Esther's Narrative in Bleak House

Jennifer Willa Tonn Sternhagen

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ESTHER'S NARRATIVE IN
BLEAK HOUSE

by
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Bachelor of Arts, Concordia College, 1982

A Thesis
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This Thesis submitted by Jennifer Willa Tonn Sternhagen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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This Thesis meets the standards for appearance and conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the complexity of Dickens's involvement with his narrative and characters, specifically Esther Summerson in the novel Bleak House. The introduction examines his habit of interrupting the speech of his characters with direct authorial comments in order that he not give up his story entirely to a character, even in an extended first-person narration. It is noted that this is true even of characters who are autobiographical, like Pip or David Copperfield. Here my references are to the work of Susan R. Horton (The Reader in the Dickens World) and Mark Lambert (Dickens and the Suspended Quotation).

A second section in the introduction discusses Dickens's reputation for being unable to present young marriageable female characters in realistic ways. Here my references are to the work of Michael Slater (Dickens and Women). The first chapter ends with a discussion of the thesis itself: that Dickens's choice of Esther Summerson, a young marriageable woman, as narrator of Bleak House posed particular rhetorical problems for the author. He had to have Esther maintain an ideal maidenly posture (in the Victorian sense) while having her tell a complex and socially aware tale.

Chapter II analyzes the way Esther functions as an
evaluator of her world. She evaluates the problems around her in four discrete ways: through direct statements, through indirect statements, by way of projected criticism, and through authorial intrusion. The chapter consists of a close analysis of representative passages from *Bleak House*.

Chapter III is parallel to Chapter II in its analysis of the text; the subject, however, is the way Esther presents herself and her feelings to the reader.

The concluding chapter explores the implications of the analyses of Chapters II and III—the complexity of Esther's narrative and its significance to both the Victorian and the 20th century reader.
Chapter 1: Introduction

AUTHORIAL INTERRUPTION

Obviously, since Dickens shifts from rhetor to reporter, from fairy-tale teller to polemicist in the space of a paragraph, an honest and complete reading of even the shortest of Dickens's novels could easily turn out to be interminable. (16)

Susan R. Horton

Horton knows what she is talking about. If one chose to examine, for example, Bleak House's rich detail, imagery, plot, social criticism, narrative style, and so forth, one might well find the job too overwhelming to be completed. For example, the study of Dickens's choice of Esther Summerson as narrator might escalate into a life's work. However, with the provision that a study need not be comprehensive to be interesting and enriching, one might be encouraged to pursue this subject.

Dickens did not care to give over his material to a character or even a narrator of his own creation. This has been the topic of several studies in the recent past, including the one by Susan R. Horton which was quoted from at the beginning. She examines the reader and the author of Dickens's novels:

All of his life Dickens tried to modify the impulse toward insistent rhetoric that he had
acquired early in his career as a journalist and shorthand writer. If he couldn't or didn't want entirely to substitute 'the bland smile of the periodical essay for the glare of the propagandist', he could at least integrate his insistent rhetoric with his images and his plots, and this is what he tried to do. (32)

His views on society, the politics of his time, social injustice, poverty, philanthropy, and British home life were not simply demonstrated through the images and characters used in the novels. In fact, Dickens's personal voice would often overshadow a character's or narrator's voice and bring his views to the reader directly.

This intrusive "voice" is the subject of Mark Lambert's study, *Dickens and the Suspended Quotation*. Part of this work involves Lambert's examination of the number of tagged speeches, that is, speeches before or after which the speaker is identified with such words as "Mr. Jarndyce said" or "Ada cried." Lambert notes that in Dickens's early and middle works, which would include *Bleak House*, readers could "not find much more than one speech in ten untagged" (102). Lambert goes on to say that though this is not necessarily a unique practice:

... the heavy use of tagging is certainly a striking feature of Dickens's early style, setting Dickensian fiction in contrast not only
with fiction by Austen and Scott but with such contemporary works as Jane Eyre (about 56 percent untagged), Kingsley's Yeast (about 60 percent untagged) and Gaskell's Mary Barton (about 45 percent untagged). (102)

The tagging occurs not because Dickens doesn't trust his readers to know who is saying what at a given time. Instead, as Lambert suggests, it appears to be because

\[\ldots\text{ unlike Austen, Dickens does not want to disappear from the drawing room for several pages at a time and leave his readers alone with the characters . . . and he keeps finding excuses to stay in the room and remind us of his presence.}\]

(103)

Even a phrase as simple as "he said" lets the reader know that he or she has not been left alone with the characters. Dickens repeatedly adds such phrases. Lambert points out that during the first half of his career,

\[\ldots\text{ Dickens the novelist was (deeply if obscurely) a jealous god, not wanting admiration for his creatures to becloud or weaken or replace admiration for the creator.}\]

(85)

In fact, this "jealous god," Dickens, would interrupt his characters and narrators with what Lambert identifies as suspended quotations. Sometimes such interruptions serve to provide comedy. For example, after Mrs. Bagnet's birthday party, Mr. Bucket takes Trooper George into his
custody for the murder of Tulkinghorn:

'Now, George,' says Mr. Bucket, urging a sensible view of the case upon him with his fat forefinger, 'duty, as you know very well, is one thing, and conversation another . . . . ' (BH 597)

The fat forefinger is a symbol of the way Mr. Bucket can point to the heart of a problem. Interrupting Bucket's speeches to comment on the presence and action of said forefinger has comedic results.

On the other hand, some suspended quotations, including the Bucket passages, also serve the function of interrupting characters to make a point the characters themselves would probably not want to make if they had been given a chance. Lambert notes that Dickens often prefers to assign the suspensions not to the speech of the sympathetic characters in his novels but rather to the speech of the unsympathetic characters (60). For example, Mr. Vholes, Richard's leech-like lawyer, is interrupted while speaking to Richard:

'Sir,' returns Vholes, always looking at the client, as if he were making a lingering meal of him with his eyes as well as with his professional appetite. 'Sir,' returns Vholes, with his inward manner of speech and his bloodless quietude . . . . (BH 485)

The anonymous narrator of this section of **Bleak House**
interrupts Wholes's dialogue and discloses him as monstrous and preying. Or consider the sarcastic description in the following interruption of Grandfather Smallweed as he discusses an occasion when Esther's father considered using a gun to attempt suicide: "'I wish he had let it off!' said the benevolent old man, 'and blown his head into as many pieces as he owed pounds!'" (BH 269).

