Bleak House's Esther Summerson: The Development and Integration of Character and Narrator.

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Bleak House's Esther Summerson: The Development and Integration of Character and Narrator

by

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Abstract

My purpose in this thesis is to examine Esther Summerson's role as both character and narrator in Charles Dickens' Bleak House. Disagreeing with the critical viewpoint that Esther's character and narrative are weak and inconsistent, I have proceeded to examine the relationship between the two. Esther is a complex, dynamic character and an adept narrator. Furthermore, Esther's character and narrative are integrated throughout the novel.

As a character, Esther suffers from feelings of inferiority and a lack of identity, caused by a traumatic childhood experience in which Esther learns that she is an illegitimate child. Feeling guilt for her birth and personal unworthiness, Esther becomes self-conscious, and, as a result, she becomes a confused and inarticulate narrator when she talks about herself. Yet when Esther discusses events from which she can remain distanced, she uses language very effectively. Thus, although Esther's narrative may seem inconsistent, her narrative shifts in tone and style are fitting in the context of her character.

Despite the criticism that Esther is a static character, Esther's narrative reveals that Esther matures, both as character and narrator. Esther gradually
learns to recognize her personal worth and her identity. Her maturation becomes evident in her increased ability as a narrator to speak articulately about herself and in her decreased references to her confusion. Thus, Esther's character and narrative remain unified, for Esther's maturation as a narrator mirrors her maturation as a character.

Finally, this paper examines the importance of John Jarndyce and Allan Woodcourt to Esther's maturation. Jarndyce places Esther in an environment in which she can mature and acts as a role model for Esther, demonstrating that one can live uncorrupted in a corrupt society. Allan Woodcourt also plays a significant role in Esther's maturation by providing her with the romantic love that Esther yearns for. With Allan's love Esther is finally able to live happily and to be a productive member of society.

Thus, Esther is a complex and developing character and narrator. Furthermore, her character and narrative remain unified throughout the novel, for as Esther the character matures, so does Esther the narrator.
Introduction

Esther Summerson, the central character and co-narrator of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, has been treated harshly by many critics from Dickens' time to the present. As a character, Esther is criticized as static, naive, simplistic, and unrealistic. For example, George Brimley, one of Dickens' contemporaries, claims that Esther's character "is not only coarse portraiture, but utterly untrue and inconsistent." She bores the reader, Brimley continues, until "a wicked wish arises that she would either do something very 'spicy,' or confine herself to superintending the jam-pots at Bleak House." ¹ Similarly, modern criticism by W. J. Harvey, Robert A. Donovan, Barbara Hardy, and others depicts Esther as childish, insipid, sentimental, colorless, and dull. ² Angus Wilson considers her a


"blemish" in Dickens' work. Wilson adds, Esther lacks "a physical body--a deficiency so great that Esther's small pox-spoilt face jars us because she has no body upon which a head could rest." Sylverè Monod concludes, "it would be a sheer waste of time to attempt a psychological portrait of such an insignificant personality."

In addition to being criticized as a flat character, Esther is also criticized as a narrator. Harvey, Richard T. Dunn, and others contend that her narrative

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is cloying, plodding, and tedious. Others, including Morton Dauwen Zabel, complain that Esther's unconvincing narrative undercuts her own congratulatory praises with "mock modesty," annoying to the reader. Sharing this opinion, Wilson states, "Dickens feels unsure of whether we will recognize her virtues . . . unless she reports to us, with an almost intolerable coyness, all the praises that others give her." Still others feel that Esther's narrative is inconsistent and transparent, allowing the reader, at times, to see her author's guiding hand through her words. Edward Morgan Forster defends this position: "At any moment the author of her being may snatch it [her pen] from her, and run about taking notes himself, leaving her seated goodness knows where, and employed we do not care

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6 Harvey, p. 147; Dunn, "Esther's Role in Bleak House," Dickensian, 62 (1966), 164. See also Broderick and Grant, p. 252.


