

The Mistress of the House and her Master: The Double Narrative in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

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Speaking in strictly functional terms, the dual narrative in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) is ingenious yet dispensable. The presence of Esther Summerson's narrative voice makes *Bleak House* a more original, compelling novel, though not a better told story than Dickens could have managed on his own. All the same, the originality of the mixture of autobiographical narration and omniscient voice was already hailed by one of the first reviewers as something untried at the time yet successful since "It affords the writer a wider range of character and scene than a single autobiography would have done, while its partaking of the latter, gives an additional interest to the character of the heroine"¹. Later critics have underlined the modernity of this discontinuous narrative as a forerunner of Modernist, and even post-modernist, 20th century fiction and have seen that "Dickens uses it quite consciously for his own ends: to show the ultimate connectedness of the apparently unconnected"².

The concept of inter-connectedness—the Coleridgean goal of describing the relationship of everything to everything else—is what underlies the whole design of *Bleak House*. The idea is clearly stated in the novel itself: "What connection can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been curiously brought together!"³; it

1 Anonymous review of *Bleak House*, *Bentley's Monthly Review*, October 1853 in A.E. Dyson (ed.), *Charles Dickens: Bleak House. Casebook Series*. (London: MacMillan, 1969), p. 57.

2 Graham Storey, *Dickens: Bleak House. Series: Landmarks of World Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 20.

3 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971(1985)), p. 272.

is the only satisfactory basis to account for the prodigious number of characters moving about its pages and the complex narrative method.

However, the true particularity of the double narrative in *Bleak House* lies in its forming part of a total design that emphasizes the artificiality of the novel as such, as a literary artifact; in other words, Dickens's choice of collaborator has its justification in his attempt to construct a novel of great structural complexity, of a complexity even greater than the subject really demanded, for the sake of experimentation. Thus, if Esther Summerson is given the privilege of acting as Dickens's co-narrator this is so, in principle, because Dickens—exploring his range of novelistic power in this book—wanted to devise a total narrator, both male and female, author and character, insider and outsider. After all, the same story could have been told from his own omniscient point of view, disregarding Esther's collaboration, without altering at all the social criticism cutting across all the classes of Victorian England or the stylistic quality of the telling. It seems obvious, though, that Esther alone could not have easily sustained the whole of the narrative flow in the way David Copperfield or Pip do; she would have been incapable of extending her autobiographical narrative to cover so much social field as Dickens includes in *Bleak House*.

The arbitrariness of Esther's role can be better seen in comparison to other stories also told from the point of view of a double narrator. As it will be seen, those stories function with the assumption that a core autobiographical narrative is guaranteed—authorized—by a peripheral narrative. This peripheral narrative may also belong to a character inserted within the fiction but it is not so directly autobiographical or simply not at all. The outer narrative frame serves to protect the validity, the illusion of reality of the inner narrative and to mediate between the reality of the reader and the alleged reality of the autobiographer within the story. As we will see, in *Bleak House*, the notion of core and periphery does not work, despite the combination of autobiography and omniscient narration.

In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1848), events are reported by a male narrator, Mr Lockwood, whose story-telling frames the narrative of the female narrator, Nelly Dean. The absence of an omniscient narrator contributes to making the reader identify with the male character cum narrator who has to find his way in the

maze of events, both in his own experience and in Nelly Dean's tale. The division of narrative tasks is done on the principle that each narrator tells—orally in Nelly's case, in writing in Lockwood's case—his or her own experience of events, reporting also on the experiences others had and told them about. Thus, through Nelly Dean we may hear the voices of Catherine Earnshaw, Isabella Linton, Heathcliff, Cathy Linton and others, while, of course, Nelly's voice itself is reported by Lockwood. Without Nelly's collaboration Mr Lockwood, who is not particularly gifted to guess the real turn of events, has no option to find out how exactly beautiful Cathy Heathcliff has come to find herself in such position, nor do we as readers. Nelly's is, evidently, the primary narrative; Mr Lockwood's is the luxury Emily Brontë indulges in for the sake of interesting the reader in the game of taking part in the story both from within and from the outside. She positively enriches *Wuthering Heights* by choosing to step back and let the slightly absurd Mr Lockwood transmit her wonderful tale. His totally out-of-place city manners are used by Brontë to underline the cultural distance between him and the Yorkshire people but also to ambiguously stress the fact that such romantic stories as Heathcliff and Cathy's may happen next door to a Mr Lockwood. In all, the narrative frame is a fully successful device, which contributes both to the novel's plot and to the meaningfulness of its design.

Two notorious instances of the use of a narrative frame can be found in Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" (1898) and Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1899). In James's novella the autobiographical ghost story written by the governess is actually transmitted to the reader by two male narrators: the governess' former pupil, who received from her, and the Jamesian country house guest narrator who rewrites it much later in the form we know. Naturally, this complicated frame introduces an element of instability in the governess' narrative—which, accidentally or not, is already unstable enough—since, though apparently a first-hand account, her narrative has been handled by a number of people, and this makes it less reliable than if the frame were missing. Likewise, we have no complete guarantee that Mr Lockwood's rendering of Nelly Dean's tale is accurate enough. Similarly, Joseph Conrad introduces Marlow, the autobiographical narrator in "Heart of Darkness" through another narrator who actually purports to be Conrad himself, one in the group of men gathered to listen to

Marlow's yarn about his Congo experience. Again, we do not have a document directly coming from the protagonist's hands but a secondary reproduction of the original story; no matter how marginal the role of Marlow's listener is in the story itself—much more marginal than Mr Lockwood's—the truth is that we have to take it/him into account. All in all, in these three stories, the dual narrative method introduces a certain ambiguity by questioning the reliability of the narrators—primary and secondary—and by placing the authorial voice (the voice that sanctions the authenticity of the autobiographical stories) in the mouth of a more or less secondary character. Paradoxically, this partial instability, the absence of the actual writer, results in an enrichment of the matter told; different perspectives work on it, including, no doubt, that which the reader is invited to develop by the author on his or her own. This is not the case in *Bleak House*.

There is no frame in *Bleak House*, something which, in theory, seems to grant a similar status to both narrators. Rather than framed, this is a shared narrative, or so Dickens lets us believe. In practice, Esther Summerson is never an autonomous narrator in the same way Nelly Dean is. Esther may well tell what she sees and hears but there is no illusion that she selects the materials of her tale nor that she has the narrative exclusive on them. Esther offers her approach to the story, which is partly her own autobiographical voice, but she is always under the command of the main narrator, who edits her story down to the very titles of her chapters, and under whose orders she compiles her memoirs. Esther's story does not gain more credibility for being shared with the omniscient narrator: she is not authorised by him but by herself. Besides this, her story reaches us without any intermediate intervention; we do know that she is writing it because she says so, but nobody else says whether she is a reliable source or not, nor why she is there as a co-narrator. The story as plot gains nothing in being told by Esther, for the distribution of the telling ensures that the respective narratives never cross each other's paths, although many if not all characters often cross the boundaries between narrators. There is nothing 'Dickens', the narrator, does not know well enough to require Esther's aid, for, unlike the male co-narrators of the stories I have mentioned, this one is an omniscient narrator placed outside the boundaries of the fictional events.

