is proof that she is more aware of her criticisms, and more understanding of their cruel sound and how they clash with her projected idealized self.

Esther's more blatant and harsher judgments after her illness are most vivid in her observations of Skimpole. Esther's thoughts about Skimpole after her illness escalate in her mind until finally she begins to speak to other characters, even Skimpole himself, about her feelings. The best example is in the culmination of Esther's increasingly frustrated thoughts about Skimpole. Esther's thoughts about Skimpole begin to become harsher and more brazen after the illness until she finally begins to speak them. First she tells Skimpole that she feels his way of living affects Richard, by simply calling his manner of handling things "unfortunate" (*BH*, 604); however, this first confrontation is

coy and casual. Esther fully confronts Skimpole by going to his house alone and telling him flat out that she does not want him to visit Richard any more (*BH*, 930). Admitting her harsher judgments to another character is a mark of Esther's personal growth, and going alone to do so is a mark of Esther's increasing ability to stand alone as her own person. Her ability to speak her thoughts after the illness, though it takes some time and she only does so in a very limited way, is proof of Esther's realization of her own identity, and her desire to stand on her own, speak her mind and be her true self.

Post-illness Esther begins to remind herself more frequently about her duty. She must do so because she becomes more inclined to stray from her promise to herself. When Jarndyce is about to give Esther the letter asking her to marry him, she sees the expression on his face and says to herself: "I don't know how, it flashed upon me as a new and far off possibility that I understood it" (*BH*, 688). Esther is able to consider herself as equal to Jarndyce and as separate from him. She is able to see herself as intelligent and understanding only in this post-illness state.

Esther's reaction to Jarndyce's letter has been widely criticized as one of her more obnoxious and sentimental moments. I, however, see much in Esther's confused, highly depressive and melancholy response. After getting the letter, Esther admits to herself and to us:

> That would have been a change indeed. It presented my life in such a new and blank form, that I rang my housekeeping keys and gave them a kiss before I laid them down in their basket again. The I went on to think, as I dressed my hair before the glass, how often had I considered within myself that the deep traces of my illness, and the circumstances of my birth, were only new reasons why I should be busy, busy, busy—useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest, unpretending ways. This was a good time, to be sure, to sit down morbidly and cry! (*BH*, 693)

Esther is explaining her innermost feelings without fully committing to them. She wants change yet is unwilling to face it. Upon considering a change that would make her happy,

to not marry Jarndyce, she must "ring her keys," and remind herself of her duty as a guard and as a prisoner. Esther goes on to think of her illness and her birth, as well as the promise she made to herself. In thinking of her promise and her need to stay busy, she thinks it is a good time to "sit down morbidly and cry." Her entrapment in her idealized self, and thus in her inhibiting environment and role as Jarndyce's future wife, is something to not only cry over, but to "morbidly" cry over. Esther sees her illness and the "circumstances" of her birth to be "new reasons" for why she should remain "busy." Her post-illness realization about her birth and her illness as a re-birth have caused her to recognize the potential within herself, making it much more difficult to hold true to her promise.

Esther tells herself that as mistress of Bleak House she will be "as cheerful as a bird" (*BH*, 692). She sees herself as trapped within a cage. Jarndyce has himself referred to her as a chirping bird in her idealized roles. It is only after her illness that Esther realizes she has the potential to break free; however, she is too afraid of what will happen if she breaks free, and it is too easy to hide in her connections and remain overshadowed by others.

Esther refers to her double identity repeatedly. In observing the changes in Richard, Esther thinks to her self: "I thought, at first, that his old light-hearted manner was all gone; but it shone out of him sometimes, as I had occasionally known little momentary glimpses of my own old face to look out upon me from the glass" (*BH*, 926). In comparison to Richard's situation, it becomes clear that Esther is not speaking just of her altered looks, but of her altered personality. Esther is referring to her idealized self just as she is referring to Richard's "light-hearted manner." Esther's "old face," continues

to be mentioned, and I believe it is a direct reference to her idealized self unaware of her true identity. Esther mentions: "Whatever little lingerings may have now and then revived in my mind, associated with my poor old face, had only revived as belonging to a part of my life that was gone—gone like my infancy or my childhood" (*BH*, 935). Esther connects her "old face" to her childhood, and thus to her idealized self as a coping mechanism for the trauma of her childhood. She sees her "old face" as immature and naïve, as unaware of the possibilities in freedom, the opportunity to discover oneself, and also of the horrors of the cruel and uncaring world.

