

## IN DEFENCE OF ESTHER SUMMERSON

Most critics assume the resolute frown of Miss Barbary when they contemplate Esther Summerson, the heroine and co-narrator of *Bleak House*. Quick to detect and applaud the irony of the third-person narrator, they find no irony in Esther.<sup>1</sup> Marvelling at the perceptiveness of the third-person narrator, they condemn that same quality in Esther as evidence that Dickens is, as W.J. Harvey puts it, "guiding her pen",<sup>2</sup> Sylvere Monod warns us that "it would be sheer waste of time to attempt a psychological portrait of such an insignificant personality."<sup>3</sup> Angus Wilson protests that she has a "complete lack of a physical body—a deficiency so great that Esther's smallpox-spoilt face jars us because she has no body upon which a head could rest."<sup>4</sup> Such censure is no mere fashion. Almost fifty years ago, George Gissing declared that "Esther Summerson...has no existence."<sup>5</sup> And at least one of Dickens's contemporaries wished of Esther "that she either do something very 'spicy,' or confine herself to superintending the jam-pots at Bleak House."<sup>6</sup>

Objections to Esther fall into two general categories. First her personality is almost universally condemned as "too good to be true, or at least too good to be credible",<sup>7</sup> "cloying and tedious",<sup>8</sup> "almost cloyingly unselfish, noble, and devoted".<sup>9</sup> Second her function in the narrative structure of *Bleak House* is seen as seriously weakened because of her personality. Edgar Johnson is only one among many in complaining that Esther's "constantly reporting the tributes others pay her" is a narrative flaw.<sup>10</sup> Only somewhat more generous, Robert A. Donovan assets that "The narrative design of the novel really requires only two qualities of her. ...In the first place, she should be as transparent as glass. ...In the second place, we require of Esther

sufficient integrity, in a literal sense, to draw together the manifold observations she sets down."<sup>11</sup> In contrast to this view of Esther as a sort of human videotape recorder, W.J. Harvey suggests that "one of Esther's functions is to be that of a brake, controlling the impulse to episodic intensification" through her "plain, matter-of-fact, conscientiously plodding" narrative.<sup>12</sup>

Even Esther's defenders have tended to patronize her or to rationalize what others find fault with. Tom Middlebro' argues that "Esther's flaw is that she fails to develop an inner sense of moral identity."<sup>13</sup> Martha Rosso sees Esther as "the classic example of the humble adult who is the metamorphosis of the unwanted child,"<sup>14</sup> a sort of Uriah Heep in skirts, and she finds Esther "surprisingly caustic".<sup>15</sup>

Such responses to Esther only testify to her success in creating a false conventionally "good" self, intended to conceal, suppress, and transform her true self, which she sees as evil. A careful reading of *Bleak House* indicates that Dickens has created in Esther not a cardboard heroine but a real person trying to turn herself into a cardboard heroine; her search for an identity in such an unpromising direction produces ironically ambiguous results. Her narrative function, moreover, is crucially dependent on her being a complex, believable person rather than a stereotyped, melodramatic heroine. Northrop Frye has cautioned us not to "bring out everything in Dickens, real or fancied, that is darkly and ambiguously ironic, or hostile to Victorian social standards,"<sup>16</sup> but it is just those qualities which do emerge in *Bleak House* when we begin to pay real attention to Esther Summerson.

Her complexity is apparent in the first lines she writes. After protesting that "I know I am not clever,"<sup>17</sup> she describes her doll, sitting "propped up in a great armchair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me—or not so much at me, I think, as at nothing..."(11). Esther's uncertainty about her own identity is thus established in the first paragraph of her narrative. She goes on to say that she can talk to her doll, but "I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else" (11); and she adds: "I had always rather a noticing way—not a quick way, O no!—a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better" (11). With remarkable economy, Dickens has sketched the broad outlines of Esther's character: her unsure sense of self, her profound sense of alienation, her powers of intelligent

observation, and her bitter irony. Underlying these qualities is her conviction that the world is chaos, a meaningless jumble—for the doll with the beautiful complexion is also Esther herself, staring at nothing, and trying to make sense of it.