Unlike the editor and omniscient narrator of the first part of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), another interesting case of dual narrative method, the omniscient narrator who edits Esther's narrative makes no attempt at explaining her existence or her story as the central motif in his narrative. Nor is there any overlapping between the two narratives of *Bleak House*, something that is the distinguishing feature of Hogg's double narrative. There whole episodes are retold and repeated by the protagonist, with Hogg artlessly neglecting the editor's precedent narrative, thus pretending that both narratives are original and independent from his own authorial, unheard voice. What we find in *Bleak House*, then, is something totally atypical, truly unconventional: a thorough separation between both narrators, but a total merger of subject matter; a gratuitous complication of the narrative method, yet a successful telling. The Dickensian narrator builds up a perfectly artificial but impassable barrier between Esther and himself that does not exist in any other of the double narratives. In one word, if Esther Summerson acts as 'Dickens's' co-narrator it is for reasons that are not justifiable in structural terms.

Criticism of *Bleak House's* double narrative has often been centred on the discussion of the actual effect the scheme has on the book, though its success has often been considered in terms of how adequate Esther is for the task, hardly ever considering why there should be a double narrative at all. Although both Esther and 'Dickens' are fascinated by the links among widely diverging people, the connectedness of the apparently disconnected could have been shown equally well without Esther's assistance since it is relevant to the whole novel, not only to her portion of it. As for her function as a subjective counterpart to the objectivity of the third-person narrator, which is Grahame Storey's view⁴, this often seems very difficult to accept in view of the shrill, melodramatic, not at all impartial tone often taken by the omniscient narrator. If Esther balances 'Dickens', the narrator, at all it is in the sense that she lives inside the story while the third-person narrator, despite all his omniscience, always remains an outsider.

However, the question of a basic imbalance within the novel may lead to contradictory views of the dual narrative method. Totally contrary to Storey's views,

⁴ Storey, p. 22.

W.J. Harvey speaks of Esther as a “brake, controlling the runaway tendency of Dickens’s imagination”⁵, a point of view which also participates of the idea of redressing the apparently unbalanced third-person narrator, though in quite different terms. Her narrative, according to Harvey, “offers us stability, a point of rest in a flickering world”⁶. He also points out at the most obvious problem concerning the double narrative in *Bleak House*, the question of Esther’s substance as a character:

In other words, Dickens has to reconcile in Esther the demands of a narrator and a main character and he chooses to subdue Esther as a character in the interests of her narrative function. We do not, so to speak, look at Esther; we look through her at the teeming Dickensian world⁷.

Correct as this view no doubt is, it seems oddly compatible with the fact that if there is a well-rounded character in *Bleak House*, that is indeed Esther Summerson. No other character is better portrayed than Esther, none better observed or developed. Esther is, truly, one of the few, if not the only character in *Bleak House*, who is not a caricature and one of the few females of the Dickensian world who turns out to be rather more than simply an angelic presence. As for the question of stability, in all intents and purposes the fact that Esther’s presence has caused so much controversy about her suitability for the role of narrator, should point to a completely different view: her narrative is precisely a sign of the instability of this novel, of the impossibility of rendering such complex, unstable web of human relationships, from a single-handed, authorially unified point of view.

Alan Shelston’s impression that the effect of the dual narrative is “a subtle one—the novel gains stability from the progressive unravelling of Esther’s story, while leaving Dickens free to expatiate on various examples of social abuse in the manner of his earlier picaresque method”⁸, points to another recurrent idea about *Bleak House*, namely, that what Dickens offers is sound social criticism. This sharply contrasts with

5 W.J. Harvey, “*Bleak House: The Double Narrative*” from *Character and the Novel* (1965), in A.E. Dyson, p. 226.

6 Harvey in Dyson, p. 232.

7 Harvey in Dyson, p. 229.

8 Alan Shelston, “Dickens” in Arthur Pollard (ed.), *The Victorians. Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, Volume 6. (London: Sphere Books, Ltd., 1970), p. 95.

Vladimir Nabokov's argumentative view of the sociological side of *Bleak House* as "neither interesting nor important"⁹—an idea which, arguably, applies to most of Dickens's allegedly socially concerned novels. The question is, however, that the instability of the narrative system is closely related to the problem of how to carry out wholesome social criticism. The complexity of the double narrative actually masks Dickens's loss of confidence in the method of social criticism, found in his earlier novels, that emphasizes sentimentalism as the solution of social evils.

No doubt, the basis of Dickens's philosophy of life and literature is a moral sentimentalism rooted in Wordsworthian moods and in sympathy with the angry anti-Utilitarianism of Thomas Carlyle:

Dickens believed that there was an instinctive, irrepressible need for human beings to affirm both in private and in public that they possessed moral sentiments, that these sentiments were innate, that they best expressed themselves through spontaneous feelings, and that sentimentality in art and life had a moral basis.¹⁰

In *Bleak House*, Dickens precisely explores the ways in which private and public sentimentalism interact: how the moral basis of art and life may not be the same. Two paths cross in the novel in more senses than the division of narrative tasks: life and art. Esther's relative optimism, which shows how individual sentimentalism and morality shape social relationships from the domesticity of Victorian households with good housekeepers; 'Dickens's' pessimistic, crumbling sentimental public world, whose narrator lacks the moral conviction necessary to assert that after all sentimentalism will save the day and that art will benefit from it. Life and art and their moral basis. The feminine, essentially private, narrator observes public life, which is hardly comprehensible to her in many aspects, from her snugly cocooned domesticity, close to that of the reader; the masculine, sarcastic public narrator, who understands social life only too well, tries hard to preserve that reserve of moral feeling presided by Esther in the middle of his savage attacks on public life, while trying to reach a core of

9 Vladimir Nabokov, "Charles Dickens: *Bleak House*" in *Lectures on Literature*, edited by Fredson Bowers (New York and London: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 68.

10 Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 3.

feeling that eludes him. The same core of feeling on which he used to base his literary art.