Esther as a Complex Narrator

To prove that Esther has developed an idealized identity, and in discussing how Esther recognizes the battle between her true self and idealized self, I must also demonstrate that Esther is a complex character. One of the greatest arguments surrounding Esther that has existed between critics since *Bleak House* was first read is whether or not Esther is a complex or a simple character. I believe that Esther's complexities, mysteries, and her depth as both a character and a narrator extend far beyond what we normally see in well-developed characters. Esther Summerson is one of Dickens's greatest masterpieces; however, many critics and readers see Esther as one of Dickens's greatest failures. As readers, we need to look beyond the words on the page, think about Esther's narration as a whole, pick up the subtle tips she provides us, and examine her abilities as a writer and the differences that appear between Esther as character and Esther as narrator.

Many critics who are of the mindset that Esther is a failed character and narrator, and is simple and overly good, wrote around the 1950s and prior; however, a fair amount

of modern critics still believe that there is nothing deeper to consider about Esther, and that perhaps the rest of us who see psychological trauma, coping mechanisms and idealized identities are reading too far below the surface, to places that even Dickens had not traveled. Regardless of when the critics wrote their criticism, there is a general split in opinion about Esther. Donovon believes that:

> The narrative design of the novel really requires only two qualities of her, both of which she exemplifies perfectly. In the first place, she should be as transparent as glass. The complex sensibility which is a characteristic feature of the Jamesian observer would be in Esther not simply no advantage, it would interfere with the plain and limpid narration she is charged with. (43)

Esther Summerson is anything but "transparent as glass." Though one of the first things Esther tells the reader is: "I know I am not clever" (*BH*, 27), and many critics and readers take this statement, along with the other moments in which Esther states her intellectual inabilities, at face value, this statement and the others come from Esther's idealized self. Esther denies her abilities in some ways, yet confirms them in others: "I had always a rather noticing way" (*BH*, 28). Esther as character does not want to show her abilities and thus give away her true identity to herself or others; however, Esther as narrator, who is post-illness Esther, has realized her true identity and has come to, in some ways, reveal and connect with her true identity. She is writing at a distance of seven years and is trying to capture the essence of pre-illness Esther, of her idealized identity she now sees so clearly.

Esther as narrator provides us with hints of Esther's true self and her true abilities. She understands her abilities and admits them privately to the reader, but never outwardly to the other characters. In fear of slipping away from her promise and her idealized self, Esther withholds her true thoughts and emotions from others. Esther's early observations of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby (*BH*, 126), for example, are rather

harsh and exact. She would never say the things she thought out loud to Mrs. Pardiggle and Jellyby, but she is able to say them inwardly to herself, and through her writing, to the reader.

Upon first coming to the Jellyby household, Esther is smarter than the crowd and is able to release the young Jellyby's head from the rails when no one else is able to think of how to calm the boy and then free him (*BH*, 51). Esther constantly proves herself to be smart, quick witted, and able to speak up when all others remain silent (she frequently speaks for Richard and Ada). Though she promises to "fall into the background" (*BH*, 40), she never does because she is too strong as a character and narrator to do so.

Jarndyce immediately asserts that Esther is intelligent, but then, when questioning if she understands Chancery, he more or less demands that she does not: "'Of course, Esther,' he said, 'you don't understand this Chancery business?' And of course I shook my head" (*BH*, 118). The sentence "And of course I shook my head," besides beginning with "and" and thus standing out, stands alone as its own paragraph. Esther knows, inside of herself, whether she wants to admit it or not, that she is intelligent. Jarndyce is consistently surprised with Esther's "noticing ways." Esther notices Boythorn's past by simply observing his behavior around Ada and Richard (*BH*, 147), and Esther notices the love growing between the young couple before Jarndyce. Esther is the one who is always able to understand the truth about Richard's ways throughout all of the changes he goes through.