The suspended quotation, overtagging of speeches, and other interruptive techniques suggest that Dickens does not want to share his stories, his credit, or his fame even with his own characters. As Horton noted, Dickens found methods other than the direct discourse of an essayist, that is, through his imagery and through authorial interruptions in the novels, to communicate opinions and social criticisms to his public. This concern for an iron hold over his material is further suggested by the fact that in only two of his novels is the whole of the narration carried out by a first-person narrator.

THE IDEALIZED VICTORIAN MAIDEN

Of the sixteen or so novels written by Charles Dickens, only two, David Copperfield (1849-50) and Great Expectations (1861), are written completely in first-person narrative form. Bleak House (1852-3) is written with the narrative divided almost equally between an anonymous third-person narrator and the novel's heroine, Esther Summerson. Dickens's choice of Esther as narrator, called
"a purely literary experiment" by Angus Wilson (234), is intriguing in light of his apparent attitudes regarding young, marriageable women.

Michael Slater provides provocative insight on this matter:

Dickens is only able to present a woman as convincingly noble as wife and mother when she is, in fact, a childless single woman who adopts, sustains and protects a quasi-husband and also a child, so creating a family for herself without any sexual or actual maternal associations. Betsey Trotwood is by far his most persuasive presentation of the domestic ideal of womanhood.

Otherwise, Dickens's presentation of admirable wives does not rise much above the level of efficient housewifery with much emphasis on the creation of neatness and order and the provision of plenty of food. (312)

Dickens seemed to share the Victorian notion, articulated by Coventry Patmore in The Angel in the House (1854-62), that the ideal Victorian beloved woman, whether she is sweetheart or wife, is gracious and also agreeably happy to fulfill the traditional roles set forth for her by the patriarchal society.

In this way, Dickens held views of women that matched the views of his Victorian contemporaries. Wives and
sweethearts were to blend quietly into the backgrounds of the lives of Dickens and his male contemporaries. They were to efficiently keep house, raise the children and, when evening arrived, entertain their husbands with music at the pianoforte or with flattering their spouses by mirroring back the husbands' views and ideas. Edgar Johnson, drawing from available Dickensian correspondence, discusses Dickens's attitude toward his marriage:

He had an ideal picture in his imagination of what marriage should be like, a sweet and brightly colored domesticity in which at the end of his day's work he would turn for happiness to the fond looks and gentle ways of his wife. There would be no more of 'the moping solitude of chambers,' but always the warm companionship of their own fireside, where he would tell her 'rationally what I have been doing' throughout a day whose pursuits and labors would all have for their mainspring her 'advancement and happiness.'

(3.130)

When his wife Katherine could not effectively cope with raising their ten children, efficiently running the household, and enduring lengthy absences of her husband, Dickens convinced her sister Georgiana to come in to run the household (Kaplan 159). He had certain expectations of his wife and, when she did not meet them, he took away her privileged position as head of their home life and gave it
to her sister. Johnson describes Dickens's relationship with Kate:

Undoubtedly Kate had moods of sulky ill-humor and was unreasonable in her inability to see that he could not neglect his work to go and hold her hand when she was in low spirits, and Dickens refused to yield on these matters. He was patient, kind, and reasonable—but he definitely spoke as one in authority, not as an equal.

(3.131)

When freed to pursue educational opportunities, the only options that middle class women, such as Kate Dickens, could choose were those emphasising fundamentals of housekeeping, sewing, bookkeeping, music and light reading. Their educations were intended to prepare them to be better helpmates to the men in their lives. Dickens apparently approved of the type of young women such an education ideally produced.

Perhaps in the characterization of certain of the young, unmarried women that we see in his novels—women like Agnes Wickfield of David Copperfield, Florence Dombey of Dombey and Son, and Amy Dorrit of Little Dorrit—Dickens is preparing a job description for young women to fill if they are to be ideal Victorian wives and daughters. If this is the case, Esther Summerson certainly fills the bill. She has been brought up by her aunt to be self-effacing, always putting the needs of others before
her own, especially the needs of her older male guardian, John Jarndyce.

THE ESTHER EXPERIMENT

Dickens's selection of Esther as narrator brings with it many complications. Women of 1850's were not allowed the same experience as men. In addition to educational limitations, they could not move freely through society nor could they speak their minds publicly without being exposed to ridicule. Noting these societal restrictions, Dickens must develop many intricate plot twists to allow Esther to travel smoothly from one scene to the next in order to provide the reader with more of the story. For instance, in order for Esther to meet privately with Lady Dedlock to receive a pivotal piece of information regarding her heritage, she must travel to the neighboring Boythorne estate to recuperate from a terrible illness. Had the narrator been David Copperfield, or Pip, there would have been little or no need to explain why he went where he went, but that seems to be an important issue for female characters. It would not have been as acceptable for Esther to go directly to Chesney Wold, on her own, as it would have been for a David or a Pip. Yet Esther had to be alone with Lady Dedlock to receive that information. Her femaleness is a limitation Dickens must effectively deal with in order to provide us with the full story without making her seem improbable as a character.
Besides wanting her physical activity to appear plausible, Dickens had to present social criticism through Esther without making her character seem less than a genuine Victorian lady. Time and time again Esther must comment on ill-managed philanthropy, the impossible British court system of the time, and social and personal problems and irritations—all without losing verisimilitude as a very nearly perfect Victorian woman. She must also present some of Dickens's wonderfully sarcastic characterizations and descriptions without crumbling as a character.

Finally, Esther must discuss herself and her love life in as clear and honest terms as possible for the reader to understand her story and her position. This "telling" becomes complicated when Esther might lose some plausibility as a demure Victorian woman by speaking out openly about her love. Other Dickens narrators, again such as the autobiographical Pip and David, may speak frankly about their feelings and loves simply because they are male and may appropriately have that freedom. Esther, on the other hand, may not have such freedom.

