

Esther Summerson and Her Problems in Dickens's *Bleak House*

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Introduction: Very few critics adopt a middle ground in describing Esther Summerson.¹ The usual charge is that she is unrealistic. Charlotte Brontë and numerous readers after her have dismissed Esther in this way.² Recently, some critics have been more tolerant. The post-modern critic Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, for instance, in an interesting and lengthy study of Esther, takes it for granted that she is artistically plausible. But Zarifopol-Johnston's view is not just post-modern; it is almost post-critical. The question of artistic success — in this case, the question of plausibility — is never raised in her study. To take a commentator for whom criticism is not just important but the most important thing, in her last book Q. D. Leavis³ declares in effect that Esther is as artistically successful as she is commendable in her conduct (her conduct being, in fact, one of the bones of contention). Without blurring the issue with quibbles and exceptions, I am much closer to this positive view than to the old, accepted opinion. What seem to be lacking in Mrs. Leavis's account (brilliant though it is in its comprehensiveness) are specifics. Anyone familiar with *Scrutiny* Magazine and the school of criticism it fostered under the guidance of the Leavises, knows that its normal modus operandi is to take a broad view — to make one's general statements clear and final and face down disagreement with minimal

reference to particular cases. In Mrs. Leavis's study Esther is discussed at length and engrossingly, but not consistently in terms that really address Esther's detractors or acknowledge the plausibility of their complaints.

In this paper I would like to discuss the vulnerable points in Esther's portrayal and assess them, either as possible weaknesses in portrayal or as artistically justified, taking examples from the novel that best illustrate these points. One thing must be borne in mind: there are really two "Esthers," since she is both a character and a narrator. If we take the proper end of the action of the novel to be Esther's marriage with Alan Woodcourt, there are seven years between the completion of the novel's story and the time of narration. So Esther has matured⁴ and more importantly, there are few secrets that she hasn't had time to unveil — she knows what happened and has had seven years to reflect on it. As Zarifopol-Johnston points out, she is even aware of the second narrator, who, less surprisingly, is also aware of her: "Thus she says that she is writing to an 'unknown friend' and her narrative is just part of another's story" (132).⁵

Therefore, we must make a distinction between the two Esthers. Of course, they are essentially the same person, and the development that is obvious, even before the seven-year hiatus, never changes her basic nature, which is exemplary from the beginning.⁶ The two Esthers are mainly different in point of knowledge. Esther is ignorant of many things while living through the story, but she must understand almost everything at the time of narration. Of course she knows what happened to the main characters: for instance, that Mr. Skimpole betrayed Jo to Inspector Bucket, that her mother was Lady Dedlock, who froze to death, and that Richard died of his addiction to the Chancery suit. Less

obviously, but just as surely, she can judge much of the action: the way her aunt (by telling her sister Lady Dedlock that the baby, Esther, had died, and by refusing Mr. Jarndyce's earlier offer of sponsorship) did her, Esther, an injustice; that Mr. Skimpole's esthetic philosophy is a sly and menacing policy (and not just brilliantly effete); and that Alan loved her for herself and not just her appearance, and therefore didn't change when her face was scarred by illness. So we should always be clear which Esther we are referring to: the protagonist or the narrator.

This paper will be divided into three parts. The first part will discuss Esther's actions as protagonist through the medium of a characteristic example. The second part will treat objections that apply to her character as the narrator, when she is matured and wiser. And the final part, which I think is necessary to strike a balance, will show Esther at her best—in a couple scenes that I think indicate why she is a worthy focus of the novel. There is also an Appendix after the Notes dealing with Sir Osbert Sitwell's illustrative attack on Esther and her portrayal.

Part I: Esther the Protagonist: As for Esther's actions in the story, the kind of thing that is objected to can be indicated by the scene in which Esther first meets the Jellyby family. Mrs. Jellyby is a wonderfully negligent parent, totally preoccupied with correspondence on behalf of her pet reformist project, the African settlement at Borroboola-Gha, and serenely unconcerned with the disorder in her own house. This disorder is manifest: the maid is drunk; the house is messy and broken down; Peepy, still a tot, is always falling into something; Mr. Jellyby, her husband, is so depressed he suffers from aphasia and can't finish his sentences; and Caddy, the older child, is at the point of rebellion for all of the above reasons and on her own behalf because her mother has her

writing piles of letters long past her bedtime, and she is up to her elbows in ink.

Eventually, Esther detaches herself from Mrs. Jellyby's unfocused gaze (she always seems to be looking beyond the present situation to Africa) and, with Ada's⁷ help, quietly takes over. She cleans up the house, reads to the children, puts Peepy to bed, and then sits with Ada, who is lying in bed and soon falls asleep. Then she finds Caddy shivering in the doorway and invites her into the bedroom, though the girl's manner is resentful and surly:

She would not sit down, but stood by the fire, dipping her inky middle finger in the egg-cup, which contained vinegar, and smearing it over the ink stains on her face; frowning, the whole time, and looking very gloomy.

“I wish Africa was dead!” she said, on a sudden (55).