In describing the ways in which Esther reveals her "noticing" nature, I must point out the difficulties in understanding pre and post-illness Esther and the complications that

arise due the fact that the Esther who tells the story is always post-illness Esther. Kearns suggests that:

> Perhaps Dickens, in creating Esther, wrote too well; perhaps he gave her so much substance as a narrator that we have difficulty seeing the person who is also the narrator and who is struggling, not always successfully, to repress her entirely natural present-tense urge toward growth and self-esteem. (128)

I believe that what Dickens did with Esther wasn't necessarily too much, but I do believe it becomes difficult to understand the slips between Esther as narrator and Esther as character. In seeing the inner workings of Esther's mind and her lack of identity functioning beneath her false self, one is able to separate Esther present from Esther past, Esther narrator from Esther character, and Esther pre-illness from Esther post-illness. Because Esther does not have her own identity, she functions on multiple levels as multiple characters, or contributors to *Bleak House*. Esther's intelligence and complexity as a character and narrator are represented not just by her "noticing ways," but also by what I call her knowing ways. Though Esther the character rarely betrays her idealized self and realizes her true abilities, at least not before the illness, Esther the narrator frequently shows the reader in subtle ways, how smart and complex the true Esther is. She is not complex only because she has psychological issues and coping mechanisms developed from an emotionally abusive childhood, but also because she is a very complex individual who is both good at heart and intelligent.

An example of Esther as narrator pointing out the "knowing ways" of her self can be seen in many of the confrontations between Esther, Ada and Richard. "'Let us talk about something else'[said Richard]. Ada would have done so, willingly…But I thought it would be useless to stop there, so I began again" (*BH*, 269). Esther's intelligence, however, does not end with her ability to carry a conversation or to demonstrate a point

in a subtle manner, but continues in what advice she has to offer: "'Then,' pursued Richard, 'it's monotonous, and to-day is too like yesterday, and to-morrow is too like to-day.' 'But I am afraid,' said I, 'this is an objection to all kinds of application—to life itself, except under some very uncommon circumstances'" (*BH*, 270). Esther can hardly be called a static character.[6] Though her complexities related to her identity crisis, self-esteem, illness, and idealized self are convincing enough, her abilities in talking to others, her "noticing way," and her knowing away, add to the list of proof against her lack of understanding and simple nature. [7]

W.J. Harvey, well known for his critiques of *Bleak House*, wrote that: "Esther's narrative is plain, matter-of-fact, conscientiously plodding. Only very rarely does her style slip and allow us to glimpse Dickens guiding her pen" (147). I do not believe we ever see Dickens guiding Esther's pen. Even the moments that some critics see as a slip on Dickens's behalf, where he unknowingly inserted his own style into Esther's writing, I see plainly as Esther's brilliant writing abilities and narrative technique. Her narration is anything but "plain," and certainly is not "matter-of-fact." One of the passages that demonstrates Esther's abilities as a writer also proves her abilities as a character:

> It was grand to see how the wind awoke, and bent the trees, and drove the rain before it like a cloud of smoke; and to hear the solemn thunder, and to see the lightning; and, while thinking with awe of the tremendous powers by which our little lives are encompassed, to consider how beneficent they are, and how upon the smallest flower and leaf there was already a freshness poured from all this seeming rage, which seemed to make creation new again. (*BH*, 296)

Esther's musings are intelligent and are formed deep within her soul. She is not simply "noticing," and she is not even merely "understanding." At this moment, Lady Dedlock comes in and asks if it is dangerous to sit in "so exposed a place" (*BH*, 296), and Ada

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[6] Harvey, 149
[7] Hough, 60

believes it was Esther speaking. How far are Esther's thoughts from whether or not it is dangerous to sit in such a place? Yet, Ada believes that it would be perfectly reasonable for Esther to be thinking of such mundane and simple things. The difference between the thoughts Ada would imagine Esther contemplating from what Esther is actually pondering is incredible. The passage is proof of Esther's true self and the vast difference between her true self and the idealized self she presents to others. I would hardly call Esther's writing artificial or unpleasant, and I certainly would not call her an amateur, as Harvey does. [8; 9]

Esther as narrator is able to withhold information from us to keep the story exciting and surprising. Though she slips her present self into pre-illness Esther on occasion, she makes it known that Esther as character never betrays her idealized self. Esther hides information about Woodcourt, not just because of her inability to discuss him or her concerns over whether or not she is worthy of him, but also because she wants to create suspense. In the chapter in which Esther explains a discussion between Richard and Woodcourt, which she did not witness, the reader is aware she must have heard it from one of the two men. She mentions that she "can answer for one of them" (*BH*, 782), and leaves us to wonder which one it is. This is one small example of her narrative and writing abilities.