Not every Victorian writer required coyness in his or her female characters. For example, Jane Eyre speaks quite frankly about her love for Rochester and Catherine directly expresses her love for Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights. Though other Victorian novelists were more flexible in their presentation of female passion, Dickens chose to present Esther along more traditional, restrictive lines.
The restrictive stance that proper women speak less freely than men must be worked through in the narrative and dialogue in order for Esther to present all of Dickens's information. The complications which arise from that restriction make *Bleak House* all the more interesting.
Chapter 2:

ESTHER AS EVALUATOR

George Orwell once noted that "all art is propaganda. Neither Dickens himself nor the majority of Victorian novelists would have thought of denying this" (90). Dickens's art certainly is propaganda. In order for the novel to have a social dimension, Dickens needs to develop a strategy to present such information through Esther.

As in all of Dickens's novels, the narrators in Bleak House are each given the responsibility of evaluating and criticizing society. It is interesting to examine just how Dickens allows Esther to carry out that responsibility. Dickens promotes her as the ideal Victorian woman. That being the case, we would expect her to be non-assertive, unassuming, and unaware of the politics of her time. It must be emphasized here that not all Victorian women were as unassuming and unaware as this. One hardly thinks of Lady Caroline Norton or Florence Nightengale or George Eliot as politically unaware or anassuming. Nor do Eliot's Dorothea Brook or Thackeray's Becky Sharp or Meredith's Diana seem socially unaware. However, the Dickensian ideal was a passive, tepid woman. Because of this, we would also not expect to hear some of the surprisingly caustic comments which issue from Esther.

Dickens seems to try to explain her acute awareness of everything around her in the following passage:
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. (BH 17)

The comment, which appears in the earliest chapter of Esther's narrative is Dickens's attempt to justify all of the evaluations and criticisms the reader receives through Esther. Dickens would have his readers believe that Esther is the pure Victorian womanly ideal, even though in her role as narrator she is not this ideal. She presents information that is beyond her expected realm of experience and her presentation of this information often lacks the propriety that the ideal role prescribes.

In any case, Dickens must present us with critical information in Esther's portions of the book. Esther evaluates the problems around her in three discrete ways: through direct statements, through indirect statements, and by way of projected criticism. A fourth narrative technique employed by Dickens in the Esther chapters is that of authorial intrusion. The following sections will examine her evaluative functions more closely.

ESTHER'S EVALUATIVE DIRECT STATEMENTS

Not only is Esther a mouthpiece for Dickens's criticism, but she is often a kind of spokesperson for other characters in the novel. Early on, she speaks to Mr.
Jarndyce about Mrs. Jellyby on behalf of Ada, Richard and herself. She notes that they all hold the same opinion on the Jellyby household, saying:

'We rather thought,' said I, glancing at Richard and Ada, who entreated me with their eyes to speak, 'that perhaps she was a little unmindful of her home.' (60)

Qualifying her criticisms by noting that others share the same views is one way Dickens allows Esther direct and aggressive speech. Sharing the opinions distances Esther from any culpability of not remaining silent and purely feminine.

A similar instance follows, regarding Mrs. Jellyby's physical appearance:

Mrs. Jellyby had very good hair, but was too much occupied with her African duties to brush it . . . we could not help noticing that her dress didn't nearly meet up the back, and that the open space was railed across with a lattice-work of stay-lace—like a summer-house. (37)

Once again by sharing the criticism with others ("we"), Esther also distances herself from the sting of such words by stating them in a formal, dispassionate manner ("had very good hair"). In addition, she adds little qualifiers as if to apologize for having made such statements. For example, she hedges, as if to soften the blows of her words as in the first Jellyby passage above where she says "we
rather thought" instead of the more direct "we thought" and "that perhaps she was a little unmindful of her home" instead of "that she neglected her home." The qualifiers and other minimizing words have a way of padding the sentences to dull the sharp edges of her criticism. Certainly a sense of humor shows through, especially in the part about Mrs. Jellyby's outfit reminding them of a summer-house, though that particular comedic bit sounds more like undisguised Charles Dickens than coy Esther Summerson. The humor in itself serves to lighten the critical feeling.

The following passage is padded in this manner. It presents Esther's (or Dickens's) view of deceitful and parasitic people in society:

The more I saw of [Skimpole], the more unlikely it seemed to me, when he was present, that he could design, conceal, or influence anything; and yet the less likely that appeared when he was not present, and the less agreeable it was to think of his having anything to do with anyone for whom I cared. (526)

Dickens's letters and biographies claim that the character Skimpole was patterned after Leigh Hunt. Just as Hunt's irresponsibility bothered Dickens, so did Skimpole's bother Esther. Esther describes Skimpole's foibles. She is put into the role of a societal psychologist, describing the
effect Skimpole has on others and the negative results of his seemingly innocent behavior.

The following passage, again regarding Skimpole, is more acceptably feminine in style than the previous one, and yet the criticism is once again made. It appears much earlier in the novel than the prior Skimpole passage, which might account for the difference in style, this comment having been made at a time when she was less mature and less full of pluck than at the time of the latter passage. It reads as follows:

If I felt at all confused at that early time, in endeavoring to reconcile anything he said with anything I had thought about the duties and accountabilities of life (which I am far from sure of), I was confused by not exactly understanding why he was free of them. (66)

The passage is a curious blend of negative description and commentary showing Esther's innocence and naivete. She exposes Mr. Skimpole without making herself look unfeminine in the process.

In a similar critique, Esther reacts to Mrs. Jellyby's fear that her daughter's marriage to a dance instructor will make her (Mrs. Jellyby) appear absurd:

It struck me that if Mrs. Jellyby had discharged her own natural duties and obligations, before she swept the horizon with a telescope in search of others, she would have
taken the best precautions against becoming absurd; but I need scarcely observe that I kept this to myself. (473)

Again we hear Esther qualifying what she says. She tells only the reader and in a sharp, almost sarcastic fashion, that Mrs. Jellyby is betraying her family by having this outside philanthropic interest. The comment is what one might call catty, yet the sting is reduced by our knowing that Esther only thought this and did not speak it.

There are times when Esther makes such difficult critiques without qualifying them. For example, she responds to Jarndyce's description of Richard's unfriendly, cynical attitude toward him by saying that Richard has behaved "so unreasonably" in doing so. She does not qualify her comment in the dialogue but, before making it, inserts into her narrative the apology "I could not help adding" (715). The criticism slips involuntarily from her, despite her innate good manners.