Caddy then delivers a litany of just complaints:

“It's disgraceful,” she said. “You know it is. The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. I'm disgraceful. Pa's miserable, and no wonder! Priscilla [the maid] drinks — she's always drinking. It's a great shame and a great story, of you, if you say you didn't smell her to-day. It was bad as a public house, waiting at dinner; you know it was!” (56)

Esther seizes on Caddy's accusatory “You know it is” to avoid criticizing the mother's neglect: she really didn't “know” about the servant. But despite her failure in absolute candor, Esther wins Caddy over, partly by

her deeds of the day and partly by her sweetness and tact; and Caddy signals charmingly that she wants to be friends:

She was still standing by the bed, and now stooped down (but still with the same discontented face) and kissed Ada. That done, she came softly back, and stood by the side of my chair. Her bosom was heaving in a distressful manner that I greatly pitied; but thought it better not to speak. (57, with proximate passages)

And then, after another lamentation she capitulates: "In a moment afterwards, she knelt on the ground at my side, hid her face in my dress, passionately begged my pardon, and wept." Caddy even resents the fact that Esther never taught her (as she did the younger schoolgirls at Reading) and ends by declaring, "I am so miserable and I like you so much," after which, she falls asleep with her head on Esther's lap, and Esther sits up the whole night with her, having wrapped them both in blankets. This is uncomfortable, and Esther records the stages by which she herself gradually falls asleep:

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 [Miss Flite] worn out with curtsying and smiling; now, some one in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one.

This scene balances Caddy's spirit with Esther's special fascination: her habitual way of examining her own consciousness — and almost her

unconscious. But naturally, Caddy's attractions as a character are more obvious. G. K. Chesterton regards her as the greatest of Dickens's heroines.⁸

Set beside Caddy in this scene (and it is exquisitely described in the above footnote from Chesterton), Esther's mild reasonableness puts her in the shadow and Caddy in the light. Only Dickens, one is tempted to say, would have had Caddy kiss Ada right in the middle of this venom-release. Her looks and words tell one story, and her actions another. And her ambivalence is real. She envies Ada's and Esther's orderly beauty, since her own good looks are literally hidden by the black ink, and she resents being seen in this state by two models of the beautiful world outside. But she is a fair-minded girl and absolutely amiable by nature (as we soon discover); and her admiration of Esther and desire for decent friends score an abrupt victory over her resentment.

So far nothing can be said against Esther. She is less lively than Caddy, but not less appropriate to the story. There is nothing really odious in her pronounced goodness. The kind of thing that grates on some readers, though, is the brief sequel to this, which merely makes plain what we have already guessed: that Esther is willing to defend Mrs. Jellyby. At this point it is worth repeating that we are discussing Esther the protagonist and not the Esther the narrator. The later Esther has seen the aftermath, and therefore knows that Mrs. Jellyby isn't even disinterested in her devotion to Borroboola-Gha. When that project has suffered utter defeat, Mrs. Jellyby quickly finds a new project to blight her house with. But at the time of the story, Esther already knows that Caddy's charges are true, which is why she takes it upon herself to improve the house at least for the duration of her stay. Yet when Caddy complains the next morning about Mrs. Jellyby's plan to marry her off

to Mr. Quale, champion of “the Brotherhood of Humanity” (51) and a repulsive, sexless cheerleader for various causes, we are completely on her side.

Caddy’s erratum, in Esther’s opinion, is using a mild synonym for *donkeys* in describing her mother and Mr. Quale: “Such ASSES as he and Ma make of themselves!” (59, with subsequent quotes: caps from the text). But for her sweet form of address, Esther sounds like a prig: “My dear!” I remonstrated in allusion to the epithet, and the vigorous emphasis Miss Jellyby set upon it. “Your duty as a child ____” Whereupon Caddy answers her back quite convincingly: “O! don’t talk of duty as a child, Miss Summerson; where’s Ma’s duty as a parent?” The rest of her answer is just as convincing.

The point is that Esther knows Caddy is right but corrects her anyway, ostensibly because of the “epithet” and Caddy’s emphasis. It is, I would concede, a very mild flaw in Esther’s conduct. Surely the important thing here is not Caddy’s duty to Mrs. Jellyby, as Esther implies, but her duty to herself. But while this betrays a small flaw in Esther’s sterling personality — a mild tendency to priggishness that most well-bred Victorian women must have shared — that is not the same as a flaw in Dickens’s characterization of Esther. If it were, we would have to fault Shakespeare for the flaws in the personality of Lady Macbeth. In this case, it seems plain that Caddy gets the better of the argument, and Esther’s squeamishness here makes her more human rather than less. Dickens appraises and at the same time excuses Esther’s peccadilloes. They are explainable by her upbringing at the hands of her strict aunt and the aunt’s servant, the odious Mrs. Rachael (subsequently, Mrs. Chadbrand), and also, perhaps (though it is much the same thing), by her feelings of guilt at being illegitimate, since her aunt has already

hinted broadly that she is:

“Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come — and soon enough — when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can. I have forgiven her”; but her face did not relent; “the wrong that she did to me, and I say no more of it, though it was greater than you will ever know - than anyone will ever know, but I, the sufferer.” (26)

This is carrying the doctrine of Original Sin very far, but illegitimate children were stigmatized in the Victorian Era. And this, in turn, explains Esther’s excessive prissiness. Many more examples could be adduced, but they are all of the same nature. Esther at the time of the story isn’t perfect, and she isn’t intended to be. Despite all her luck in eliciting Mr. Jarndyce’s patronage before she had even met him, and for all her good fortune, Esther is a victim of the circumstances she grew up in, the salient one being her aunt’s belief in her inherited guilt, and the aunt’s success in imparting this belief to Esther.

Part II: Esther the Narrator: It is one thing to see flaws in the character of Esther the protagonist because these are the imperfections of life. As I tried to suggest with a very common example, this kind of imperfection is really attributable to Esther’s personality, and it is the opposite of a problem with her portrayal. If she had no flaws, that would be a problem. But flaws in Esther the narrator could be more serious. Let us take, for example, Esther’s initial comments on her aunt and Mrs. Rachael. Here is Esther on her aunt:

She was a good, good woman! She went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to lectures whenever there were lectures; and never missed. She was handsome and if she had smiled would have been (I used to think) like an angel — but she never smiled (24, with next quote: italics mine in both).