Esther's unsureness and alienation are strengthened by her loveless upbringing. When Esther asks why she lost her mother, Miss Barbary tells her:

"Your mother...is your disgrace, and you were hers. ...Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart." (13)

Miss Barbary both expresses and embodies one of the novel's major themes, the disruption and perversion of family relationships and the isolation of individuals within those relationships. Yet her words are ambiguous. Submission, self-denial, and work are the preparations for Esther's life, but not its purpose; to be set apart from others is not necessarily to be set beneath them. That Esther is aware of her ambiguous position is clear from the outset of her narrative, when she observes: "I was brought up...like some of the princesses in the fairy stories, only I was not charming" (11). At the same time, however, she feels "sensible of filling a place...which ought to have been empty" (14).

Throughout *Bleak House*, Esther suffers from a recurring sense of her lack of a clear identity; it is a genuine, and unpleasant, selflessness. Such moments come when her life has undergone some drastic change and her defences are weak. At the end of Esther's first day in London, for example, Caddy Jellyby falls asleep in Esther's lap:

I began to lose the identity of the sleeper resting on me. Now it was Ada; now, one of my old Reading friends from whom I could not believe I had so recently parted. Now it was the little mad woman worn out with curtsying and smiling; now, some one in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one. (35)

Esther's sense of nonentity returns during her long illness, when memories of childhood, girlhood, and womanhood fuse with the delirious present:

At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few who have not been in such a condition can quite understand what I mean, or what painful unrest arose from this source. (370)

Her guard lowered by illness, Esther is in fact recognizing her normal condition of life. She is daughter, wife, and mother to John Jarndyce; a surrogate mother to Richard and Ada (and sometimes their sister or daughter); both mother and sister to the Jellyby children; and both teacher and student at Greenleaf School. Lacking a proper place in society, she tries to fill all possible places, yet she is at home in none of them. Esther makes this clear in another passage describing the crisis of her struggle with smallpox:

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 an inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing? (370)

While we can interpret the necklace as being made up of the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, locked to one another and revolving endlessly about the vacuity that is the estate, it is more important to see the necklace as symbolizing Esther's view of human society, in which she is caught up against her will.

Further complicating Esther's sense of self is her friends' fondness for giving her nicknames. Edgar Johnson claims that the reader "wearies... of her being called Dame Durden, Dame Trot, and Little Old Woman,"<sup>18</sup> but such a reader would miss a valuable insight into Esther's character. William Axton has pointed out that these nicknames

uniformly refer to the witches, hags, comic old dames, and widows of folklore, nursery rhyme, and street song. ...Some of these names, moreover—Mother Hubbard, Dame Durden, and Dame Trot...are the names of old women who, like Esther, serve as surrogate parents or guardians of abandoned orphans, servants, and animals. ...Like her predecessors she has little success in caring for [her charges]. 19

Esther herself, after telling us how John Jarndyce first nicknamed her, observes:

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. (74)

More than a little exasperation seems to creep into this list of names, despite Esther's unquestionable fondness for Jarndyce and Richard and

Ada. Given the ambiguity which Esther's nicknames cast on her role at Bleak House, we cannot entirely accept Michael Steig's suggestion that "it is through her association with Mr. Jarndyce and her role as housekeeper...that Esther gains her identity as a human being."<sup>20</sup> It might be fairer to say that she gains *an* identity, but only at the cost of continuing to submerge her true self.

If Esther, then, is not just a two-dimensional melodramatic heroine, we can dismiss another charge often levelled at her and by extension at Dickens: that her "simple, virtuous, and naive intelligence", in Morton Dauwen Zabel's words, cannot plausibly set down "observations...and insights of a sophisticated kind", and that these "can be credited less to her than to the novelist who looks over her shoulder."<sup>21</sup> It should be clear by now that Dickens knows exactly what he is doing with Esther, and has prepared us for her perceptive observations. She has by nature a "noticing way"; she is very intelligent and reasonably well-educated; and she is compelled, for reasons we shall soon discuss, to express her true self in words rather than in actions. She is most articulate, most negative, and presumably most obnoxious to the critics, when describing irresponsible parents such as Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and old Mr. Turveydrop. Considering what Esther has suffered from parental irresponsibility, her shafts seem perfectly appropriate to their targets.