In his book on Victorian sensibility, *Sacred Tears*, Fred Kaplan argues that the modern crisis of sentimentalism has to do with the fact that the formal realism supporting the novel as an essentially mimetic genre is incompatible with the idealisation of people or events found in it; this makes novelists like Dickens sound insincere to modern ears when they try to make idealised characters like Esther pass off for realistic portraits of credible people. I would simply add that the problem is aggravated when the author himself doubts the soundness of his principles, while he still wishes to perpetuate them in art for the sake of public morale if not morality. Michael Bell places Dickens's crises as the necessary condition of his artistic progress:

In short, Dickens's perception of sentiment as a deeply ambivalent good is cognate with his maturing as a novelist. The structural and thematic integrity his work assumes in the years around 1850 is the artistic correlative of a moral awareness concerning the ambivalence of sentiment whether in characters or in readers¹¹.

Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt agree with the idea that the integration of the subject matter becomes the key concept in Dickens's *Bleak House*¹², the sign of Charles Dickens's full growth as a novelist. Yet this positive artistic maturity is certainly contrasted with a greater cynicism or despair, what Orwell refers to when he says that "The seeming inference from the rather despondent books that Dickens wrote in the 'fifties is that by that time he had grasped the helplessness of well meaning individuals in a corrupt society"¹³. This more pessimistic outlook explains the notorious lack of humour in *Bleak House* already noted in the first reviews¹⁴ and the absence of any underlying universal optimism holding the book together, a feature that could be

11 Michael Bell, "Dickens: The Fiction of Popular Sentiment" in *The Sentiment of Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 147.

12 See John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, "The Topicality of *Bleak House*" in *Dickens at Work*. (London: Methuen & Co. 1957(1982)).

13 George Orwell, "Charles Dickens" (1940) in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol.1, An Age Like This, 1920-1940*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945 (1969)), p. 419.

14 See the anonymous review of *Bleak House* in *Bentley's Miscellany*, Vol. xxxiv, 1853 in Dyson, p. 72.

found in earlier books such as *Oliver Twist*. The sentimentalism of the third-person narrator, which indeed exists but is based on rather shaky foundations, pales by the side of Esther's restrained control of her narrative and often simply lapses into downright bathos; see, for instance, George Gissing's outburst at the description of Jo's death, which also points out the question of the sincerity of the sentimental novelist:

Does there, I wonder, exist in all literature a scene less correspondent with any possibility of life than the description of Jo's last moments? Dickens believed in it—there is the odd thing. Not a line, not a word, is insincere. He had a twofold mission in life, and, from our standpoint, in an age which has outgrown so many conditions of fifty years ago, we can only mark with regret how the philanthropist in him so often overcame the artist.¹⁵

Idealism and sentimentalism seem specially suspect to modern readers when they are used to dealing with social rather than personal relationships—sentimentalism seems to be still valid only in the sphere of personal relationships, as a great part of Hollywood's production still shows. Dickens's mounting disbelief in the effectiveness of sentimentalism led him to increasingly histrionic performances of feeling, the ones Gissing will not regard as art. His doubts also led Dickens to face the idealized, falsified view of life through Esther Summerson's positive domesticity. Whether he used her to defend her position or to vent his rage against tearfully sensitive people like her is another matter; the fact is that the dilemma lies at the very core of *Bleak House*. Dickens wanted to defend the "human nature" of 18th century moral philosophy but no energy was left in him to find an alternative other than domestic happiness—Esther's view; and so he dissimulates the lapse through this amazing interplay of characters and by using Esther as a defence or, alternatively, as a decoy for excessively intuitive readers. Or as Shelston argues, "the dual narrative method can be seen as enabling Dickens to put forward a solution to the problems outlined in the novel which he could scarcely endorse in rational terms"¹⁶, provided we bear in mind that what Esther finally offers is the rationality of private life in front of the irrationality of public life. For all the adverse criticism it has received, Esther's sentimentalism is not really

15 George Gissing, "The Immortal Dickens" (1925) in Dyson, p. 95.

16 Shelston, p. 96.

exaggerated or bland. She is not really sentimental in a self-indulgent way nor for the sake of enjoying a melancholy mood; when she cries, she often has a reason to do so, a reason usually related to a moment of major psychological rather than moral crisis, such as the different proposals of marriage she receives. Hers is not a sugary view of life but an assertion of common sense.

The most difficult question concerning the relationship between Esther and 'Dickens' is whether Dickens is being ironic towards Esther. J. Hillis Miller thinks he is:

There is, then, a subtle irony in Dickens' attitude toward Esther as narrator. He does not wholly identify himself with her experience or judgement. The acceptance of the bourgeoisie Protestant ethical principles of duty, public service, domesticity, responsibility, frugality, thrift, cleanliness, orderliness, and self-discipline is qualified and in a way undermined by the juxtaposition of the two modes of narration. The suggestion is that the world can only be seen as Esther sees it, as moral, as containing an immanent Providence, through her eyes. The narrator cannot see the world in this way through his own neutral point of view.¹⁷

But, does this mean that the omniscient narrator's high-keyed sensibility is a parody of Esther's style or that Esther's narrative must be read assuming that Dickens is mocking her? In my view, Dickens shows an immense respect for Esther Summerson; if there is irony in *Bleak House*, Dickens directs it against himself, the arch-judge of society, the creator of the 'teeming Dickensian world', in subtle ways. Significantly, the narrators do not intrude into each other's path so that Dickens never has a chance of dissecting Esther in the merciless way he uses with the Smallweeds or the Jellybys. Dickens just could not cope with the idea of destroying Esther by means of the fierce irony of the third-person narrator, nor could she be at the same level than the other caricatured personages: he needed her strongly for her deeper belief in human nature and to keep his own alive.

Without any question, Esther's perspective is as rhetorical as 'Dickens's', another form of preaching in *Bleak House*:

Esther's language too is a special perspective, perhaps a distorting one, as is the view of the other narrator. Each has his (sic) characteristic rhetoric, a rhetoric which interprets the world along certain lines. To Esther the course of her life seems secretly governed by a divine Providence... To the other narrator no such

17 J. Hillis Miller, "Bleak House and the Moral Life" from *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (1959), in Dyson, p. 189.

presences are visible. He sees a world darkening towards death, a world in which it is always foggy or raining.¹⁸

Nonetheless, if Charles Dickens had wished to stress how mild, how leniently charitable, how wrong Esther's belief in Providence is he could have done this more effectively by silencing Esther's narrative voice. To reject Mrs Pardiggle's or Harold Skimpole's philosophy of life Dickens needn't let them be co-narrators: their presence is just enough. The way I see it, Esther Summerson is essential to Dickens because by putting himself in her (feminine, female) shoes he could explore other areas of storytelling; these were in many senses more free than those the male narrator had access to. Women could, for instance—so it was believed—show more feeling and do it more authentically. In other words, in *Bleak House* the more sensitive, or feminine, side of Dickens's personality sustains through Esther's creation his socially conscious or masculine side, which was in a state of crisis. Whether or not the novel started as an irony on Esther's sentimentalism, the fact is that Dickens found himself more and more comfortable in his 'feminine' role and more and more interested in his co-narrator. That form of unexpectedly thriving literary transvestism allowed *Bleak House* to be the fascinating masterpiece it is. Nabokov's observation that "By midstream, Dickens, writing through Esther, can take up the narration in a more fluent, supple, and conventional style than he did under his own name"¹⁹, also hints at how comfortable Dickens grew to feel behind Esther Summerson's mask, even in stylistic matters.