And here is her comment on Mrs. Rachael:

I had more than once approached this subject of my thoughts with Mrs. Rachael, our only servant, who took my light away when I was in bed (*another very good woman*, but austere to me), and she had only said, “Esther, good night!” and gone away and left me.”

Already, on p. 24, we have to feel some exasperation with Esther: not, I stress, the little Esther being depicted, but the older Esther, seven years after her marriage to Alan. Esther says something positive (in the first case, buttressed both by a repetition and an exclamation point), then goes on to give us evidence in the opposite direction. Clearly, Esther the narrator does not think her aunt was that good a woman. For one thing, she took it upon herself, in the name of God, to lie to her sister, the future Lady Dedlock, and say the baby (Esther) had died. And then, of course, there is the pettiness of taking out her frustrations on the child. She treats Esther like a sinner (“Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you hers”), and she “never” smiles.

The case of Mrs. Rachael is even clearer. By the time of narration, Esther is quite aware that Mrs. Rachael married Mr. Chadbrand, the evangelical fraud (with his hilariously empty rhetoric) and has actually

taken part in the blackmailing of Sir Leicester Dedlock. In fact, during the attempted blackmailing (with the avaricious Mr. Smallweed being the point man)⁹ it is Mrs. Chadbrand (aka Mrs. Rachael) who takes credit for being the source of the damaging information:

Mrs. Chadbrand, more than ready, so advances as to jostle her husband into the back-ground, and confronts Mr. Bucket with a hard frowning smile.

“Since you want to know what we know,” says she, “I’ll tell you I helped to bring up Miss Hawdon [Esther’s name to the kind of person who insists on calling her after her sire, the late Capt. Hawdon, Lady Dedlock’s lover].” (764)

Furthermore, Mrs. Chadbrand makes it very clear that what she is after is money — and a lot of it. She laughs at the first, facetious offer made by Inspector Bucket (on behalf of the man he always calls by his full title, “Sir Leceister Dedlock, Baronet” [e.g., 765]).

Clearly, Esther knows that the present Mrs. Chadbrand, at least, is not “another good woman,” so why does she call her this? There is a problematic coyness here that fits the structure of the novel because Dickens likes to speak by example. We are shown what the mindset exhibited by Esther’s aunt has done: ultimately, it has caused Lady Dedlock’s suicide — a pointless suicide, since it becomes clear that the little world of Chesney Wold (the nobility) does not ascribe to the puritan middle-class dogmas that condemn Lady Dedlock’s premarital love affair. Sir Leicester’s letter, given to Mr. Bucket to pass on to her Ladyship, promises full forgiveness:

My Lady is too high in position, too handsome, too accomplished, too superior in most respects to the best of those by whom she is surrounded, not to have her enemies and traducers, I dare say. Let it be known to them, as I make it known to you, that being of sound mind, memory, and understanding, I revoke no disposition I have made in her favor. I abridge nothing I have ever bestowed upon her. I am on unaltered terms with her, and I recal — having the power to do it if I were so disposed, as you see — no act I have done for her advantage and happiness. (828)

Perhaps influenced by this letter, the comments of Sir Leicester's retainers suggest a resolute indifference. In practical terms, Lady Dedlock commits suicide because she never realizes the difference between the middle-class morality into which she was born (practiced so vindictively by her sister) and aristocratic tolerance: generosity in Sir Leicester's case and a casual amorality in the case of the retainers. Furthermore, the sister's hiding the fact of Esther's birth combines with the later revelation (through Guppy) of who Esther is and with the blackmail of Mr. Tulkinghorn to speed Lady Dedlock out of the house too quickly for Mr. Bucket and Esther to save her. And more obviously, Mrs. Rachael's constant meanness¹⁰ is all we need to judge her. An accurate appraisal from Esther isn't necessary. Why, then, does Esther call her aunt and the servant "good"? The only exculpatory answer I can imagine is that Dickens was dramatizing the child's view of these two molders of her self-image. But if that is Dickens's purpose, he does it rather clumsily, since it is the married Esther, not the child, who is commenting.

The former example stands for dozens of cases of coyness that can't quite be overlooked, though ultimately I don't regard them as very

important. There is one kind of coyness, though, that bothers many readers. This is the ubiquitous case of Esther, despite her modesty, itemizing people's praise of her. There is almost an example of such praise for every character she meets, including some of the brutal and evil ones. The wife-beating bricklayer has grudging praise for her, as does, in his hilarious vein, Mr. Skimpole, who turns out to be quite evil.¹¹

Most of these cases won't bother anyone who isn't put off by Esther from the beginning. The cases that might offend a lot of readers, though, are the direct contradictions, where Esther doesn't just pass on praise with a modest bow but reminds us of her modesty at the same time. How can she indicate that she's modest and then pass on the dissenting opinion that she is wonderful? One example, referring to the scene with Caddy above, will suffice to represent these cases. When Esther and Ada return to Bleak House, they report on the situation at the Jellyby house to Mr. Jarndyce, who had them stay there partly for convenience, but partly as an object lesson in philanthropic "causes" and how not to run a house. Here is Esther, quoting from this conversation:

"Why, cousin John [Jarndyce]," said Ada, clasping her hands upon his arm, and shaking her head at me across him — for I wanted her to be quiet: "Esther was [the children's] friend directly. Esther nursed them, coaxed them to sleep, washed and dressed them, told them stories, kept them quiet, brought them keepsakes" — My dear girl! I had only gone out with Peepy, after he was found, and given him a little, tiny horse! — "and cousin John, she softened poor Caroline [Caddy], the eldest one, so much, and was so thoughtful for me and so amiable! — No, no I won't be contradicted, Esther dear! You know, you know, it's true!" (77-78)

For a discussion of this scene to make sense, we have to pretend, this side of insanity, that Esther is a real person. It isn't hard to see how vulnerable to ridicule Esther is here (and in many similar passages). Ada is praising her to their mutual guardian and benefactor (almost their savior) Mr. Jarndyce. Esther reports this praise to us. But she also suggests by the stage directions in dashes — her own hushing signals and diminishing comments and Ada's self-interruption ("No, no I won't be contradicted, Esther dear! You know, you know, it's true!") — that she wanted her good deeds to remain a secret. So why does she tell *us* about them?

In this case, I think we have to refer back to the fact of Esther's illegitimacy. As I imply in Part I, the Victorian age was a time when popular judgment was closer to the view of Esther's aunt than that of Mr. Bucket, who calls her a "Queen" in the passage quoted in the Appendix.¹² Q. D. Leavis quotes the following letter from a post-Victorian correspondence in an English newspaper (she doesn't give details of its origin), to show that the stigma was still alive in her day (Mrs. Leavis isn't specific about source or date, but perhaps this was the England of the 1950s): "I am illegitimate, and have been in social work for 20 years, so I have had ample opportunity to study the problem. I have noticed one point above all: whatever their background or experience, illegitimates seem to feel the need to apologize for their existence ..." (214). Mrs. Leavis's point (I arrived at it independently, but she deserves credit for her clarity) is that Esther's good works and sweet talk are a form of apology for her "sin," and this also accounts for what I would call her *tick* of reporting these triumphs.

Here I must separate my opinion from Mrs. Leavis's because I don't know if she would agree. I believe that Esther exhibits a universal tendency in Dickens's characters to distinguish themselves by some kind of

repetition, which might be called a tick because it is involuntary and more often than not unconscious. In the case of the simpler characters in *Bleak House*, the ticks are obvious. Little Miss Flite is always curtsying and answering with startling lucidity comments about her that she isn't supposed to hear. George (aka Mr. George, nee George Rouncewell) never misses a chance to admit that he is only "a man who has been knocking about the world in a vagabond kind of a way" (e.g., 734). George's friend Matthew Bagnet is always praising his wife ("The old girl." In half sentences. Like this.) and then ending by reminding whoever he's talking to that he never tells her of his high opinion because "Discipline must be maintained" (e.g., 407, 408 [twice]). And Mrs. Bagnet, though too much an embodiment of common sense to be comic, is always washing greens.

This is a morally neutral pattern that the evil characters share with the good ones. The Draculean lawyer, Vholes, who seems to suck the life out of Richard Carstone by keeping his Chancery hopes alive, reminds anyone who will listen that he has two daughters and an aging father to support. And everyone's guardian angel, Mr. Jarndyce, always feels a cold East wind when he senses that something is wrong. In exactly the same way as the other characters, Esther has her tick: an ambivalent compulsion to justify herself by reporting other people's good opinion of her — ambivalent because it is accompanied by a natural sense of modesty and the need to *appear* modest. So most of her reports on her triumphs present us with this coyness, which is really pride battling with an inferiority complex. What can be said, finally, of this is that the complex is unwarranted and the pride is fully justified. Esther is as good as her report, which is why the other (Dickensian) narrator passes on the same reports. For instance, when Alan Woodcourt, as part of his

doctor's duty, goes with Jo to the bricklayer's house, the bricklayer's wife chastens Jo for causing Esther's disease (which at least temporarily scarred her face)¹³: "And that young lady that was such a pretty dear, caught his illness, lost her beautiful looks, and wouldn't hardly be known for the same young lady now, if it wasn't for her angel temper, and her pretty shape, and her sweet voice" (661). The "angel temper" part is supported by Jo, whose comment on Esther is exactly the same as it was on the dead Nemo (really Captain Hawdon, Esther's father, and evidently a kind man despite his descent into the lower depths, who shared what little he had with Jo): "...she wos wery good to him, she wos" (661, dialectal spelling).

Thus it can be seen that the coyness of Esther the narrator isn't a schoolgirl artificiality, and it isn't "subacid" or indeed sinister in any way. It is Esther's trademark: and in psychological terms an entirely plausible one.

Part III: Esther's Special Moments: I have argued that Esther's coyness doesn't undermine her portrait, and that where it seems most suspect (in her role as narrator) it is most plausible. But this is a rather negative justification for the main character in a major work of perhaps England's greatest novelist. The thing that distinguishes Dickens from many other great novelists — from Conrad, for instance — is his ability to portray happiness. In *Bleak House*, Esther has many happy moments. Part of one is quoted in the final note of this paper: the scene with Alan at the end of the novel. But some of the happiest scenes are with Esther's female friends — perhaps, as I suggested earlier, her surrogate daughters — her maid Charley and her charge Ada. To give a more rounded picture of Esther I will treat a small scene with each of them.

The scene with Charley occurs about forty pages after she was depicted in the house of the Smallweeds, suffering constant abuse. It is a depressing scene, showing how poor children could be treated by unkind masters (and mistresses: her direct tormentor is the Smallweed girl). In the present scene, narrated by Esther, Charley knocks on the door of Esther's room and is invited in:

“If you please, miss,” said the little girl, in a soft voice, “I am Charley.”