Realizing very early that her true, ambivalent, "evil" self is unacceptable to society, Esther makes a straightforward decision to create an ideal self:

I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confessedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could. (13-14)

"To do some good", we soon see, is not an end in itself for Esther, but the likeliest means of winning the love she has been deprived of. At Greenleaf, for example, she enjoys teaching "because it made the dear girls fond of me"(19).

Establishing and maintaining this false self preoccupies Esther throughout the novel, especially after Miss Barbary's death, when Esther learns she is to go to Greenleaf. The remarkable passage in which she buries her doll offers us some understanding of this self:

I had wrapped the dear old doll in her own shawl, and quietly laid her—I am half-ashamed to tell it—in the garden-earth...I had no companion left but my bird, and him I carried with me in his cage. (17)

Just as her mother had abandoned her, Esther abandons her own symbolic child, condemning it to the death she feels she herself ought to have suffered. But the doll is also all Esther knows of loving human society, and a symbol of her childhood. In burying her doll, Esther chooses a maturity which brings with it an isolation even more total than that of childhood.

Dickens makes it clear, however, that maturity is Esther's only acceptable choice. She has been attacked by Leonard W. Dean as "a particularly perverse and sentimental expression of Dickens' life-long over-valuation of the experience of the child."<sup>22</sup> Yet children and childishness in *Bleak House* are shown in very negative terms. The Pardiggle children are glum little wretches. Caddy and Prince must endure Mr. Turveydrop's parasitism because they will not abandon their filial roles. Harold Skimpole's childish irresponsibility soon loses its tacky charm. Mrs. Smallweed babbles through a repulsive childish senility, and her husband must be propped up repeatedly, like a tiny baby. Richard Carstone brings grief to those around him by his refusal to accept adult obligations. And Jo, who "don't know nothink", is an infant grown horrifying old without any chance of growing up. By contrast, Charley Neckett assumes a parental role after her father's death, which seems to confirm Esther's wisdom in rejecting childhood. Henceforth, however, Esther's true self will be caged, like the bird which foreshadows Miss Flite's sad aviary.

Maintaining her false self is not easy. Any sudden change in her way of life brings on, as we have seen, an emotional crisis, which she surmounts by a kind of self-hypnosis. On leaving Greenleaf School for London, Esther describes the affection showered on her by the children and staff, and then tells us:

I was quite bowed down in the coach by myself, and said, "O, I am so grateful, I am so thankful!" many times over. ... I made myself sob less and persuaded myself to be quiet by saying often, "Esther, now you really must! This *will not* do!"(21)

Scenes like this, often repeated, have provoked much of the critics' dislike of Esther, but her detailed accounts of the compliments paid her are not mere self-congratulation. Rather, as Joseph I. Fradin has

suggested, "her need to be loved and to report the praises which are the signs of love is itself one of her scars."<sup>23</sup> But Fradin does not pursue this insight. What Esther is doing is compulsively reassuring herself that all is well, that her false self is doing its job of "winning some love". She literally talks herself into the attitudes which her false self ought to hold, quite as if that self were a separate person.

The false self is manifested in externals. Esther's constant key-jingling reassures her of her place in the Jarndyce household; by reminding herself of "Duty, my dear!" she sets herself a safe, orthodox course of action to which none can object. Esther's preoccupation with her face is another expression of her concern for externals; her disfigurement seems to reveal her true, tainted self.

Matching Esther's concern for keeping up appearances is her tendency to reduce conflicts to mere exercises in good manners. When Caddy calls her parents "asses", Esther is scandalized:

"My dear!...Your duty as a child--"

"O! Don't talk of duty as a child, Miss Summerson; where's Ma's duty as a parent?" (36)

Yet Esther would dearly love to strike back at all the failed parents who rule and corrupt her world, as her verbal demolitions of Mrs. Pardiggle, Mr. Turveydrop, and Mrs. Jellyby make clear. Nevertheless, she never treats these wretches with anything but courtesy; Jarndyce virtually wrings from her the observation that Mrs. Jellyby "was a little unmindful of her home" (48). Only after years, and from the safe vantage point of her new Bleak House, does Esther dare express her true feelings about such people. During the actual events she relates, Esther is, as Axton observes, "torn between the desire to evaluate and the contrary impulse to judge not, lest she be judged."<sup>24</sup>