Esther's popularity is by no means unanimous. She is often criticized mostly because she is perceived as an option, as an intrinsically unnecessary luxury in the narrative. This is, seemingly, deftly used by Dickens to conceal the very artificiality of his own narrative voice, to the extent that one of the original reviewers dubbed 'ordinary narration' precisely what never is ordinary. The objections against Esther or the praise in her favour are usually related to the issue of her goodness and her coy modesty:

18 J. Hillis Miller, "Introduction" to Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971(1985)), p. 33, original ellipsis.

19 Nabokov, p. 101.

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Esther is, as we have hinted, too precociously good, too perpetually self-present, and too helpful to everyone around her to carry a sense of reality: nor are her virtues made more probable by the fact that she is the chronicler of her own perfection—though with disclaimers manifold.²⁰

At the other end of the critical spectrum comes A.E. Dyson's view of Esther as "that rare thing in the novel, a convincing depiction of human goodness"²¹, although he also sadly acknowledges that Esther has lost her popularity with 20th century readers. Paradoxically, the most obvious problem concerning Esther is her apparent lack of modesty, her excessive self-praise. This problem is the natural result of Dickens's choice to show Esther exclusively through her own narrative, a problem Samuel Richardson himself also had to face in *Pamela*. Pamela Andrews was the same kind of sinner as Esther Summerson, supposing, of course, Dickens did not intend this facet of Esther's narrative as an irony on her in the same way Jane Austen exposes Emma, while still liking her.

One of the most remarkable enigmas in the book is why Esther writes her memoirs at all. The sexist reviewer of *The Spectator*, who wishes that Esther "would not bore one with her goodness till a wicked wish arises that she would either do something 'spicy', or confined herself to superintending the jam-pots at Bleak House" was convinced that "such a girl would not write her own memoirs"²²—whatever adjective might qualify 'girl'; he was possibly hinting at what he regarded as Esther's dullness, but the truth is that if we dismiss Esther, we should also reject heroines like Jane Eyre. Educated to be a governess and with enough power of observation and description, there seems to be no reason why Esther should not make an accomplished Victorian female autobiographer, as there were many at the time. Obviously, Esther Summerson writes with a voice invented by Dickens, so there is no question whether she is actually a good writer or not, but, as far as her psychological depth is concerned, Dickens manages to give her enough to make her perfectly credible as a co-narrator.

She is a practised story-teller in a definitely feminine speciality, as it can be seen when she entertains the Jellyby children with the traditional children's stories of

20 Anonymous review of *Bleak House* in *Atheneum*, 17 September 1853 in Dyson, p. 54.

21 A.E. Dyson, "*Bleak House: Esther Better not Born?*" (1969) in Dyson, p. 264.

22 Anonymous review of *Bleak House* in *The Spectator*, 24 September 1853 in Dyson, p. 57.

“Little Red Riding Hood” and “Puss in Boots”. There is indeed a degree of manipulation of the female voice by the male one in the question of Esther’s anti-feminism, but there were actually educated women in the Victorian age (writers or otherwise) who stuck to feminine values above feminist ones much more staunchly than Esther. Thus, Esther’s definition of her feminine role is no novelty in fiction by men or by women. Her rejection of the women who work for diverse charities while neglecting their homes—the clearest statement in the book that a woman’s place is in the home—sounds very much like what Dickens himself would tell these women, but it is not out of tune with other Victorian women’s values:

At first I tried to excuse myself for the present, on the general ground of having occupations to attend to, which I must not neglect. But as this was an ineffectual protest, 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 that 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 in my good intentions alone. For these reasons, I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and try to let that circle of my duty gradually and naturally expand itself. (p. 154.)

The conventionality of many of Esther’s opinions also extends to her narrative voice. A factor that seems worth looking at is that the so-called ‘autobiography’ of Esther Summerson has little to do with actual autobiographies. Esther accounts for the events in which she was involved as the centre of a mystery; very often she insists that this is not her own story and quickly steps to the background when she has written about herself for any considerable stretch. Her protagonism is, thus, an option that pleases her little, for she does not write her own autobiography of her own accord but because her editor, the male narrator, has asked her to do so. This editor who has commissioned her to write has done so in order to offer the reader a more rounded version of the story, a technique still used nowadays when journalists include in their reports ‘true testimonies’ of the protagonists: “I hope any one who may have 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 with them, and can’t be kept

out”(p. 162.) This is the reason why she appears to be elusive and more difficult to pin down than any of the caricatured characters in the book.

Esther functions rather as a private journalist than as an autobiographer; she falls back, as she claims, the moment Miss Flite appears; by then Esther is firmly grounded in the reader's view as an acute observer to start reporting for 'Dickens' about those around her. Her memory of events explains very little about herself from that moment onwards because her book is not a reflection on herself. As Dyson notes, "There is no reason, after all, why Esther should think of herself as important, since she shares no romantic obsessions with the 'self'"²³. Precisely, Esther's selflessness is what enables her to gather so much detail about those around her and so, to reconstruct the story seven years later with such precision. Nevertheless, what she expects as a reward from the fulfilment of her narrative function is something that may have to do with the permanence of her own self, call it gratified vanity of the author's deepest wish. So she says goodbye to her readers with a definite hope:

Full seven years I have been the mistress of Bleak House. The few words that I have to add to what I have written, are soon penned; then I, and the unknown friend to whom I write, will part for ever. Not without much dear remembrance on my side. Not without some, I hope, on his or hers. (p. 932.)

The extraordinary memory required by Esther Summerson to repeat dialogue heard seven years before, considering she does not keep a diary at the time of the events, is one instance of the artificiality of the narrative method in *Bleak House*. Esther compares her own memory to "the wind that wandered in the dark" (p. 142), a metaphor that for all its beauty does not inform us about the reliability of her memory. of course, she confesses herself frank ("I write down these opinions, not because I believe that this or any other thing was so, because I thought so; but only because I did think so, and I want to be quite candid about all I thought and did" p. 280) but the truth is that she is also a deft manipulator of her part of the story. Nonetheless, unlike what happens in those double narratives I considered earlier, nothing seems to undermine Esther's reliability.