“Why, so you are,” said I, stooping down in astonishment, and giving her a kiss. “How glad I am to see you, Charley!”

“If you please, miss,” pursued Charley, in the same soft voice, “I’m your maid.”

“Charley?”

“If you please, miss, I’m a present to you, with Mr. Jarndyce’s love.”

I sat down with my hand on Charley’s neck and looked at Charley.

“And O, miss,” says Charley, clapping her hands, with tears starting down her dimpled cheeks, “Tom’s at school, if you please, and learning so good! And little Emma, she’s with Mrs. Blinder, and being took such care of! [Charley finishes the list of favors done for her family by Mr. Jarndyce.] Don’t cry, if you please, miss!”

“I can’t help it, Charley.”

“No, miss, nor I can’t help it,” says Charley. “And if you please, miss, Mr. Jarndyce’s love, and he thinks you’ll like to teach me now and then..... And I’m so happy and so thankful, miss,” cried Charley with a heaving heart, “and I’ll try to be such a good

maid!”

“O Charley dear, never forget who did all this!”

“No, miss, I never will. Nor Tom won’t. Nor yet Emma. It was all you, miss.”

“I have known nothing of it. It was Mr. Jarndyce, Charley.”

“Yes, miss, but it was all done for the love of you, and that you might be my mistress. If you please, miss, I am a little present with his love, and it was all done for love of you. Me and Tom was to be sure to remember it.”

Charley dried her eyes, and entered on her functions: going in her matronly little way about the room, and folding up everything she could lay her hands upon. Presently, Charley came creeping back to my side, and said:

“O don’t cry, if you please, miss.”

And I said again, “I can’t help it, Charley.”

And Charley said again, “No, miss, nor I can’t help it.” And so, after all, I did cry for joy, and so did she. (356-57)

This scene will stir some readers more than others. It is fine for what is implied as much as for what is directly presented. Esther is crying more than Charley, partly because she is softhearted, but also because she sees Jarndyce’s hand in all this, including Jarndyce’s other tick: his legendary dread of being thanked. He has convinced Charley that all the thanks is due to Esther. At the same time he has used the little girl as a means of conveying his love to Esther, whom he still dreams of marrying, though he later dismisses this desire as a weakness and sets up Esther’s marriage with Alan. More relevant to a main theme of the novel, with this gift to both Charley and Esther, Jarndyce is performing

what Dickens regards as a meaningful act of philanthropy (in opposition to the Jellyby variety).

In addition to this, the scene is moving because it shows how humble Esther is. Being what Inspector Bucket calls a “Queen” (please refer to the Appendix), she acts in the opposite way from the ill-bred Miss Smallweed. She doesn’t mind “stooping down” to give Charley a kiss. And there is even a subtle role reversal here, which doesn’t distress Esther at all, with Charley doing the comforting, though she knows her place and never fails to say, “if you please.” This scene partly justifies Charley’s later expressions of love when Esther falls ill with the disease that Charley caught from Jo. To protect Ada from infection, Esther has kept the door of her own room locked and nursed Charley back to health by herself; now it is her turn to fall ill, and she asks Charley to do the same:

“Now Charley,” said I, after letting her go on for a little while, “if I am to be ill, my great trust, humanly speaking, is in you. And unless you are as quiet and composed for me, as you always were for yourself, you can never fulfil it, Charley.”

“If you’ll let me cry a little longer, miss,” said Charley. “O my dear, my dear! If you’ll only let me cry a little longer, O my dear!” — how affectionately and devotedly she poured this out, as she clung to my neck, I never can remember without tears — “I’ll be good.” (463-64)

For Charley, Esther is a combination of the “real” Esther and Mr. Jarndyce. She is the instrument of the humane philanthropy that Jarndyce practices, and she is also a warm and kind person in her own

right. So, as odd as Charley's terms of endearment may seem (especially outside the context of the rest of the novel), they are quite believable. Esther will, in fact, temporarily go blind, nearly die, and nearly, at least, lose her beauty.

My second and final example of a happy scene is one that has been commented on by many critics. After Esther recovers from danger and examines the disfiguring scars on her face — Charley has hidden the mirrors, so this takes some character to do — Esther accepts her new face and resolutely shows it to everyone but Ada. Mr. Jarndyce understands this, and his friend Mr. Boythorn lends his country house to Esther, so she can have privacy and compose herself for the meeting with Ada. Finally the day of the meeting comes, with Charley on the lookout for Ada's arrival:

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

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

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

Oh how happy I was, down upon the floor, with my sweet beautiful girl down upon the floor too, holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek, bathing it with tears and kisses, rocking me to and fro like a child, calling me by every tender name that she could

think of, and pressing me to her faithful heart. (544-45)

Mrs. Leavis regards this whole episode, and especially the way Esther wavers at the last minute and hides herself, as “proof that Dickens had the true creative artist’s power of feeling himself into and sustaining a character who is as far as possible from being himself” (215). Zarifopol-Johnston considers the scene pivotal to her reading. For her the scene shows Esther’s final recognition that people (represented by her favorite person, Ada) can love her for herself, and therefore is the turning point in the story, not unlike Hamlet’s acceptance of death in his “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” speech: “It is only after her illness, and after her reunion with Ada, in whose eyes she descries an unfaltering love, that Esther is cured of her suspicions, and lets herself believe that ‘others’ goodness towards her is not just pity but genuine understanding and acceptance of her ambiguous self. The reunion with Ada is the final and supreme test of her legitimation [sic] through the eyes of another” (131). What the scene does for sure is fill Esther with a sense of acceptance. She now has confidence that the love of the people she values most is unconditional. Phrases like “rocking me to and fro like a child” have absolutely no sexual overtones, and such a reading is inane. Esther was not rocked when she really was a child, and that is why she has this constant desire to justify herself. Here she is fully accepted by the person who for her represents love prescinding from passion or any kind of selfish desire. While I am often suspicious of Jungian symbols, here I do think it can be added that Ada’s tears are a sort of baptism: they wash away Esther’s sense of Original Sin, which has made her so vulnerable in this scene. This is Dickens at his most unembarrassed and best.