In considering Esther's true and false selves, we should remember that she is the daughter of "Nemo" and Lady Dedlock—of a man who has given up his identity and a woman who has created hers. J. Hillis Miller's description of Lady Dedlock applies almost equally well to her daughter:

Lady Dedlock's state is the perfectly lucid and deliberate prolonging from moment to moment of the same frozen state. She lives as the desperate attempt to cease to be her real self, the mistress of Captain Hawdon and the mother of Esther, and to become a false self, the unstained wife of Sir Leicester and the leader of fashionable society. This false self is kept in being only by the endless reiteration of the act of will which creates her false surface...<sup>25</sup>

Esther's response to her learning that Lady Dedlock is her mother is beautifully in character: "a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I could never disgrace her by any trace of likeness" (386); in other words, appearances will be kept up. There is a fearful irony in this passage, for even as Lady Dedlock makes herself "humble and ashamed there, in the only natural moments of her life" (387), Esther struggles frantically to maintain her false self. She does not entirely succeed. She tells her mother "—or I tried to tell her—" that she has forgiven her and that "my duty was to bless her and receive her" (386). Esther's bitterness breaks through the veneer of "duty" a few moments later, when she tells us:

my agitation and distress throughout were so great that I scarcely understood myself, though every word was uttered in the mother's voice, so unfamiliar and so melancholy to me; which in my childhood I had never learned to love and recognise, had never been sung to sleep with, had never heard a blessing from, had never had a hope inspired by; made an enduring impression on my memory...(388)

Esther becomes a party to her mother's deception through an almost automatic process we have witnessed several times already in the course of her narrative:

Stunned as I was, as weak and helpless as I had ever been in my sick chamber, the necessity of guarding against the danger of discovery, or even of the remotest suspicion, did me service. ...I constrained myself to think of every sacred obligation that there was upon me to be careful and collected. (389)

By falling back on conventional morality, on "duty" and "sacred obligation", Esther manages both to control her true feelings and implicitly to condemn her mother's failure to do *her* duty. Esther sees no way out of this trap; to reproach Lady Dedlock would invite even worse confusion and disorder. But Esther pays a heavy price to maintain appearances:

I hope it may not appear very unnatural or bad in me, that I became heavily sorrowful to think I had ever been reared. That I felt as if I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had never breathed. That I had a terror of myself, as the danger and possible disgrace of my own mother, and of a proud family name. That I was so confused and shaken, as to be possessed by a belief that it was right, and had been intended, that I should die in my birth; and that it was wrong, and not intended, that I should be then alive. These are the real feelings that I had. (389)



Esther's "terror of herself" springs from her conviction that her true self is evil and a threat to conventional society. So she had been taught by Miss Barbary; and since no one has taught her otherwise, Esther regards conventional society, for all its hypocrisies, as good. If there is unconscious irony in Esther, it is here. In a world where family bonds are poisonous and perverted, where Ada wonders why "we should all be ruining one another, without knowing how or why" (45), Esther's true self defers to another person for the sake of the most abstract possible relationship.

We have noted that Esther responds with words, not with actions, to the persons and events around her. This is not entirely accurate; within a tightly defined sphere of domestic duties, she is highly competent. She will extricate Peepy's head from the railings, though she will never rebuke Mrs. Jellyby for allowing him to put it there. Her reluctance to take public action is, we have seen, inspired partly by her fear of being judged herself. Yet there are reasons which combine to make public action almost unthinkable for her.

As a girl of thirteen, Esther suffers a powerful shock in her aunt's death—or rather, in the manner of it. Reading from the Bible, Esther has just quoted "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," from the Gospel of St. John. Miss Barbary then cries out:

"Watch ye therefore! lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch!" (14)

Repeating these words, she falls into a coma and dies a week later. Her oracular advice to Esther is a slight abridgement of Mark xiii. 35-37. In this chapter, Christ foretells the destruction of the temple, and the time of troubles in which "children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death" (xiii. 12). He also relates the parable of the fig tree—"When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near" (xiii. 28)—and concludes by comparing mankind to servants in a house from which the master is temporarily absent. They dare not shirk their tasks, for the master may return at any time.