23 Dyson, p. 264.

Like the omniscient narrator, Esther withholds information and organizes her narrative with a view not to disclose the mystery of her origin and her present state. She uses sentences such as “These were perplexities and contradictions that I could not account for. At least, if I could—but I shall come to all that by and by, and it is mere idleness to go on about it now” (p. 471) to taunt the reader. The effect increases the interest of the plot, for we want to know what she promises to tell later, but it does not add to Esther’s psychological portrait at all. She skips and censors parts of her emotional autobiography that are never wholly explained, such as, for instance, the growth of her love for Alan, with the excuse of not explaining events before their time. In this sense, her narrative is not truly autobiographical but functionally autobiographical, following the primary needs of the omniscient narrator.

Esther does not comment—she tells, shows, reports, judges but hardly comments. Of course, she does not create her characters—they are given to her by Dickens and in this sense there is no way of denying she is subservient to Dickens and often merely a reporter of other people’s actions. On the other hand, she never reports other people’s narratives of any event but her own, with a single exception that may well be a slip or a hint at a closer tie between Alan and Esther: in Chapter 51, she reports on Woodcourt’s first meeting with Richard in London and it is obvious that she can only do so because Alan told her. Moreover, there is only one scene reported by both narrators (Chapter 56 in ‘Dickens’, 57 in Esther): the arrival of Bucket to fetch Esther to help him look for Lady Dedlock. The scene is of very little intrinsic interest except for the exceptional way in which it short-circuits the gap between both portions of the story.

The third person narrator, ‘Dickens’, is, above all, a moral critic of society. Radical in his criticism of institutions like Chancery and individuals like Sir Leicester Dedlock, he, nevertheless, offers no alternative to the evils he describes despite his sharp, incisive expression in passages like this one about the aristocracy:

It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too (as your Highness shall find when you have made the tour of it, and are come to the brink of the void beyond), it is a very little speck. There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool,

and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air. (p. 55)

As can be seen, the omniscient narrator often uses the rhetoric of a preacher in spite of the fun he makes of characters like Mr Chadband. That is, of course, most notorious in the passages dealing with Jo, Tom-all-Alone's or with the court of Chancery itself. 'Dickens' is, indeed, the commenting author unhindered by the adverse criticism he may encounter or by his insufficient knowledge of his subject matter. He feels entitled to holding all kinds of opinions on all kinds of subjects, ranging from slum life to the uselessness of the members of the aristocracy.

Esther never acts like this. She regards herself as a good judge of moral conduct and tries to do her best to redress wrongs within the domestic sphere, whether it is by educating Charley, nursing Caddy or keeping house for Jarndyce. What she does not do is to impose her opinion on the reader, especially when she shows reservations about aspects of institutional or public life. As a woman, she hardly ventures opinions on the life of men or on public life, with the single exception of her negative view on the classical education received by Richard Carstone, an opinion that she gives the reader with many apologies but with poignant sarcasm: "To be sure, I knew nothing of the subject, and do not even now know whether the young gentlemen of classic Rome or Greece made verses to the same extent—or whether the young gentlemen of any country ever did"(p. 218).

The common denominator of 'Dickens' and Esther is the fascination for connection and the romantic fascination for the strangeness of everyday situations and people. Both act basically as seats of moral judgement in their own sphere—Esther is regarded as both a good adviser and judge of character by several characters—and both are capable of introducing irony in their judgements of people, though in different degrees. The third person narrator displays a dark irony close to that of a Fielding deprived of his sense of humour. It is a brand of irony that reads masculine in contrast to Esther's. Her irony is never as caustic as 'Dickens's'; it is unquestionably milder than Jane Austen's but not so far from it with the difference that Esther moves towards more ironic judgement as she grows up, for, of course, she is a character

maturing as her story moves forward. The Esther who can be so ironic for instance, about Mrs Jellyby (“Mrs Jellyby had very good hair, but was too much occupied with her African duties to brush it”, p. 85) is no doubt Dickens’s mouthpiece but she is as well the adult mistress of Bleak House writing about her past self with little compassion for those whom she now knows did not deserve any. Esther Summerson, who wants to understand but cannot understand it all, grows increasingly impatient with people such as Mrs Jellyby or Skimpole and so her judgements become harsher and harsher, especially with those who observe no duty or show no gratitude.

In terms of literary craftsmanship there seems to be no reason to think with Nabokov that Esther’s voice is drowned by her master’s or that “Stylistically, the whole book is a gradual sliding into the matrimonial state between the two”²⁴. Her voice sounds distinct enough throughout the novel and, as I hinted before, does register the growth of her mind, while the omniscient narrator’s remains stable throughout the novel. ‘Dickens’ and Esther have widely different styles, granting that in the second half of the novel Esther emerges as Dickens’s true disciple in matters of character presentation. An instance will show how Dickens is careful to make it obvious that Esther speaks for herself, that she is not a state he lapses into. Their respective power of description bears no comparison at all, especially as far as the description of place or atmosphere is concerned. See, for instance, the marked contrast in their respective descriptions of the streets of London. While ‘Dickens’ is capable of producing something like:

LONDON. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. (p. 49)

Esther’s literary power will not take her farther than the functional but hardly poetical sound of “We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought), and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses...” (p. 76). Nonetheless, Dickens makes

24 Nabokov, p. 102.

Esther also capable of writing brilliantly touching passages, such as the description of Prince Turveydrop²⁵. In any case, Esther is created by Dickens perceptive enough as to write about the symbolism of everyday scenes—her view of Ada and Richard in love—and even so as to feel epiphanic moments such as her intuition of change just before she becomes ill:

I had no thought, that night—none, I am quite sure—of what was soon to happen to me. But I have always remembered since, that when we had stopped at the garden-gate to look up at the sky, and when we went upon our way, I had for a moment an indefinable expression of myself as being something different from what I then was. I know it was then, and there, that I had it. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time, and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sounds of wheels coming down the miry hill. (p. 484.)

Strangely, the most striking differences in narrative technique between 'Dickens' and Esther are determined by the time plan of the narration, which is perplexing enough. Esther writes about the past from a vantage point located seven years after the events narrated, so, logically, she uses the past tense in her narrative except for brief commentaries about herself or her task as a narrator and for the very end of her portion. The omniscient narrator, who has apparently commissioned her to write the story after this lapse of seven years, uses the present tense for his narration, as if he were a more firsthand eye witness of events than Esther. Oddly enough, with him we see the action in cinematographic terms and not only regarding narrative time: see as instances of cinematic effects the tracking shot that opens the novel or the crow's flight that connects events in Chapter 10 in an interesting montage effect. In my view, this strange special narrative effect is even more thrilling and exceptional than the dual narrative for, indeed, it is totally whimsical. This double temporal perspective forces the reader to keep a double temporal outlook on the events that stretches to the utmost the reader's ability to perceive time flow in fiction without actually being very

25 "I curtsied to a little blue-eyed fair man of youthful appearance, with flaxen hair parted in the middle, and curling at the ends all round his head. He had a little fiddle, which we used to call at school a kit, under his left arm, and its little bow in the same hand. His little dancing-shoes were particularly diminutive, and he had a little innocent, feminine manner, which not only appealed to me in an amiable way, but made this singular effect upon me: that I received the impression that he was like his mother, and that his mother had not been considered or well used." (p. 242)

prominent. The temporal scheme is unquestionably another proof of the inclusiveness of the narrative method Dickens boldly designed for *Bleak House*: he designed not only a 'total' narrator, but also a 'total' narrative time.