Notes

- 1 Two Oxford University Press editions are mentioned in the Works Cited section. Textual references are always to the edition edited by Stephan Gill, which has almost thirty excellent pages of explanatory notes, as opposed to none in the edition introduced by Sir Osbert Sitwell.
- 2 For a discussion of Sir Osbert Sitwell's contribution to this discussion of Esther, please see the Appendix.
- 3 Q. D. (first name Queenie) was the wife of F. R. Leavis and his collaborator on their book on Dickens — ironically, a book that contradicts their earlier judgment of Dickens, but never mentions this fact.
- 4 George Orwell observes that Dickens's heroines, Esther being one of his examples, always seem to have been adults. This is quite relevant to *Bleak House*, in which so many of the young girls have adult roles. Thanks to Mr. Jarndyce's plan to prepare her for a useful life, Esther has been taking care of younger girls almost from the moment she started the boarding school he placed her in. The Smallweed girl, who mistreats Charley when she has her under her thumb (when Charley is forced to work at the Smallweed house), seems, like her brother, never to have been a child. And Charley has adult responsibilities (the care and feeding of her siblings) from the first time we see her until her rescue by Mr. Jarndyce, who makes her Esther's maid. Without being exhaustive in this list, Caddy goes from slaving away as a writer for her mother, when we first see her, to marrying Prince and slaving away for old Mr. Turveydrop. And even the lovely Ada sacrifices her youth and ease to Richard by marrying and trying to take care of him.
- 5 Those who have never read *Bleak House* need to be informed that there are two narrators: the omniscient, Dickenslike narrator of the first chapter, who writes in third person and whose tone is usually ironic, and sometimes quite emotional (as when Jo dies); and Esther, who writes in first-person and in accordance with her own personality.

As an example of the emotional tone of the omniscient narrator, here is his closing peroration on the death of poor Jo:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day. (677)

Vladimir Nabokov (author of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*) in his Cornell lecture on *Bleak House*, which he had just read for the first time, makes the distinction between sentimentality — the unwarranted expression of emotion — and decent, humane sentiment, which is what Nabokov considers Dickens's treatment of the death of Jo to be. It is

enlightening that the most acerbically witty of mid-twentieth-century novelists would defend Dickens's pathos. Moreover, he makes it clear throughout this lecture that he admires the portrayal of Esther. It never seems to occur to him that Esther would be accused of excessive sweetness, in the Osbert Sitwell manner (47).

- 6 Specifically, at the beginning, when Esther is still living with her puritanical aunt, she is more than the *tabula rasa* (the blank slate) of Locke's description. She is a slate on which only decent, ethically sound, things may be written; but the actual writing still takes time, and how much will be written is uncertain. Esther's rectitude is innate, but her knowledge and judgment are still imperfect, which is why she can make mistakes.
- 7 Ada Clare is a beautiful orphan of nineteen who is legally a ward of the Chancery courts, like her handsome young cousin Richard Carstone (whom she eventually marries). Since they are his cousins and he is a very kind man, Mr. Jarndyce invites them to live with him at Bleak House, along with Esther, who is assigned the task of being Ada's "companion." This isn't much of a task because Esther simply can't contain her effusions over Ada. She dotes on her. The relationship is so ardent on both sides that it is hard to tell what to make of it. We can at least say with confidence that at the time of narration, Esther loves Ada more than anyone except (presumably) her own husband and children. By modern standards, Esther's constant use of endearing terms in place of Ada's name is odd, but surely harmless. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that Ada is an orphan, and Esther, though not much older, is her surrogate mother. This was her role with new students at the boarding school, to a lesser extent it is her role with Caddy Jellyby, certainly with her little maid Charley, and later with Ada's daughter, who calls Esther "mother" even though she already has a perfectly good one.
- 8 Chesterton is more often than not the spokesman for the know-nothings who prefer their Dickens rough and artless. In a rather intriguing passage, Chesterton even argues that Dickens's best novel might be *Pickwick Papers* despite it's being no novel at all (just a series of episodes). Having said that, one must respect Chesterton's passage on Caddy:

Caddy is a perfectly feminine study of how a girl goes right. Nowhere else perhaps in fiction, and certainly nowhere else in Dickens, is the mere female paradox so well epitomized, the unjust use of words covering so much capacity for a justice of ultimate estimate; the seeming irresponsibility in language concealing such a fixed and pitiless sense of responsibility about things; the air of being always at daggers-drawn with her own kindred, yet the confession of incurable kinship implied in pride and shame; and, above all, that thirst for order and beauty as for something physical; that strange female power of hating ugliness and waste as good men can only hate sin and bad men virtue. Every touch in her is true, from her first bewildering outbursts of hating people because she likes them, down to the sudden quietude and good sense which announces that she has slipped into

her natural place as a woman. Miss Clare is a figure-head, Miss Summerson in some ways a failure; but Miss Caddy Jellyby is by far the greatest, the most human, and the most really dignified of all the heroines of Dickens. (Chapter XV)

It should be pointed out that Chesterton doesn't love the portrait of Esther with the contempt that we might expect. If she is "in some ways a failure," she must in other ways be a success. But in the end, it is surprising to see Caddy rated so high. The praise of her character is good and inspiring, but, as with Chesterton's judgment of *Pickwick Papers*, I wonder if he isn't partly inspired by his obsession with paradox. He does, after all, extol the way she exemplifies "the female paradox so well." On a more grateful note, though, Chesterton makes the point here: Caddy is such an attractive character precisely because she isn't all of a piece when we first meet her. Her true character emerges rather than being fairly well fixed from the beginning.