THE EVALUATIVE INDIRECT STATEMENT

Such qualified direct statements are only one of the ways Esther evaluates. She also makes indirect statements which the contexts clearly allow us to see are censorious or otherwise critical. For example, when Harold Skimpole tells Esther that he cannot be bribed, Esther's response is: "I showed that I was of a different opinion, though I had not the capacity of arguing the question" (728). She
claims not to have the capacity for arguing her opposing position but her statement is clearly an attempt to make an effective argument, in and of itself. At the same time as she is firmly putting Skimpole's position on the table, she effaces herself, withdrawing the speaker but not the words. This almost appears to be false modesty yet perhaps it is simply Dickens's way of promoting Esther's femininity while still using her as a critical mouthpiece.

Esther's femininity is maintained through not saying some of the more caustic things she is feeling; yet because she implies such things in her narrative, the reader comes to know how firmly Esther espouses the conventional role of the Victorian woman as keeper of the home. Ironically, her very stepping outside the role of perfect Victorian woman to make the criticism reinforces her commitment to that role. For instance, she criticises the non-traditional Mrs. Jellyby for not meeting the confines of such a role. Surely her criticism of the "other" group of women is intended to show her as a member of the status quo.

We observe Esther's indirect criticism of Mrs. Jellyby in the following two passages. The first takes place after Mrs. Jellyby has just finished reading at length to Esther from letters regarding the Borrioboola-Gha project and commenting on their importance. Esther seems to almost turn to the reader, conceivably with a caustic gleam in her eye, and say, "I felt quite ashamed to have thought so
little about it" (39). The second passage describes a hypothetical meeting between the husbands of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby:

Suppose Mr. Pardiggle were to dine with Mr. Jellyby, and suppose Mr. Jellyby were to relieve his mind after dinner to Mr. Pardiggle, would Mr. Pardiggle, in return, make any confidential communication to Mr. Jellyby? I was quite confused to find myself thinking this, but it came into my head. (95)

Here Esther is not saying directly that the two men would very likely commiserate about their wives' public interests and household neglect, but the implication is there, nonetheless. Esther's feelings of guilt over having considered this scenario seem to show up when she says that the idea "confused" her, as though cynicism were not a part of her daily fare.

In the next passage she might appear cynical, yet the tone is lighter than in the one just mentioned. This comment occurs just after Mr. Skimpole tells Esther and Richard he has been arrested for debt. Esther says: "It was a most singular thing that the arrest was our embarrassment, and not Mr. Skimpole's" (70).

The formal tone of Esther's speech also contributes to the maintenance of her dignity; its lack of "lowness" or vulgarity helps to keep her above possible reproach. For example, the evening of their first visit to the Jellybys,
Esther describes a disastrous dinner, a typical Dickensian scene, in which the food was poorly prepared and badly served. She says that throughout the meal, "Mrs. Jellyby preserved the evenness of her disposition" by describing in minute detail the Borrioboola-Gha project to her guests (40). The irony in this passage is that Esther is not so much in admiration of Mrs. Jellyby's calmness, but flabbergasted that Mrs. Jellyby can serenely ignore the culinary crisis.

The formal, non-blaming tone also appears in this early passage, when Esther takes leave of the housekeeper upon the death of her Aunt Barbary:

Mrs. Rachael was too good to feel any emotion at parting, but I was not so good and wept bitterly. I thought that I ought to have made myself enough of a favourite with her to make her sorry then. When she gave me one cold parting kiss upon my forehead, like a thaw-drop from the stone porch—it was a very frosty day—I felt so miserable and self-reproachful, that I clung to her and told her it was my fault, I knew, that she could say good-bye so easily! (23)

The cold, callous treatment of Mrs. Rachael toward Esther is certainly being censured here, even as Esther's strong attachment is being valorized. Esther doesn't directly state her criticism, and yet certainly, despite her formal, innocuous tone, the critical meaning comes through.
The Jellyby dinner party incident also provides an example of the third way in which Esther fulfills the role of evaluator. We have seen her make direct and indirect critical remarks about people and things, but a third technique in which she engages is that of attributing critical statements to other characters in her narrative. For example, at the same dinner party, Esther tells us that, "Richard, who sat by [Mrs. Jellyby] saw four envelopes [regarding Borrioboola-Gha] in the gravy at once" (41). Ostensibly Richard is making the critical observation, yet by the mere fact of its inclusion in her narrative, the criticism becomes Esther's own. She seems to be citing others, but since she agrees with their opinions, and is in control of the story, the opinions become her own.

In another Jellyby instance, Esther notes that Mrs. Jellyby appears oblivious to the fact that her son Peepy has fallen down the stairs, saying that

Mrs. Jellyby, whose face reflected none of the uneasiness which we could not help showing on our own faces . . . had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if--I am quoting Richard again--they could see nothing nearer than Africa. (37)

The criticism of Mrs. Jellyby's neglectful maternal style appears to come from Richard and not from soft-spoken
Esther.

Similarly, Bucket sympathizes with the plight of Liz and Jenny by saying of Liz:

... any fool knows that a poor creetur like her, beaten and kicked and scarred and bruised from head to foot, will stand by the husband that ill-uses her through thick and thin. (685)

His criticism of such blind loyalty and the whole entrapping system for the poor in England becomes Esther's criticism because she chooses to present it in her narrative. She attributes the critique to Bucket, but shares the opinion.

Mrs. Jellyby's introduction into Esther's narrative is a further example of this projection. As Mr. Kenge describes Mrs. Jellyby, Esther says he was "casting his eyes over the dusty hearth rug as if it were Mrs. Jellyby's biography" (35). Esther's interpretation of that glance is what makes us see Kenge as critical. Esther's criticism is projected onto Kenge, so the words do not seem to be her own.

AUTHORIAL INTRUSION

In the fourth type of evaluative function assigned to Esther, the words really do not seem to be her own. She makes critiques of society, situations, or of individuals and those critiques seem too harsh or sarcastic to fit Dickens's presentation of the modest, gentle Esther. Some
of the comments also show a degree of sophistication and savvy which does not seem to match up with either what we know of Esther's education and background or with her status as a woman.