Esther is not only a talented writer, but is also a very intelligent person. Esther is not fooled by Chancery or false people. She sees right through Mrs. Pardiggle, Mrs. Jellyby, Mr. Turveydrop and Mr. Skimpole. Esther, from the start, is aware of the powers of Chancery and the unpleasant nature of the world. She sees the false missions of

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[8] Monod, 24
[9] Harvey, 148

people, and the lack of functionality or help in a harsh world. When Esther appears to be dutiful, she is actually "engaging in very serious self-suppression and denial" (Linehan, 138). Esther as narrator has many slips that allow us to view Esther's true identity and her true abilities.

Esther's self-suppression, and her position as prison guard over herself are revealed to us through present post-illness Esther. One of the greatest slips within the novel is:

> we went down into the damp dark kitchen, where Peepy and his little brothers and sisters were groveling on the stone floor, and where we had such a game of play with them, that to prevent myself form being quite torn to pieces I was obliged to fall back on my fairy tales. (*BH*, 384)

Fairy tales? Though Esther literally means that she tells the children fairy tales as a form of entertainment, I see the passage as alluding to the idealized fantasy life Esther pre-illness has created. Esther in the present, who is post-illness, is able to admit that she had relied on fairy tales to get her through the times when she wanted to discover her true self, desert her perfect image, and remain separated from the truth about her own abandonment as well as the abandonment of others. When confronted with the truth about the undeserving lack of care so many children and people face, as Jarndyce turns to the Growlery and shivers at the turn of the wind, Esther turns to fairy tales. She relied on fairy tales to help her chirp while caged, and to keep her jingling her keys. Esther lived a fairy tale, and arguably, she continued to do so even after she realized it was what she was doing.

Developing a True Identity: Conclusions of *Bleak House*

If Esther's illness represents a breaking point in the novel, the point at which Esther recognizes her true self and her idealized self, then one question remains—why doesn't Esther ever fully develop her identity and come to present herself as she truly is? Post-illness Esther, after recognizing her conflict of identity, moves towards fully realizing herself, but never completes the process. The combination of her own inhibitions, and the inhibitions of the world in which she lives, stop her from reaching her true potential as an individual. Esther desires to and yet fears to break away from her promise. She also desires to and yet fears to completely separate herself from her mother and develop her own identity.

Bleak House and the relationships developed there are inhibitors to the completion of Esther's self-growth. Though they give her an opportunity to experience love and appreciation, which are important to Esther's growth, they don't allow her to step away from the idealized self and fully discover her own identity. Axton's study of the names given to Esther explores the idea that they act as inhibitors to Esther's growth. Axton refers to the following passage: "This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them" (*BH*, 121). Axton writes: "these pet names are gratefully received; but in so far as they obscure or ignore her given names, they deprive Esther of a measure of identity and status as an individual and reduce her to the relative anonymity of a housekeeper" (159). Esther's identity is lost in these names that are representative of her idealized self. Beyond what Axton explores, I see that not only is Esther "reduced…to the…anonymity of a housekeeper," but that through the nicknames, she is also given the

space to hide behind busy roles and is perceived as she wishes to be, thus reinforcing her stable yet limited sense of worth.

Those who enforce her lack of identity and call her by these names are inhibiting her ability to look beyond her idealized self. Jarndyce mentions "'we must take care, too, that our little woman's life is not all consumed in care for others'" (*BH*, 214). Jarndyce is a supporter of Esther's role as caregiver; if he wanted her to explore her own identity and live life for herself, he would not inhibit her from doing so. Though Jarndyce "gives" Esther away, and thus releases her from Bleak House and her role as caregiver, there is a problem in his act of "giving"—both in his giving Esther away and in his giving Esther and Woodcourt their very own Bleak House. Esther is a possession. Jarndyce says to Woodcourt: "'take from me, a willing gift…'"(*BH*, 966). That Esther is something to give proves that she is not her own individual with her own developed identity, capable of making her own decisions. In the act of giving Esther to Woodcourt, Jarndyce brands Esther not as a person, but as a gift. Sawicki writes: "As critics have noted, Esther's failure to *choose* Woodcourt, her having him chosen for her, undermines her progress toward self-identity, toward a state of maturity and autonomy as a character" (217). Esther's voice is missing in the one of the most important decisions a person can make.