- 9 The incisive appraisal of old Mr. Smallweed is given by Phil, George's ugly, warm-hearted, Shakespearean helper: "'Guv'ner,' says Phil, with exceeding gravity, 'he's a leech in his dispositions, he's a screw and a wice in his actions, a snake in his twistings, and a lobster in his claws'" (497: the misspelling is dialectal).
- 10 The most irksome example of this meanness is when she meets Esther after the latter has become Miss Summerson, a perfect young lady. Mrs. Chadbrand (nec Rachael) insists on calling her "Esther" — a heavyhanded show of disrespect — to remind her of her former position and "disgrace." Esther's comments on the meeting are not naïve: "'I wonder you remember those times, Esther,' [Mrs. Chadbrand] returned with her old asperity. 'They are changed now. Well! I am glad to see you, and glad you are not too proud to know me.' But indeed she seemed disappointed that I was not." This raises the same question I have been asking: if, as narrator, Esther sees through Mrs. Chadbrand, why does she call her "another good woman"?
- 11 Please refer to the Appendix. This is not a paper on Skimpole, but it is clear that he abuses his family by neglect; that he sponges not just off Mr. Jarndyce, but off Richard, who can't afford it; that he betrayed Jo to Inspector Bucket, as Bucket tells Esther; and that he slandered Mr. Jarndyce in his memoirs despite all Jarndyce had done for him. Furthermore, Skimpole's sense of the "poetry" of life's nuances — the poetry of the negro slaves in Florida; the poetry of the poor orphans of the dead bailiff — is a heartless estheticism. It is much worse than Oscar Wilde's estheticism. But in some ways Skimpole is an uncanny precursor of Wilde. Q. D. Leavis mentions this too (but anyone familiar with Wilde must have recognized it without her comments). Unfortunately, Mrs. Leavis calls Skimpole "something of an Oscar Wilde without the vice" (205), which is very unfair to Wilde, a real person (not a character in a novel) persecuted and jailed for his "vice." Wilde had a dilettante's view of art but his homosexuality does not bother many people today, and even in the most orthodox view he was not a cunning predator like Skimpole. Mrs. Leavis's comment is just the kind that causes one to resent her attitude as much as one admires her reading skill and her ability to discuss large novels like this one comprehensively.

- 12 Michael Slater informs us that Dickens had a model for Bucket: “[Scotland Yard’s] Charles Frederick Field [was a person] whom Dickens greatly admired and on whom he famously modeled Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*” (265). It is ironic that Bucket does things that we can’t approve of: for instance, he rousts Jo out of his house. Yet Bucket, unlike Skimpole, who takes his bribe, is never self-seeking. John Lucas explains this: “Bucket has to function as an upholder of law and justice in what is a fundamentally unjust society. It is the ultimate contradiction, given that he is neither cynical, nor corrupt” (4603).
- 13 As every observer points out, it is unclear whether Esther fully recovers from these scars. Her husband laughs at her when she brings the matter of her “old looks” up because he thinks she is as pretty as ever:

“I have been thinking, that I thought it was impossible that you could have loved me any better, even if I had retained them.”

“— such as they were?” said Allan laughing.

“My dear Dame Durden,” said Allan, drawing my arm through his, “do you ever look in the glass?”

“You know I do; you see me do it.”

“And don’t you know that you are prettier than you ever were?” (914, with next quote)

The novel ends in midsentence, still uncertain: “...and that they can very well do without much beauty in me — even supposing — .” The common-sense view would be that Esther’s looks have mostly returned, and Allan’s view is as good as hers, but not necessarily perfect.

Appendix: Sir Osbert Sitwell on Esther and Skimpole

Perhaps Esther’s most typical detractor — in that he typifies the tone and frivolity of these attacks — is Sir Osbert Sitwell in his introduction to *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens*. Sir Osbert makes his dislike of Esther clear from the beginning:

I delight in the people of this book: though to my mind it contains the most detestable of all Dickens’s heroines. Esther Summerson is odious, so sweet, so sweetly spiteful — especially

about Mr. Skimpole — so tenderly cocksure, so coy and subacid; on the other hand, one would welcome entire stories devoted to Mrs. Jellyby, old Mr. Turveydrop, his son Prince, and his daughter-in-law Caddy..... (viii)

It is interesting that the people Sir Osbert likes the best are bloodsuckers and two of their victims (Prince and Caddy). It is a pity that he doesn't also mention Vholes, the novel's ultimate vampire. What he likes about Skimpole is the brilliance of his conversation, which he has seen, prophetlike, through the dark glass of Esther's report:

Most of all in *Bleak House* do the exquisite conversations of Mr. Skimpole entrance me. Seldom, if ever, has the talk of a brilliant conversationalist been wafted across to us so naturally, so successfully from the printed page; (how much better it is than the reporting of Whistler's and Wilde's discourse that occurs in various novels and memoirs of the '90s!) And bear in mind, this talking was usually wasted on the deserving Miss Summerson — there is no kindred spirit to call it out.....Again, how gay and how true to life is the scene where he asks 'particularly' to see Charley, or 'Little Coavinces,' as he called her, the bailiff's daughter. [Quote from relevant passage from the novel.]