At the same time both Dickens and Esther share a certain insecurity about their limitations: Esther constantly insists that she is not intelligent enough to carry out her task; 'Dickens' certainly does not apology for doing his but he feels the need to justify the spectacularly sensational death by spontaneous combustion of Krook. In comparative terms, 'Dickens' is a keener sensationalist than Esther. All violent deaths fall on his side and are described with plenty of lurid details. In contrast, Esther's treatment of her mother's death is sober and restrained. Esther does not exploit her mother's demise for sentimental or sensational purposes in the way 'Dickens' does with Jo's. The discovery of Lady Dedlock's dead body takes just the last three lines of Chapter 59, which is also the end of a monthly part, and is barely a statement of the fact. When we hear Esther again, at the beginning of the following monthly part, she goes on like this:

I proceed to other passages of my narrative. From the goodness of all about me, I derived such consolation as I can never think of unmoved. I have already said so much of myself, and so much still remains, that I will not dwell upon my sorrow. I had an illness, but it was not a long one; and I would avoid mention of it, if I could quite keep down the recollection of their sympathy. (p. 869)

What this shows, naturally, is Charles Dickens's genius to assume Esther's controlled viewpoint as eagerly as that of the theatrical narrator of Jo's death, in a word, to role play.

Purely as a character, Esther is possibly Dickens's most successful female creation. He carefully justified each stage in her development that could form her adult personality and the whole narrative benefits from his caring for Esther. She is, in a word, totally consistent. Esther Summerson's psychological growth is grounded on her slowly overcoming the fear that her being alive at all may cause anxiety and suffering in others. She is a lonely, isolated child—living with the trauma of being rejected for a fault that is not hers, made different by her illegitimate birth as her aunt Barbary ceaselessly reminds her—whose feelings overflow when she is offered sincere human contact as love or friendship. She is taught to conform and obey by all who surround

her and since she is in much better hands than *Oliver Twist*—her illegitimate fictional brother—she has even more reasons than him to be so grateful, so trusting in Providence and the well-meaning of others towards her. Still, in *Bleak House* the question of illegitimacy is more complex than it may seem in novels like *Oliver Twist*. Unlike Oliver, Esther is not restored to her true family, nor is she further ennobled by the discovery of her origins, for she seems to be already noble in another way. The mystery of her birth is more interesting as the motif conditioning her personality than as part of the plot. A heroine who is afraid of herself, of her own existence (“That I felt as if I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had ever breathed. That I had a terror of myself, as the danger and the possible disgrace of my own mother, and of a proud family name”, p. 569) but who still claims that “I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it” (p. 571) is no ordinary Victorian dutiful woman, but a more subversive kind of heroine than it seems at first sight. Both motherly and ladylike, Esther charms adults and children like her mother, though without her aloofness and despite their widely different social status. Without question, Esther is a thorough middle-class Victorian woman, a firm believer in the concepts of respectability and duty—above all in altruism and self-sacrifice—but yet thoroughly aware of her limits and of society’s barriers. Thus she reflects when she visits the St Alban’s family with Ada: “We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend. By whom, or how, it could be removed, we did not know; but we knew that” (p. 159).

Mentally lively enough, although she is never seen reading (nor does she show any intellectual interest beyond educating those around her into moral life) Esther possesses a strong power of observation and a wish to understand better. She hates mental weakness and feels sentimental bonds acutely of which a good instance is her sudden ‘falling in friendship’ with Ada Clare or her intuition of Lady Dedlock’s role in her life. Like many other Victorian ladies inside or outside the novel, Esther is proficient at describing and analyzing everybody’s feelings except her own. She represses exhaustively all her flights of fancy and love pretending she does not have

them; indeed, she even claims she does not understand her dreams about her grim childhood life well. So Charles Dickens designs this heroine complete with all the tools to know and understand herself but does not allow her to use them to explore her own self. In this aspect, the pretence of Esther's autobiographical research on her life is at its lowest.

No doubt, the central psychological marker of Esther's adult life is not her illegitimacy but the disease that disfigures her. Whether this is a obscurely justifiable sadistic punishment by Dickens or sheer melodramatic martyrdom, her illness is the tragical experience that lowers Esther down to the level of common humanity from her angelic stance. The disease is a metaphysical accident, as Esther realizes: "I had never known before how short life really was, and into how small a space the mind could put it" (p. 543). Dickens incorporated it to remind Esther, in her happiness, that we are all touched by tragedy, that the world is ugly at heart. The loss of her beauty certainly blunts the edge of Esther's self-confidence: its most immediate effect is that she clearly stops regarding herself as a desirable woman lovable by men, especially by Alan. Curiously enough, the experience somehow frees her from some of the unwanted consequences of being a pretty woman: she becomes capable of coolly using her new face to scare Guppy and his proposal away in one of the strangest scenes in the novel. The loss of her looks confirms Esther's basic belief in her worthlessness, though there are strong hints that she has to struggle hard with herself to overcome her need for romantic self-indulgence.

Esther is a love-starved child who grows into a love-starved woman that will not, indeed can not, acknowledge her need for affection; this, of course, makes her more human and less saintly than she seems to some of her detractors. The story of the three proposals of marriage she receives forms a kind of secondary fairy tale within the encompassing mystery tale and effectively exposes the kind of woman she is through her contrasted reactions. Guppy's love, though unwelcome, awakens in Esther the urge to be loved for herself and this is why she falls into hysterics—yet rather mild—when she rejects him: not because she is losing him in particular but because she realizes she does need another kind of love. Strangely, Jarndyce and Esther's chastisement of Guppy turns out to be one of the ugliest scenes in the book, for, after

all, the young man does not act out of any interest towards Esther at the beginning and seems to be ready to accept her as she is, after the initial shock caused by her new features. Ultimately, Jarndyce's ultra-protective brand of love, shown in that scene, reveals itself as selflessness not selfishness, as many critics claim. Although he may seem suspiciously careless of Esther's feelings, John Jarndyce is not a tyrant. He is excessive because he is exaggeratedly good and we are more ready to believe in selfishness than in true benevolence. The respectable elderly man with the inexhaustible bank account proposes to Esther to save her self-esteem as a woman after she loses her attractiveness in order to give her the rights no other man would then give her. Romanticism would be misplaced in Jarndyce's proposal: he simply asks Esther to be the mistress, not the housekeeper of Bleak House, to exert her full rights as a woman—of course, within the Victorian conventions regulating the life of women. Thus, Jarndyce acts out of good-will when he offers Esther's love to Alan. He does not coolly transfer Esther to Alan but places her in a position in which he positively knows she will be loved for what she is not for what she looks like, which seems to have been Guppy's crime. It seems Jarndyce had chances enough to marry Esther before she lost her looks, so there is no question of tyrannical patriarchy in his proposal. The only thing needed to believe in Esther's happiness when she is informed about who her husband is going to be is a reminder that she fully trusts in Providence, or so Dickens informs us.