The following is such an example. Esther accompanies Richard to the court of Chancery and makes this comment:

To see everything going on so smoothly, and to think of the roughness of the suitors' lives and deaths; to see all that full dress and ceremony and to think of the waste, and want, and beggared misery it represented . . . as if nobody had ever heard that all over England the name in which they were assembled was a bitter jest: was held in universal horror . . . that little short of a miracle could bring any good out of it to any one. (307-8)

This passage comes from the pen of Dickens the essayist rather than Dickens the novelist. The essayist criticizes directly without the moderating influence that a narrator imposes. Esther's world is limited, despite the travels she makes to Bleak House from London and vice versa. Though she is educated enough to gather information from a newspaper, we are given no indication in the text that Esther keeps politically up-to-date. It is odd that she would know that Chancery was a bitter jest "all over England." This inconsistency in the material shows how Dickens intrudes into the text. Dickens forces a
consistency which fails to hold between Esther's knowledge and her femininity by having her state:

This was so curious and self-contradictory to me, who had no experience of it, that it was at first incredible, and I could not comprehend it. (308)

Similarly, when the eccentric Miss Flite suggests that Woodcourt would be given a title for his heroic role in the shipwreck rescue, Esther's reply sounds much more like the cynical, "masculine" voice of Charles Dickens than the feminine, less aggressive voice of Esther:

I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great; unless occasionally when they consisted of the accumulating of some very large amount of money. (442)

This is one of the stronger authorial intrusions in the novel. The prevalent cynical tone sounds Dickensian. The information in the passage sounds correct, despite the cynicism, and also sounds beyond the confines of what Esther would have probably been exposed to in her daily life.

Another voice also takes over in several other situations which require Esther to be evaluative. When Esther first meets Mr. Turveydrop, she says, "as he bowed to me in that tight state, I almost believed I saw creases come into the whites of his eyes" (171). This ungracious
personal comment does not befit the personality Dickens wants us to believe she has, though there is, once again, humor in the passage. When Esther later comments on Mr. Turveydrop's behavior toward Prince and Caddy on the occasion of their wedding, once more the tone rings false to Esther's supposed nature:

The power of his deportment was such, that [Prince and Caddy] really were as much overcome with thankfulness as if, instead of quartering himself upon them for the rest of his life, he were making some munificent sacrifice in their favor. (294)

Esther is certainly not graciously offering Mr. Turveydrop the benefit of the doubt (which he no doubt does not deserve in any case); the biting wit displayed in the passage is pure, unmitigated Dickens.

The occasion of the next example is the visit to Mr. and Mrs. Bayham Badger's when Richard is seeking an apprenticeship. After hearing, at length, about Mrs. Bayham Badger's accomplishments and previous husbands, Esther comments, to the reader only, of course, that "If I add to the little list of her accomplishments, that she rouged a little, I do not mean that there was any harm in it" (156). This sort of amused barb is something one might expect from, for example, Hortense the maid in describing some other woman, but we would not expect Esther to make such a personal attack. Yet later on in the same episode,
Esther says, "After dinner, when we ladies retired, we took Mrs. Badger's first and second husband with us" (158). This barely veiled sarcasm at Mrs. Badger's inability to stop discussing her previous spouses once again does not fit with the gentle Esther image we are to believe in. On the other hand, though they might detract from Esther's consistency as a character, the Mrs. Badger passages show us, once again, that Dickens cannot resist a joke; those bits of humor are what make his work such a pleasure to read. Most readers would want to keep them despite any loss in the speaker's integrity as a character.

That it was not Dickens's intention for Esther to lose integrity by making critical statements seems clear. There are several good reasons to assume that, in Esther, Dickens was trying to portray the ideal Victorian woman. He was a product of his culture in that he expected women to fulfill the roles of protector of the home, housekeeper, child caretaker, homemaker, avid listener, in short, passive support system for men. At least one angel in the house figures prominently in the other major works of this middle period. Dickens found the sentimentality of home and hearth imagery which often occurs in Victorian literature very appealing and what he might have called "pretty" (Letters vol. 6, 805n). As always, Dickens was attuned to the tastes of his readers and since the paying public regarded middle class female domesticity as a virtue, he would try to meet their sometimes great expectations in his
writing.

Dickens's intention to describe Esther as a pure Victorian maiden does not match his execution of her as a narrating character. The disparity between intention and execution can be seen as duplicity in Esther. For example, Esther's sarcasm regarding the eccentric Mrs. Bayham Badger shows a less pure component. It appears duplicitous of Esther to criticize Mrs. Jellyby's outside interests to the reader. She does not, however, tell Mrs. Jellyby of her reservations. In fact, she goes so far as to tell the reader that she keeps such thoughts to herself. However, although the ideal is not met, what results is a more rounded, more interesting and more realistic character.

The reader gets more of a sense of multiplicity than duplicity when looking at Esther. Because of this multiplicity Esther can be seen as a precursor of complex female characters like Hardy's Sue Bridehead or Meredith's Diana.
Chapter 3:

ESTHER DESCRIBES ESTHER

I hope any one who may read what I write, will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them and can't be kept out. (BH 102-3)

We have seen the various twists and turns the narration in Esther's chapters had to take in order to reconcile the fact of Esther's Victorian ideal femininity and Dickens's need to provide his readers with opinion and information. Similar problems must be worked out in having Esther present her own story—especially the details relating to her love interest. The prim Victorian maiden would have known that discretion almost to the point of introversion is preferable to candor. After all, candor might be interpreted as immodesty, an inappropriate personality trait for women. In Robin Lakoff's 1975 study *Language and Woman's Place*, she notes that similar speech trends still exist. She says:

As children, women are encouraged to be "little ladies." Little ladies don't scream as vociferously as little boys, and they are chastised more severely for throwing tantrums or showing temper: "High spirits" are expected and therefore tolerated in little boys; docility and
resignation are the corresponding traits expected of little girls. (11)

Dickens is clearly aware of gender-linked differences in speech such as those identified by Lakoff. He uses the expected female speech patterns to great effect in *Bleak House*. At the same time, just as many women do, he feels the constraints of such codified speech patterns which prevent him from presenting the story in full.