This warning is not lost on Esther; she thinks about her aunt's last words on her journey to Greenleaf school, whose name takes on significance in a Biblical context. We begin to see the reasons for Esther's terror of herself: she fears she is an agent of society's

destruction, a parricide, and believes "that it was I, who was to bring calamity upon the stately house" (390).

Esther's reluctance to interfere with the *status quo* is strengthened by witnessing the fates of those who do interfere. Chancery and its victims, public ladies with miserable families, Tulkinghorn, Boodle and Coodle—their actions produce nothing but fog and mud. Esther prefers the example of her guardian; as Fradin points out,

Jarndyce's wisdom essentially consists of his knowledge that...to join battle with Chancery...is to be destroyed by it. Accomplishing even his acts of private charity anonymously whenever possible, he moves always toward disengagement from the public realm, withdrawal to the family hearth.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Esther and Jarndyce are failures even on the family hearth. Richard destroys himself despite his guardian's efforts, and Esther's rare interventions with Richard are equally vain. When Esther goes in search of her mother, it is only as Inspector Bucket's passive companion; even Bucket, with all his agents and expertise, fails. Not until the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is consumed in its own costs is there any hope for private benevolence or genuine domestic happiness. Presumably, then, general social happiness is impossible until Chancery itself is consumed by its own evils, like Krook in his shop.

Seeking acceptance in a morally compromised society, Esther achieves only a compromised success. Her true self, the person she ought to be, is submerged beneath a conventionally "good" self; the maturity she gains is better only than her thwarted childhood. She is aware of much, if not all, of the irony in her predicament; the third-person narrator is not the only ironist in *Bleak House*. Indeed, Esther is aware of the narrative shifts between her central viewpoint and the outside viewpoint of the third-person narrator, for she calls her narrative "my portion of these pages"(11). *Bleak House* is about a Manichean world in which impotent good grapples with equally impotent evil; it makes no artistic sense to place a "simple, virtuous, and naive intelligence" at the novel's centre. But to embody that world's contradictions in a tormented, divided character who is selfless for selfish reasons, is a considerable achievement. That most of Dickens's readers have misunderstood it is, as Mrs. Rachael says of Esther, not his fault, but his misfortune.

## Notes

1. W.J. Harvey, "Chance and Design in *Bleak House*," *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Cross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 149.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
3. Sylvere Monod, *Dickens the Novelist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 415.
4. Angus Wilson, "The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens," *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 20.
5. George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1966), p. 186. Originally published 1924.
6. Quoted in George H. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers* (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 60.
7. William Axton, "The Trouble With Esther," *Modern Language Quarterly* XXVI (1965), p. 545.
8. Richard J. Dunn, "Esther's Role in *Bleak House*," *Dickensian* LXII (September 1966), p. 164.
9. Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown, 1952) II, p. 766.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 767.
11. Robert A. Donovan, "Structure and Idea in *Bleak House*," *ELH* XXIX (1962), pp. 200-201.
12. Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
13. Tom Middlebro', "Esther Summerson: A Plea for Justice," *Queen's Quarterly* LXXVII 2 (Summer 1970), p. 259.
14. Martha Rosso, "Dickens and Esther," *Dickensian* LXV (May 1969), p. 91.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
16. Northrop Frye, "On Value-Judgements," *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 68-69.
17. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 11. Further references to this text are indicated by page numbers in parenthesis.
18. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 766.
19. William Axton, "Esther's Nicknames: A Study in Relevance," *Dickensian* LXII (September 1966), pp. 159-160.
20. Michael Steig, "The Iconography of the Hidden Face in *Bleak House*," *Dickens Studies* IV (March 1968), p. 20.
21. Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Introduction," *Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), xxi.
22. Leonard W. Dean, "Style and Unity in *Bleak House*," *Criticism* III (1961), p. 215.
23. Joseph I. Fradin, "Will and Society in *Bleak House*," *PMLA* LXXXI (March 1966), p. 97.
24. Axton, "The Trouble With Esther," p. 553.
25. J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 188-189.
26. Fradin, p. 105.