8 The World of Charles Dickens, p. 234.

9 Donovan, p. 43; Harvey, p. 147; Zabel, p. xxi.
Finally, George Robert Gissing concludes that Esther's narrative is a "mistake in art." 11

In spite of such criticism, I contend that Esther is an adept and artistic narrator who proficiently recaptures and conveys the thoughts, feelings, and events of her troubled, young life. In addition, Esther is a complex and dynamic character who, although initially a self-centered, naive child, evolves into a mature, dignified woman. Moreover, Esther's character and narrative are integrated throughout the novel, and Esther's maturation as a character is reflected in her maturation as a narrator. Furthermore, John Jarndyce, who has received less than adequate critical attention, plays a central role in Esther's development, for Esther's position at the novel's conclusion has been modified, formed, and influenced under his guidance. Similarly, Allan Woodcourt, although he appears very little in the novel and remains an undeveloped character, also influences Esther's maturation. With Jarndyce's assistance and Allan's love Esther learns to accept her role in a complex social network character-

10 Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), p. 120.

ized by self-interest, greed, bureaucracy, and deception. In the corrupt world in which she lives, the development and maintenance of a selfless attitude allows Esther paradoxically to attain an admirable self identity. Although the complexity of nineteenth-century London society prevents any final or complete moral solution, Esther discovers the means by which to live in such a society without sacrificing human dignity.
Chapter 1: Esther: The Unity of Character and Narrator

Many critics view Dickens' creation of Esther Summerson as a failure on the grounds that her character and her narrative are inconsistent. For example, one of Dickens' contemporaries argues, "We cannot help detecting in some passages an artificial tone, which, if not self-consciousness, is at any rate not such a tone as would be used in narrative by a person of the character depicted."¹² Some recent critics continue to support this position. Donovan, for example, claims that "Esther the heroine is in a sense betrayed by Esther the narrator," and Harvey contends, "He [Dickens] chooses to subdue Esther as a character in the interests of her narrative function."¹³ These critics cannot reconcile Esther's roles as character and as narrator. They find it problematic that as a character Esther often remains unperceptive, confused, and modest while she at other times seems perceptive, clear-sighted, and confident, and also that as a narrator Esther is at times inarticu-

¹³ Donovan, p. 41; Harvey, p. 150.
late while her narrative at other times is artfully written and even poetic. They fail to recognize that Esther's shifts in narrative style are fitting to Esther's character because they fail to examine the complexity of Esther's character.

Other commentators, however, see Esther as a complex character with a complex psychology. For example, William Axton argues that Esther suffers from an "internal struggle between a sense of guilt . . . and a contrary sense of personal innocence," and Lawrence Frank states, "Hers is a self founded upon a twisted definition of innocence and guilt." Others, including Alex Zwerdling and Gordon D. Hirsch, recognize that Esther's internal conflict results in an inferiority complex, which inhibits her in both her personal life and her social interactions. Still others define Esther's psychological problem as a felt lack of

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identity. These illuminating studies of Esther's character reveal Esther's complexity. Furthermore, the seeming inconsistencies that have annoyed many critics can be reconciled in the context of Esther's internal struggles, specifically the inferiority complex and identity crisis from which she suffers as a result of a traumatic childhood experience. It is fitting, then, that, because of her negative personal feelings, Esther often becomes confused and inarticulate, and her prose style suffers when she attempts to relate the compliments others pay her and when she must confront her past as well as people who threaten her. On the other hand, when Esther describes or discusses people from whom and situations from which she can remain somewhat distanced, her prose demonstrates her keen observation as well as her literary ability to use descriptive language and details, to use conversational diction with her reader, and to convey humor—three

positive qualities of her narrative for which some critics have praised her.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, as Monod points out, the "tone and attitude" of Esther's narrative are consistent with her character, for she remains inarticulate and her tone seems artificial only when she discusses herself.\textsuperscript{18}

Before examining the consistency between Esther's character and narrative, I will briefly consider Esther's background in order to explain the origin of her personal conflicts. Raised by Miss Barbary, an uncaring aunt who Esther thinks is only her godmother, Esther lacks parental love. Recalling her youth, Esther notes, "My birthday was the most melancholy day at home, in the whole year."\textsuperscript{19} She remembers one birthday in particular, during which her godmother


\textsuperscript{18}"Esther Summerson, Dickens, and The Readers in Bleak House," p. 20.