Esther has to talk about herself, and she must do so at great length considering that half the novel is about her life. The anonymous narrator does little more than mention Esther. So her story and that of most of her immediate contacts, such as Ada and Jarndyce, must come from Esther. This might seem like a fairly straightforward task, especially to readers familiar with the frank speech of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who quite openly talks about her loves and her woes. But Dickens had to find a way to make Esther's tale compatible with the image he desired her to maintain. Her story, therefore, is told through at least the following four modes: direct but qualified and often self-effacing statements, indirect statements, projected statements, in which Esther quotes others describing herself, and omission of facts.

**DIRECT BUT QUALIFIED DESCRIPTION**

The first method, that of direct statement, is once
again riddled with qualifiers and self-effacement. In the earliest chapters she tells us she "was not charming" (17) and that she "felt so poor and trifling with [Aunt Barbary] that [she] never could be unrestrained with her" (18). Through these statements, we learn that Esther's self-esteem was low and that her relationship with Aunt Barbary was anything but open. When she later says that:

any seeming inconsistencies in Mr. Skimpole, or in Mrs. Jellyby, I could not expect to be able to reconcile, having so little experience or practical knowledge (75)

we see her lack of confidence in her own wisdom. When Jarndyce asks Esther if she agrees with his attempts to find Richard a vocation, Esther's narrative reads:

He who was so good and so wise, to ask ME whether he was right . . . I could not help showing that I was a little moved, though I did all I could to conceal it (163).

Once again her lack of confidence shows through, but others completely trust her wisdom.

When Esther takes leave of her boarding school to be Ada's companion at Bleak House, we learn how beloved she was to those involved with the school. The following shows how endearing Esther made herself to others and yet it also shows her unwillingness to accept this flattering description of herself:

When they all surrounded me with their parting
presents and clung to me weeping, and cried, "What shall we do when dear, dear Esther's gone!" and when I tried to tell them how forbearing, and how good they had all been to me, and how I blessed, and thanked them every one; what a heart I had! . . . But of course I soon considered that I must not take tears where I was going, after all that had been done for me. Therefore, of course, I made myself sob less and persuaded myself to be quiet by saying very often, "Esther, now you really must! This WILL NOT do." (28)

In this scene we are made aware through direct description how others respond positively to the presence of Esther. Yet Esther, in keeping with Lakoff's recognition of feminine learned behavior, chides herself for enjoying the adulation of others and tries to minimize her positive influence.

Later in the text, in the tone of a confession, Esther says to the reader:

And now I must part with the little secret I have thus far tried to keep. I had thought, sometimes, that Mr. Woodcourt loved me; and that if he had been richer, he would perhaps have told me that he loved me, before he went away. I had thought, sometimes, that if he had done so, I should have been glad of it. (443)
Like a moth dancing around a flame, Esther dances around her story, trying not to offend but still needing to provide the reader with information about herself. Esther, the moth, would be burned by appearing to brag or openly give an accurate description of her attributes. She is attracted to the luminous idea of sharing her story honestly, but societal conventions say that ladies are more reticent than that.

Her opinion of her own worth does not seem to be very high, and Esther feels quite free to express directly the low self-esteem which came of the tutelage of Miss Barbary and Mrs. Rachael. On the other hand, when people such as Jarndyce and Woodcourt show Esther how valuable she is to them, she tells her reader about it somewhat hesitantly, as if too shy to admit there might be worth in her after all. We learn of the moth's nature by observing it interacting with the flame; similarly, we learn about Esther's nature by observing her interaction with others in the story. She can present information directly, but more often than not, we learn of her indirectly.

INDIRECT SELF-DESCRIPTION

Keeping in mind Esther's apparent low self-esteem, it is interesting to observe her reaction, in the privacy of her own room, to the fact that Mr. Guppy found her attractive and even proposed marriage to her despite what he saw as her questionable origins. Her reaction to the
boorish proposal contains elements of the shy, painful confusion it is likely that Dickens associated with becoming behavior for young women:

... I thought I had quite dismissed this unexpected incident. But, when I went upstairs to my own room I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry about it. In short, I was in a flutter for a little while and felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been. (115)

Her self-description does two things here. It allows Dickens to express his dissatisfaction with people in British society who judged others on the merits of their birth rather than their worth. Esther's agonizing over Guppy's condescending expectations brings this out. The description also shows that Esther is girlish and tentative in examining her feelings, which Dickens would see as being flattering to her.

Later when Esther is attempting to shake off the affections of Guppy, she displays the same quaint uncertainty:

Sometimes I thought of telling Mr. Jarndyce. Then I feared the young man would lose his situation, and that I might ruin him. Sometimes, I thought of confiding in Richard; but was deterred by the possibility of his
fighting Mr. Guppy, and giving him black eyes. Sometimes, I thought, should I frown at him, or shake my head. Then I felt I could not do it. Sometimes, I considered whether I should write to his mother, but that ended in my being convinced that to open a correspondence would be to make the matter worse. I always came to the conclusion, finally, that I could do nothing.

(155)

Her prim distress, her feeling of powerlessness, and her desire to remain above reproach seem evident in these passages. Yet she never directly says she is hurt by Guppy's putting her down and behaving as though his proposal would be a great favor to her. She hesitates to inform others of her dilemma and therefore we primarily learn of her intentions and feelings indirectly.

In the same way, she is indirect in telling the reader about her great interest in the article Miss Flite has pertaining to Mr. Woodcourt's heroism at the shipwreck. She says, "... I did read all the noble history; though very slowly and imperfectly then, for my eyes were so dimmed I could not see the words ..." (442). Her interest and pride in Woodcourt is evident, though she'd never tell us so directly. She tries her best to conceal her passion for Mr. Woodcourt completely, whereas Dickens's other two first-person narrators proclaim their loves outright. David Copperfield is
obvious in his romancing of Dora Spenlow, and Pip bares his romantic soul to everyone regarding Estella. Propriety dictates that a lady, such as Esther, not be so bold.

In like manner, after reading Jarndyce's proposal of marriage, we indirectly learn of Esther's feelings on the matter. She says,

... I cried very much; not only in the fulness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect—for it was strange though I had expected the contents—but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much. (538)

Esther cannot even be direct with herself. She says "as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me." As readers, we know that that "something" is her chance of happiness and love with Woodcourt. Yet Esther cannot articulate this love even to herself. Also, the tears that Esther sheds speak more eloquently and meaningfully than her words of thankfulness and hope. We know she is disappointed but feels compelled to accept the proposal.