Jarndyce also speaks for Esther upon Guppy's renewal of his proposal (*BH*, 970). Guppy's second proposal represents an opportunity for self-growth and appreciation. If Esther were given the chance to inform Guppy that she is too good for him, rather than allowing Jarndyce to say so, it would mark a significant step in Esther's realization of her worth. Because Esther is never given the chance to discover her own destiny and make decisions for herself, and because she is kept comfortable in the shadows of others,

Esther is never able to fully accept herself as an individual or as simply being herself, and not her mother.

Though Esther's marriage to Woodcourt and separation from Jarndyce, Bleak House, and her mother, are helpful to her development of an identity, her marriage is ultimately inhibitive. Though Esther and Woodcourt love each other, Esther did not officially choose Woodcourt. Esther is also placed into a copy of her inhibitive environment at Bleak House. The little house she marries into is aptly named and Esther remains a caged bird. Miss Flite says very early in the novel of her birds that she had the "intention of restoring them to liberty," however, she goes on to say that they "…die in prison though…I doubt, do you know, whether one of these, though they are all young, will live to be free! Ve-ry mortifying, is it not?" (*BH*, 73-74) The question remains, will Esther live to be free? How mortifying it is indeed that a young, beautiful, intelligent and good-hearted person like Esther will never be free to explore her own identity.

I find that Esther's greatest opportunity to explore her own identity and to "live to be free" arises in her chance to write. Esther implies that she is obliged to write, and that in a way she is being forced to. I believe that Woodcourt is the one who asked Esther to write, and begrudgingly she obeyed. Woodcourt recognizes Esther's suppressed self, and though the two have never spoken about her identity problems and how they are related to her childhood and illness, I believe Woodcourt is aware of them. Woodcourt knows that through writing, Esther might gain some self-confidence and self-esteem, and that perhaps through remembering what she has been through, she might recognize the truth about herself and her continued self-imprisonment. As Jarndyce mentions, Woodcourt was present at the death of both of Esther's parents, both of which events Esther never

discusses with the reader. Woodcourt sees the identity dilemma Esther faces in her separation and connection with a woman whose guilt is forced upon her, and a man who goes by the name of Nemo. What seems to be a perfect match and situation is actually not—Woodcourt himself contributes to Esther's imprisonment as much as her lack of identity and complications related to her childhood and parental abandonment ever did. Woodcourt, however, was right about something—Esther does grow through writing. It is obvious by the end of her narration that she is beginning to consider things she hadn't before, or that she is able to say things, even if only to the reader, that she wasn't able to admit before. However, Esther has slips in which we can see how she truly feels about her connection to Woodcourt and thus the life she is living.

Based on the way she writes about him, I feel it is clear that she still thinks he is with her out of pity, and that he only loves her idealized self, not her potential true self. Post-illness Esther writes:

> But, how much better it was now, that this had never happened! What should I have suffered, if I had had to write to him, and tell him that the poor face he had known as mine was quite gone from me, and that I freely released him from his bondage to one whom he had never seen! (*BH*, 570)

Esther's love for Woodcourt becomes mixed up in her identity crisis. Because she is unable to fully accept her "new face," and her new self, she assumes that Woodcourt will not be able to as well.

When Esther first sees Woodcourt after her illness, she detects pity, and does so repeatedly. One instance is as follows:

> And in his last look as we drove away, I saw that he was very sorry for me. I was glad to see it. I felt for my old self as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes. I was glad to be tenderly remembered, to be gently pitied, not to be quite forgotten. (*BH*, 708)

Though Esther later mentions that what she thought was pity was actually love (*BH*, 937), I do not believe she ever comes to fully believe this. Esther is writing having been

married for seven years. Her way of writing about Woodcourt and her present fears surrounding her love for him and whether or not she deserves his love or is fully accepted by him are indicators of how present Esther feels. Even post-illness, Esther is both joyful and sorrowful over the love she has won: "joy that I have won it, sorrow that I have not deserved it better" (*BH*, 938). Esther does not see herself as deserving Woodcourt's love.