Esther's love for Alan Woodcourt is founded on moral pleasure. Her marriage does not bring her the additional reward of wealth nor can it be based like many other fictional marriages on physical attraction on his side. She loves Alan because he is good. He cares for others, first for Miss Flite, then to the people he heroically rescues from the shipwreck—not that this is strictly necessary to show he is morally sound, of course—, later for his patients in Yorkshire. He loves Esther for the same reason, because she is good, or so they regard each other. Dickens makes Esther fight a bitter battle against her own feelings (a battle that can be inferred in her narrative but is never plainly told) between the human need, or right, to be loved for what she is and her knowledge that she is not a desirable woman and so lacks power to show herself as she truly is. As can be noticed, this is a more pitiable dilemma than those besetting

Austen's Elizabeth Bennet or Eliot's Dorothea Brooke. When it comes, Esther's reaction to Woodcourt's declaration of love exposes her innermost belief in her right to be loved: "He had called me the beloved of his life, and had said I would be evermore as dear to him as I was then; and I felt as if my heart would not hold the triumph of having heard those words" (p. 891). Once the battle is won, the heroine is left to face a life of ever-lasting happiness. Her marriage to Woodcourt exemplifies the ideal of Dickensian domestic happiness which Orwell found so inexplicably rooted in Charles Dickens's essentially rebellious view of the world. This passive Esther Summerson, to whom events happen and who lives circling around her morally luminous husband, ends up her narrative at a point of perfect happiness as a wife and a mother. Around her, others find life more than painful. Ada loses Richard, Sir Leicester Dedlock loses his lady, Caddy's daughter—the other Esther—is deaf and dumb and so on. Who is Esther, after all, to receive such a share of human happiness?

The final paragraph holds the key to the whole novel in a rather shadowy fashion. It hints at something obscure in her nature, at an alternative Esther who is not so happily content with herself:

'And don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?'

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing— (p. 935)

The least one can say about the meaning of "even supposing" is that it is ambiguous. It does not close *Bleak House*/Bleak House: it leaves the door ajar for us to peep in again and consider whether so much happiness is actually true or sheer wishful thinking. Is this really the voice of the serene, courageous, sane Esther who endured the loss of her beauty without complaining? Everybody is pretty, beautiful, handsome around her but Esther herself; even if those around her can do without her looks, her self-confidence as a woman has certainly been damaged—she wishes those around needn't comfort her. One feels compelled to understand that despite the display of beauty Esther's family presents her with, she has realised it will not keep ugliness at bay, not even her own. There is a greater mystery in *Bleak House* than Esther's birth, even

greater than why she is needed to tell her story, and that is why Dickens chose to punish her by disfiguring her.

Esther's disgrace may have been a kind of sadistic poetical justice to compensate for the very subversiveness of Esther's function. As Dyson points out: "Esther's subversive role in the novel is that of simply existing, and the whole structure of *Bleak House* turns on this. What would the novel be like if she did not exist in it as a central character, but simply as Lady Dedlock's tragic mistake?" (p. 271). The ambiguity lies in whether Dickens fully calculated her subversiveness or whether it grew with the novel. Esther Summerson, the illegitimate child who chooses not to feel guilty because of her birth, is designed like this by Dickens and placed in a position from which she can effectively challenge readers' ideas about the respectability of people like her. Nobody is more dutiful or respectable than Esther in *Bleak House*, nobody more heroic. Her disfigurement may be Dickens's way of admitting that some readers—even himself—may find Esther just too unspoiled by the dark side of life. What is most difficult to accept is the way in which the disease affects Esther as a woman. Even more difficult to pin down is the way in which the disease is connected to the idea of a sick world (is it a symptom or a larger malaise?) or to Dickens's doubts about the healthiness of his own opinions: is this why Esther is punished somehow? All in all, the question of Esther's illness is, to say the least, a central disturbance within the body of the novel.

Placed by Charles Dickens at the very core of *Bleak House* for reasons that have to do mainly with the exploration of his artistic potential, Esther Summerson indirectly reveals the existence of a conflict in Charles Dickens's fiction. This conflict shows his increasing inability to cope with sentimental solutions in fiction and fully reveals itself in the equivocal partnership Dickens and Esther enact throughout the novel, which includes obscure aspects dealing with her status as a woman, such as her disfigurement.

The very arbitrariness of Dickens's artistic design for *Bleak House* is the key to its success. It will not prevent readers from agreeing with Vladimir Nabokov that "despite the superb planning of the novel, the main mistake was to let Esther tell part

of the story: I would not get the girl near!"²⁶. Nevertheless, and despite objections to Esther, for all its peculiarity the double narrative is fully successful and inarguably contributes to shaping one of Charles Dickens's best novels, if not the best one. Regarding Esther, far from being a wrong choice she is undeniably one of Charles Dickens's best characters and an accomplished narrator into the bargain. In all, a very generous gift from Dickens to his readers, even despite himself.

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²⁶ Nabokov, p. 102.

Appendix: The Plan of the Novel

Bleak House was written by Dickens in 22 months between November 1851 and August 1853 and serialized in 19 months between March 1852 and September 1853. It was published in volume form later in the same year 1853. Its 67 chapters are distributed in 19 monthly parts of three (13) or four chapters (5), plus a last double number consisting of 8 chapters. Obviously, this method of publication must have imposed a leisurely, unhurried reading pace on the original Victorian reader which is very far from the way we appreciate the novel nowadays as a solid block of more than nine hundred pages of narrative. Among other things, the time span between each number must have helped to blur the distinctions between both narrators, which in such a long narrative are never kept as perceptible as in a shorter narrative, such as “Heart of Darkness” or “The Turn of the Screw”. Since *Bleak House* is not a framed narrative but a shared narrative it is more difficult to see which percentage of the telling corresponds to each narrator. Surprisingly, the task is shared by both in fairly equal terms, although the distribution of the chapters does not seem to follow any clear pattern.