Later, when Mrs. Woodcourt has begun to accept Esther despite her questionable origins, Esther is asked by Jarndyce if she would welcome Mrs. Woodcourt as a
houseguest. Instead of an immediate reply, Esther ruminates:

I had nothing to say. At least I had nothing in my mind that I could say. I had an undefined impression that it might have been better if we had some other inmate, but I could hardly have explained why, even to myself. Or, if to myself, certainly not to anybody else.

(716)

Esther is once again avoiding direct admission of her feelings even to herself. She feels bound and obligated to Jarndyce because of her acceptance of his proposal. She still, however, is attracted to Woodcourt and feels guilty that she desires a connection between herself and him via Mrs. Woodcourt. Her feelings of guilt and confusion point to her continued love for Woodcourt and must do the job that direct words would for another narrator.

PROJECTED SELF-DESCRIPTION

In Esther's narrative, other characters describe her to the reader. Esther quotes them as they talk about her in various ways. One example of this occurs very early in the novel. Dickens gives us a clear idea that Esther is wise, dependable, motherly, and old-fashioned, by having Jarndyce, Richard, and Ada call Esther by all sorts of "comfortable" names. The following exchange between
Esther and Jarndyce describes the beginning of that practice:

"You are clever enough to be the good little woman of our lives here, my dear," [Jarndyce] returned, playfully; "the little old woman of the Child's . . . Rhyme."

"'Little old woman, and whither so high?'—
'To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky.'

"You will sweep them so neatly out of our sky, in the course of your housekeeping, Esther . . . ."

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. (90)

Such name-calling is intended to be flattering or gently teasing. Esther enjoys the names given to her and we learn quite a bit about her nature by way of them. It is via the words of others that Esther's good housekeeping habits, steadfast nature, and pluck become apparent to the reader.

We also hear how others respect Esther through the dialogue she presents. For example, when in response to his inquiry, Esther tells Boythorn that no mail has arrived for him, Boythorn replies that he "had no need to
ask, after even [his] slight experience of Miss Summerson's forethought for everyone about her" (110). Though we learn of Esther's thoughtfulness here, Esther minimizes it by saying in an aside to the reader that "They all encouraged me; they were determined to do it" (110).

There are other times when we learn about Esther just by the way others react to her. Esther is seen as an authority by people such as Richard Carstone, John Jarndyce, and even Mr. Kenge, all of whom call upon her for advice. For example, after a meeting with the Lord Chancellor, when Richard Carstone is barely acquainted with Esther, he turns to her and asks, "and where do we go next, Miss Summerson?" (32). He asks this in spite of the fact that he is older than she and the entire situation is as new to her as to him and Ada.

Later, Richard joins Mr. Skimpole in asking her advice:

"Miss Summerson," said Richard, hurriedly, "I am glad you are come. You will be able to advise us. Our friend, Mr. Skimpole--don't be alarmed!--is arrested for debt."

"And, really, my dear Miss Summerson," said Mr. Skimpole, with his agreeable candour, "I never was in a situation, in which that excellent sense, and quiet habit of method and usefulness, which anybody must observe in you
who has the happiness of being a quarter of an hour in your society, was more needed." (69-70)

From this we learn that others trust her to make wise decisions.

We also learn from other characters that Esther is quite attractive. Numerous characters, including Mr. Guppy and Lady Dedlock, see a strong similarity between Esther and the renowned beauty, Lady Dedlock. Unbeknownst to most of those drawing the comparison, Lady Dedlock is in fact Esther's mother. With regard to describing her own person and her moral character, Esther the story teller relies heavily on the remarks of others. When Esther quotes other character's statements about her she is giving the reader a description of her own nature and person.

**DESCRIPTION BY OMISSION**

Finally, Esther seems to speak volumes about herself and her story simply by omitting information, often quite obviously. The reader often learns a great deal from the gaps in her narrative which she later fills. This type of "telling" abounds in the Esther chapters, especially when the information is personal and refers to the romance between her and Mr. Woodcourt.

Take, for example, her roundabout manner of telling the reader that Woodcourt had come to dinner. Her coy reluctance to tell seems to emphasize the importance of
the information:

I have omitted to mention in its place, that there was some one else at the family dinner party. It was not a lady. It was a gentleman. It was a gentleman of a dark complexion—a young surgeon. He was rather reserved, but I thought him very sensible and agreeable. At least, Ada asked me if I did not, and I said yes. (163)

The way she stretches out her description, apparently not wanting to get to the vital information, and the way she attempts to make the description appear as if it originated with Ada also seems to show how reticent she is about speaking of her feelings. In the same way that it took a long time to spin the information out in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, Esther takes a long time to reveal what we do come to know about her. Both reveal the truth by what is not admitted. In both, the facts that are hinted at give as much information and direction for investigation as those facts that are stated directly.

The next example, also involving Woodcourt, shows that she continues to be shy about her feelings:

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

She was always merry. (182)

In a way, Esther is exactly right—it doesn't matter what Ada said. We as readers know from the context that Ada said something about Esther's attraction to Woodcourt and the details of the dialogue don't really matter. The three dashes say quite a bit. Once again Esther avoids giving a direct disclosure of her feelings to the reader, but a direct disclosure is not needed, as we can correctly infer her emotions from the context.

She is not explicit in describing her feelings for Mr. Woodcourt. Yet her descriptions often hint that her mind is on him. For example, when she learns of Richard's and Ada's love for one another, she reports:

I was so little inclined to sleep, myself, that night, that I sat up working. It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather low-spirited. I don't know why. At least, I don't think I know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don't think it matters. (211)

Her wakefulness and nearness to tears say more to us than she is directly admitting. We know from the intensity of her emotions and the fact that these emotions were
triggered by Richard's and Ada's admission of love that Esther, too, is in love, but not with John Jarndyce.

A similar situation occurs after Esther assists Caddy and Prince in explaining their engagement to Mr. Turveydrop. She takes her leave of them and says,

And I looked up at the stars and thought about travellers in distant countries and the stars they saw, and hoped I might always be so blest and happy to be useful to someone in my small way. (298)

This is after Woodcourt has gone to China, and it is when she is in a romantic mood because of having helped Caddy and Prince. The implication is that one of the travellers in distant countries who is on her mind is Allen Woodcourt.