Esther admits to the readers: "although I was not what he thought me, still he loved me very dearly, and it might remind him mournfully of what he believed he had lost" (*BH*, 963). If we read into Esther's words, it is clear that she feels the Esther that Woodcourt loves is not the true Esther. She believes he loves who he thinks she is and that he might remember what he "believed he had lost," implying that he had not lost what he thought he had because it was never his to have in the first place. Esther is referring to her idealized self, her "old face." She believes that Woodcourt only loves the idealized self, the pre-illness Esther.

Esther is both right and wrong in her assumptions. Though Woodcourt does in fact love Esther for who she is and encourages her to discover her true self, he does not allow her to continue her self-discovery. Esther says: "The people even praise Me as the doctor's wife. The people even like ME as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake" (*BH*, 989). Esther is continuing to live for someone other than herself. She is hidden in Woodcourt's shadow and believes people only like her because of him and can only see her as a part of him. With this view of herself, Esther will never be able to develop her own identity. The new Bleak House becomes almost as inhibiting as the old Bleak House: "I have never lost my old names…Dame Trot, Dame

Durden, Little Woman!—all just the same as ever; and I answer, Yes, dear guardian!—just the same" (*BH*, 988). Esther is still hidden beneath her idealized self and the names given to her. She is "just the same," and it is clear she is unhappy about it.

Another reason Esther never fully develops her own identity is because she cannot completely separate herself from her mother. When Esther discovers her dead mother, she informs the reader: "I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child" (*BH*, 915). Though Esther's confusion is in seeing the dead woman as the brick maker's wife rather than as her mother, this statement can easily be read as a slip. Lady Dedlock is the mother of a "dead child." To Lady Dedlock, Esther was dead, to Esther's godmother, she should have been dead, and to Esther herself, she is in many ways dead. What does it mean for one's mother to think one is dead and for one's father to be Nemo? Jo's confusion about Esther's identity speaks to the mix up Esther herself experiences over separating her own identity from her mother's: "'She looks to me the t'other one. It ain't the bonnet, nor yet it ain't the gownd, but she looks to me the t'other one'" (*BH*, 490). At the heart of Esther's identity problem lies the confusion she was born into—Esther was raised with her mother's guilt, and in a way, the only identity Esther ever took on, the one that caused her to develop her idealized self, is the identity of a tainted and unloved individual. Without ever having found her own identity, Esther is left incomplete.

Bleak House ends with an incomplete sentence because Esther is incomplete. The final conversation between Woodcourt and Esther reveals that Esther is still unsure of who she is. Woodcourt explains that she is "prettier than…ever" (*BH*, 989), but Esther claims "[She] did not know that," and that she is "not certain that [she] know[s] it now"

(*BH*, 989). Esther's confusion about her looks is directly related to what she calls her "old looks," and her current looks or new face. The physical manifestation of her identity crisis and her separation from her mother helps to reveal the extent of Esther's inner confusion. Writing has helped Esther to consider the possibility that she is loved for who she is, but Esther is still left in an inhibiting environment. I believe that in order to fully discover herself and come to develop her own identity, Esther needs to be separated from both Bleak Houses, from Jarndyce, Woodcourt and even Ada. The relationships she has developed have been good for her in many ways and can be good for her in the future, however, Esther needs to explore herself on her own before she can realize her true identity. The last page of the novel leaves the reader questioning whether or not Esther will continue to present her idealized self or whether she will fully come to terms with her true identity.

Conclusion

A primary concern that often arises between critics of *Bleak House* is about Esther's purpose within the overall framework of the novel. What is the message of *Bleak House*, and how does Esther contribute to it? Hough writes:

> In terms of a psychological text-book this would be a complete recipe for the production of a psychopath. On any social-determinist philosophy Esther could never have become what she becomes. (66)

Esther's resilience and the fact that she does not turn into a "psychopath" helps to prove that those who are good at heart can overcome the negative effects of the world and inevitably make the world a better place. Esther is constantly at odds with and yet also in agreement with the third person narrator. The third person narrator presents the world as it is—Bleak. Esther's story is not a marvelous one of sunshine and happiness. Many critics feel that Esther functions to balance out the views of the third person narrator;

however, I argue that Esther presents both the possibility of a solution to the problems of the world as well as the fact that the solution is not easy to develop.