Even the author can only bring himself, one would hazard, to dislike the heartless, gay, little man towards the end of the book. And it has sometimes seemed hard to me that he may have based his loathing for Skimpole on that airy being's attempt to eject a sufferer from smallpox from the house in which he was finding shelter. After all, Skimpole, we are told, had been a doctor, though he

had never practised, and his advice, that if they did not turn the boy out, they should take him to a loft, give him cooling medicine, and sprinkle him with vinegar, was sound counsel for the time when it was offered. It has to be admitted that the next morning he connived, behind the host's back, at the victim being removed; but already two persons had caught the infection. (x-xi)

Skimpole, Sir Osbert concludes, was doing about the best he could for Jo, and he was protecting the house. It isn't mentioned that when he "connived," it was for money (£10), as the almost-omniscient Inspector Bucket knew he would. Money is the commodity that Skimpole claims to know and care nothing about. "No idea of money," observed Mr Bucket. — "He takes it though!" (809). This is Bucket's terse preamble to his discussion of Skimpole's betrayal of Jo for the £10. Bucket then renders the final appraisal of Skimpole: He tells Esther how Skimpole took his bribe and betrayed Jo. He also gives the general grounds for suspecting Skimpole:

"Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it, if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' you can consider that that person is only a crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One. (810)

Having set himself against Sir Osbert in his judgment of Skimpole, Bucket then delivers a very un-Sitwellian appraisal of Esther, to whom

he is speaking, the night of their search for Lady Dedlock:

“So you have [confidence in me], my dear,” he returned. “And I tell you what! If you only repose half as much confidence in me as I repose in you, after what I’ve experienced of you, that’ll do Lord! you’re no trouble at all. I never see a young woman in any station of society — and I’ve seen many elevated ones too — conduct herself like you have conducted yourself, since you was called out of your bed. You’re a pattern, you know, that’s what you are,” said Mr Bucket warmly; “you’re a pattern.”

I told him I was very glad, as indeed I was, to have been no hindrance to him; and that I hoped I should be none now.

“My dear,” he returned, “when a young lady is as mild as she is game, and as game as she’s mild, that’s all I ask, and more than I expect. She becomes a Queen, and that’s what you are yourself.” (834)

Just as he understands Skimpole, Bucket has an uncanny talent for appealing to each person’s claim to conscience, and he knows what their motivating principle is. He knows what inspires Sir Leicester (“You ask yourself, how would all them ancestors of yours, away to Julius Caesar — not to go beyond him at present — have borne that blow...” [757]); and he addresses the jealousy and simple-mindedness that have misled Mrs. Snagsby and must dealt with to make her cooperate in the search for Lady Dedlock. So it is natural that he should appeal to Esther on this matter of not just conduct but class: she is illegitimate, as Bucket knows, and this is her sensitive point; but if class can be inferred from conduct, she is a “Queen.”

Furthermore, Sir Osbert seems to confuse fiction with reality when he mentions “the author” bringing himself to dislike Skimpole, as if Dickens were Mr. Jarndyce, learning regretfully about Skimpole’s betrayal of Jo and the rest of the house. Dickens was Skimpole’s creator and had planned the deed himself, probably early on in the writing of the monthly episodes of the novel. This is why, in Dickens’s design, Skimpole is constantly enjoying the “poetry” in every horrid thing he sentimentalizes — from the practice of slavery in Florida, to the plight of Charley, a small child suddenly orphaned and struggling to support her even smaller siblings (the whole shocking event is reported by Skimpole at the piano, with which he cheerfully accompanies his revelations), to the death of Jo, whom Skimpole will betray later in the evening, but who occasions a teary little Scottish air about a parentless peasant boy, again at the piano, immediately after Skimpole has advised turning Jo out.

Clearly, in the story, Esther’s dislike of Skimpole is on behalf of the slaves, Charley and her other siblings, and the dead Jo — whom she has sacrificed much to save: Sir Osbert neglects to mention that Esther is one of the “persons” who “caught the infection” and Charley is the other. Since Sir Osbert tends to treat Skimpole and Esther as if they were real people (Skimpole’s wit being “lost on” Esther), his resentment against Esther’s dislike of Skimpole must say something about Sir Osbert’s priorities. All I can guess is that Sir Osbert thinks the abuse of Charley by the Smallweeds, the sacrifice of Jo for money and, of course, the “poetry” of American slavery are in sum a small price to pay for witty conversation (especially with piano accompaniment). This is surely a “privileged” perspective.

But these comments assume that Sir Osbert, before writing his Intro-

duction, had reread the novel recently enough to remember it well; and I doubt this. Otherwise, while admitting things, he would also admit that after Jarndyce had finally cooled toward Skimpole and stopped at least some of his free services to him, Skimpole slandered Jarndyce in his memoirs: “Jarndyce, in common with most other me I have known, is the Incarnation of Selfishness.” (864). Being Sir Osbert’s idea of a prig, Esther stopped reading the memoirs at that point. Either Sir Osbert forgot this or he failed to mention and explain it. Therefore, I don’t regard his attack on Esther for her “sweetly spiteful” attitude (“especially about Mr. Skimpole”) as very serious or damaging to Esther’s status with the conscientious reader — by which I mean the person who reads the novel from cover to cover (rereading before writing about it) and tries to work out its implications. What the attack really indicates is the difference between the two Oxford University Press editions of the novel: this hardcover Oxford Illustrated Edition and the very fully edited and annotated paperback Oxford Classic that is the text I refer to in this paper.

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