Related to this are the passages referring to Mrs. Woodcourt's visit to Bleak House. During that time, Mrs. Woodcourt would regale Esther with stories of her fine ancestry and strong noble blood lines, subtly warning Esther off from pursuing her son. Both Esther and Mrs. Woodcourt talk in circles around that issue, but we get the idea:

[Mrs. Woodcourt] took very kindly to me, and was extremely confidential; so much so that sometimes she almost made me uncomfortable . . . She would tell me about Morgan ap Kerrig until I was quite low spirited! (365)
It was in vain for me to try to change the subject, as I used to try—only for the sake of novelty—or perhaps because—but I need not be so particular. Mrs. Woodcourt never would let me change it. (366)

I was very anxious that she should like me. . . . I felt it was better and safer, somehow, that she should be there than anywhere else . . . . These were perplexities and contradictions that I could not account for. At least I could—but I shall come to all that by-and-by, and it is mere idleness to go on about it now. (368)

Esther simply omits the main point behind her thoughts. She wants to get along with Mrs. Woodcourt because she is in love with Allen. She wants Mrs. Woodcourt to stop rejecting her as a potential daughter-in-law, though she never overtly says so. Esther coyly avoids telling us her feelings, but her anxiety and strong desire to please Mrs. Woodcourt indicate that where there is smoke there is fire, and where there is a desire to please there are underlying feelings of love.

Esther's reticence to speak directly about these issues is very different from the passion we hear in *Jane Eyre*. It is also a far cry from the passionate testimonies of love and romantic disappointment put forth by David Copperfield and Pip in their stories. And this reticence in Esther is a good indication of the tension
between her two roles as female protagonist (her role in the plot) and narrator (her structural role). As female, she is modest, reticent—as befits a woman dependent on charity. She has little authority to speak. But as narrator she must speak, with authority, in a manner that the reader attends to, believes. The strategies we have discussed in this chapter are Dickens's way of reconciling the conflicting roles he has assigned to Esther.
Many aspects of *Bleak House* make the novel one of enduring appeal. Dickens's sensitivity to and criticism of social and political problems in British society are as appropriate to today's reader as they were to readers of his time. In *Bleak House* we see Dickens's disillusionment with the capabilities of the British legal system, which he learned while he was a court reporter, displayed in the bleak case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in the court of Chancery. His disgust at society's judging its members based on their social position and heritage rather than innate value is expressed in the high value he places on the illegitimate yet worthy Esther. His frustration with ill-managed British philanthropic efforts appears in his castigation of the Mrs. Pardiggles, Mrs. Jellybys and Mr. Chadbands.

Also of universal appeal is the almost lyrical way in which Dickens presents some of the material. In a previously quoted passage, for example, we get a sense of the rhythm in Esther's speech:

I have forgotten to mention—at least I have not mentioned—that Mr. Woodcourt was the same dark young surgeon whom we had met at Mr. Badger's. Or, that Mr. Jarndyce invited him to dinner that day. Or, that he came. Or, that when they were all gone, and I said to Ada, "Now, my darling,
let us have a little talk about Richard!" Ada laughed and said—But, I don't think it matters what my darling said. She was always merry.

Like the refrain of a poem or the chorus in a ballad, Esther's repeated words or phrases serve to ground us in a lyrical rhythm. This almost poetic pacing adds to the beauty of his presentation and is part of what makes reading the novel so satisfying.

Finally, the novel's continued appeal may also be attributed, in part, to Dickens's humor and succinct characterizations. He is adept at capturing the humor in, for example, a Mrs. Bayham Badger, and is at the same time well able to express the distress we ought to feel at the injustices and hypocrisy of civilization. Bucket and his fat forefinger, Grandfather Smallweed and his spousal missiles, and poor Jenny with her dead, kerchief-covered baby—these are images which the reader recalls long after the political issues of the novel are forgotten.

Esther herself has always been of particular interest to readers, though her appeal for the Victorians was not perhaps the same as it is for 20th century readers. For Dickens and his contemporaries, Esther's appeal lies in her measuring up to the feminine ideal. The idea of an unprotected, apparently orphaned, pretty, sweet, and efficient young woman would have been audience-pleasing in itself. Placing this character into the important role of
narrator and involving her in a love story would increase the material's popular appeal. Dickens was very open about his desire to create a work aesthetically pleasing to his audience. In fact, upon completion of Bleak House, he commented in a letter to a friend that: "I have just finished my book (very prettily indeed I hope) . . ." (Burdett-Coutts Letters 124). Many of Esther's mannerisms, such as her hesitancy to speak of her own love and her busy, efficient domesticity, were qualities highly regarded by Victorians. Dickens went to great pains to have the "prettiness" and youthful innocence of Esther shine through her narration.

Sentimentality and a need for prettiness is not, however, what one finds behind the 20th century reader's enjoyment of Esther. Instead, what appeals to us is her multiplicity. Today's reader is more likely to appreciate her character at precisely those moments when Dickens resorts to such literary techniques as suspended quotation to direct a socially critical or humorous message through his idealized Esther. The resulting character may, in fact, be more realistic and more rounded than Dickens intended. In Esther's case, her narrative makes her a female who would not fit the idealized feminine codes set by Dickens and Victorian society. The modern reader, however, has an easier time accepting her, as a result of her sliding outside that idealized mold.

In another sense, too, the use of Esther as the
conduit for Dickens's social criticism results in more than he probably intended. If the novel had concentrated on social criticism only, it would likely have had a harder edge to it, and would likely not have been told by a character such as Esther. If the novel had concentrated on creating the perfect Victorian female character, the actual events would have been far more mundane and less appealing to a mass audience. In fact, when we combine the two phenomena, Dickens's social criticism and his narrative genius as embodied in the character Esther Summerson, we encounter a situation where the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Esther verges on being a well-rounded character, independent in a variety of ways.

For some readers, this multi-facetedness might instead seem like inconsistency, causing Esther to deviate from the idealized role expected of her. She sometimes comes across as judgemental, sarcastic, overly-knowledgeable and even, occasionally rude, in expressing what Dickens would have her express. But most readers would be willing to accept this loss and enjoy the material that comes to them as Dickens, consciously or not, rides roughshod over his own planned scheme. In fact, the diversion from ideal Esther comes as something of a relief.
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