Dickens creates Esther's identity crisis and has her both overcome it as well as be stifled by it. The true good does not lie in Esther's idealized self, but in her true self. Dickens does not find good in those who live to do good like Mrs. Pardiggle or Mrs. Jellyby, nor does he find good in idealized Esther, but rather, he finds good in the very core of the human heart. Esther's good nature lies beneath her idealized shell, as it does in the other characters. Esther does not relate only to Jo, but also to the other characters that function in a corrupt society with imagined guilt and suppressed identities. Dickens developed Esther's identity as he does to explore the possibilities of creating positive change within an oppressive society, as well as to further develop the connectivity of his characters and the problems they deal with as imposed upon them by an unjust and uncaring world. Frazee writes:

> The melodramatic pattern of the Esther-Lady Dedlock relationship, with its neglected child and negligent mother, it's the microcosmic, emotional equivalent of society's neglect of the helpless…he could freely dramatize the punishment of the mother for neglecting her child. (230)

In a way, this scenario works. Esther, like Jo, stands for the neglected, the unknown and uncared for; however, Esther is not "helpless," and this is essential to Dickens's point. Esther has the ability to overcome her past, to overcome Bleak House and the bleak world, if only she can gain personal freedom. Dickens asks us to question whether or not this freedom is achievable. In a society that casts away all hope of affection and self-fulfillment, Esther builds up a coping mechanism, and through the separation with her mother, and symbolically the separation with the oppressive and neglectful society, Esther is able to recognize her own identity and her own ability to create positive

change.[10] However, Esther leaves us at the end of the novel not having created the ultimate positive change, that which starts within.

. Esther's inability to become fully self-supporting and to fully recognize her identity is important to Dickens's message about connection. Through the use of the illness as rebirth and as a manifestation of Esther's separation yet interminable connection to her mother, Dickens is able to create a unique character and narrator who grows twice before our eyes—in the story she is telling and in present tense through telling the story. In a novel of connections, Dickens points out that one cannot fully separate from society. Esther must remain connected to society and to her mother, but she also must learn to develop her own identity and personal freedom. There must be a layer of separation for effective and positive change to occur. Esther's attempt to create the necessary layer of separation is only partially successful, as it is to many people in reality as well as within the novel. Dickens is able to emphasize the importance of and yet difficulty of separation from the source of neglect and dismay by using Esther's self-growth and self-discovery as an example. Esther is not a failure, nor is she "static, consistent, [and] passive" (Harvey, 149). Esther is an example of the possibilities that lie within us. She is an example of the good that exists within the soul and the way so many of us have our fingers within reach of positive change only to be oppressed and kept silent. Her identity struggle is the struggle every single human faces in determining the way she will present herself to the world, and the way she might create positive change within a bleak world. Esther is a beautifully developed, complex yet subtle, always moving and growing, strong character and narrator.

[10] Kennedy, 346

The final question remains: How can *Bleak House*, a novel of connections, be seen as a whole, and how do Esther's illness and complexities function within Dickens's main themes? Harvey writes that:

> The usual novel may be compared to a pebble thrown into a pool; we watch the ripples spread. But in *Bleak House* Dickens has thrown in a whole handful of pebbles and what we have to discern is the immensely complicated tracery of half-a-dozen circles expanding, meeting, interacting. Esther—to change the metaphor—has the stability of a gyroscope; by her we chart our way. (152)

I believe that Harvey's metaphor is exact and powerful; however, I feel that Esther functions as the biggest pebble of all sending off the most impressive and far-reaching ripple. Esther is not static or stable, but a connecting point between every character and theme that passes through *Bleak House*. Esther's ripple expands from the center and reaches through and disturbs every line of every other swell and undulation. Though *Bleak House* is akin to a "handful of pebbles" thrown into a pool, it is as if the resulting ripples are concentric and related to a single tossed stone, for all of the circles relate back to one central point—Esther. *Bleak House* is a novel of connections in that it speaks of the human condition—the condition we all must face. Dickens proposes that we develop a powerful sense of self, individually, and then turn to face the bleak world together. Strung upon a string one by one, like the necklace Esther sees, we cannot separate from each other, but we can discover personal freedom and the power that change within ourselves can create for the world.

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