34 chapters out of a total of 67 are narrated by ‘Dickens’ (a 50,75% of the novel), 33 by Esther out of 67 (49,25%) which would indicate that ‘Dickens’ has slightly little more to say; however, about 470 pages out of the Penguin edition of 886 pages are told by Esther and about 415 by ‘Dickens’, something which again, seems to be aimed at striking a remarkable balance between both narrators. In other words, no matter how accidental the distribution of events seems in the novel, the fact is that Dickens was constantly working to keep the balance straight throughout the long months of writing.

The monthly parts show no clear pattern of equally shared narration; thus, 11 are begun by Esther and 8 by ‘Dickens’ while 13 are ended by ‘Dickens’ but only 6 by Esther, something that contradicts the novel as a whole, for this is begun by ‘Dickens’ and closed by Esther. The monthly parts have varied structures; significantly, only in one case does Esther hold the monopoly of the monthly part while Dickens does so in five occasions, without any seemingly clear pattern: (DDD 3, DDDD 2) 5, EEE 1, EED 6, EEED 2, EDE 1, EEEDEEDE 1, DDEE 1, DDE 2. Both narratives are distributed in 13

intertwining blocks of varied lengths, considering the novel as a whole not in its monthly parts. 'Dickens's' blocks run from five to one chapter: 5 chapters = 1 block, 4 chapters = 4, 3 chapters = 2, 1 chapter = 5. Esther never narrates a block as long as five chapters, though, on the other hand, her narrative is less fragmented than 'Dickens's': 4 chapters = 3, 3 chapters = 3, 2 chapters = 5, 1 chapter = 1.

Usually 'Dickens' stops the narrative of the monthly part at a crucial moment of suspense in the story, a cliffhanger: Mrs Rouncewell hearing the footsteps on the Ghost's Walk (twice), Tulkinghorn opening the door of Nemo's room or threatening Hortense with prison, Lady Dedlock realizing that Esther is her long lost daughter, Mr Bucket putting George under arrest. There are also moments of pause in which, for instance, Mr Snagsby, his wife or Jo wonder about their role in the events. Esther stops her monthly narrative rather at a moment of reflection or conclusion, for instance, by mentioning Woodcourt almost by accident, being grateful that nothing between her and Woodcourt happened before she lost her looks, frightening Guppy away from her, finding her mother dead and reflecting on her present happiness.

The transitions from 'Dickens's' to Esther are often marked by the title of the corresponding chapter. The title 'Esther's Narrative' announces the switch in eleven occasions out of thirteen shifts (chapters 13, 17, 23, 30, 35, 43, 50, 57, 59, 64, plus chapter 67, 'The Close of Esther's Narrative'). Furthermore, readers run little risk of getting lost in the maze of the doubled-voiced narrative, for Esther starts her chapter with a sentence including the pronoun "I" in 20 occasions, and "we" in 10 out of the 33 chapters. Usually, Esther opens her chapters in a basically narrative way, with little description while Dickens opens his chapters mainly with descriptive passages. There are also interesting openings, like the one in chapter 3, which contains the only reference to Esther made by 'Dickens'—actually one of the only two moments in which the double narrative is short-circuited—or the ones in chapters 56 and 58 by 'Dickens', which seem to ignore the intervening presence of chapter 57, told by Esther.

Curiously enough, Dickens's symmetrical design also comprehends the introduction of the characters in the novel: 29 of them out of a list of 58 main characters are introduced by Esther and 29 by 'Dickens'. Thus, Esther introduces herself, Miss Barbary, Mrs Rachel (Mrs Chadband in 'Dickens'), Kenge, John Jarndyce,

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Richard Carstone, Ada Clare, William Guppy, Mrs Jellyby, Mr Jellyby, Caddy Jellyby, Peepy Jellyby, Prince Turveydrop, Mr Turveydrop, Mr Quales, Miss Flite (first found unnamed in Dickens), Krook, Harold Skimpole and family, Coavinses, Charley, Tom and Emma Neckett, Mrs Pardiggle and family, Liz and family, Jenny and family, Mr Boythorn, Mr and Mrs Bayham Badger, Allan Woodcourt (first seen unnamed in Dickens), Mr Gridley (seen unnamed in Dickens). On his side, 'Dickens' introduces Sir Leicester Dedlock, Lady Dedlock, Mr Tulkinghorn, Mrs Rouncewell, Mr Rouncewell, Watt Rouncewell, Rosa, Mr and Mrs Snagsby, Guster, Nemo, Jo, Tony Jobling/Owen Weevle, Mrs Piper, Mrs Perkins, Hortense, Mr (and Mrs) Chadband, Bart Smallweed, Judy Smallweed, Mr and Mrs Smallweed, Mr George, Phil, Bucket, Volumnia Dedlock, the debilitated cousin Dedlock. Most characters meet across Esther and 'Dickens's' narratives: the only ones who never really come across each other are precisely the two narrators.

Sara Martín Alegre, The Mistress of the House and her Master:
The Double Narrative in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

Plan of the Novel

In italics, the chapters narrated by Esther Summerson

I

- 1 In Chancery
- 2 In Fashion
- 3 A Progress
- 4 *Telescopic Philanthropy*

II

- 5 *A Morning Adventure*
- 6 *Quite at Home*
- 7 The Ghost's Walk

III

- 8 *Covering Multitude of Sins*
- 9 *Signs and Tokens*
- 10 The Law-Writer

IV

- 11 Our Dear Brother
- 12 On the Watch
- 13 *Esther's Narrative*

V

- 14 *Deportment*
- 15 *Bell Yard*
- 16 Tom-all-Alone's

VI

- 17 *Esther's Narrative*
- 18 *Lady Dedlock*
- 19 Moving On

VII

- 20 A New Lodger
- 21 The Smallweed Family
- 22 Mr Bucket

VIII

- 23 *Esther's Narrative*
- 24 *An Appeal Case*
- 25 Mrs Snagsby Sees It All

IX

- 26 Sharpshooters
- 27 More Old Soldiers than One
- 28 The Ironmaster
- 29 The Young Man

X

- 30 *Esther's Narrative*
- 31 *Nurse and Patient*
- 32 The Appointed Time

XI

- 33 Interlopers
- 34 A Turn of the Screw
- 35 *Esther's Narrative*

XII

- 36 *Chesney Wold*
- 37 *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*
- 38 *A Struggle*

XIII

- 39 Attorney and Client
- 40 National and Domestic
- 41 In Mr Tulkinghorn's Rooms
- 42 In MrTulkinghorn's Chambers

XIV

- 43 *Esther's Narrative*
- 44 *The Letter and the Answer*
- 45 *In Trust*
- 46 Stop Him!

XV

- 47 Jo's Will
- 48 Closing In
- 49 Dutiful Friendship

XVI

- 50 *Esther's Narrative*
- 51 *Enlightened*
- 52 *Obstinacy*
- 53 The Track

XVII

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