\textsuperscript{19}Charles Dickens, Bleak House (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), Ch. iii (p. 13). All further references to this work appear in the text.
tells her, "It would have been far better, little Es- 
ther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never 
been born!" (Ch. iii; p. 13). Furthermore, Esther 
learns from her aunt that she is an illegitimate child: 

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

At this stage in the novel, Esther is young and naive; 
she is a self-centered child who feels separate from 
the rest of humanity. Moreover, her godmother's words 
generate feelings of guilt, condemnation, and unworthi- 
ness within Esther. Consequently, Esther becomes torn 
between feelings of innocence and love in her heart and 
feelings of unworthiness, evil, and guilt.

Although she is plagued by guilt, and although she 
feels too unworthy to be loved by anyone, especially 
to be loved romantically, Esther is, nevertheless, 
strong-willed and determined to find the love she was 
denied as a child. Esther expresses her desperate need 
to love and be loved in the opening of her narrative 
when she states, "When I love a person very tenderly 
indeed, it [her noticing way] seems to brighten"
(Ch. iii; p. 11). Accordingly, she resolves to her 
doll:
I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confessedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could. (Ch. iii; pp. 13-14)

Some critics argue that Esther's need to love is unrealistic because a child brought up without love is not likely to be able to offer love. Judith Wilt, for example, finds it "remarkable that any power of affection at all was created in Esther, let alone that it was, as it clearly is, primary." In addition, Zwerdling argues that "a child brought up in a totally loveless home, as Esther was, is almost surely doomed to grow up unable to love anyone. Yet Esther is an open, affectionate, and thoroughly responsive person." This position is somewhat tenuous, since Wilt and Zwerdling imply that environmental influence is solely responsible for character development. Theoretically, as psychologist Abraham Maslow suggests, an individual may try to satisfy such a fundamental need as love at any time in life, even if impaired at

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21 Zwerdling, p. 438.
childhood. Interestingly, Dickens' own life supports Maslow's theory and, in a sense, resembles Esther's. Like Esther, Dickens felt unloved and abandoned by his family or, to use his own words recorded in an autobiographical sketch, "utterly neglected and hopeless." Dickens continues to recall the troubled time of his childhood, namely when he had worked at Warren's Blacking Warehouse in 1824: "I have lounged about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond." Significantly, however, Dickens is later able to offer love, particularly to his audience. As Steven Marcus points out, Dickens had faith in humanity; he believed in the possibility of a "life of simplicity and of exclusively affectionate feeling." As Dickens' innate need for love becomes apparent in

Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, Theories of Personality (New York: John Wiley, 1970), p. 327. Abraham Maslow establishes affection as a basic need, a part of man's "inner nature" that "rarely disappears." He continues, "Even though denied, it persists underground forever pressing for actualization."


Marcus, p. 356.
his relationship with his audience, so is Esther's innate need for love apparent in her childhood relationship with her doll. Finding no other source of love in her immediate environment, Esther superficially fulfills her need in a fantasy that allows her to exchange love with her doll.

Esther's doll, however, cannot satisfy Esther's love need for long, nor can it help Esther feel worthy, important, and secure. Thus, at the death of her aunt, Esther buries her doll and leaves for school at Greenleaf, determined to experience a more mature, realistic love in her new environment. Still her aunt's words resound in her mind throughout the novel, bringing with them recurring feelings of guilt and unworthiness. In addition to her feelings of inferiority, Esther's lack of identity also becomes apparent early in the novel when she reveals her thoughts while Caddy Jellyby sleeps with her head on Esther's lap. Esther says, "I began to lose the identity of the sleeper resting on me. First, it was Ada; now, one of my Reading friends. . . . Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one" (Ch. iv; p. 35).

Furthermore, Esther's inability to confront her past, and therefore herself, becomes most apparent in her failure to reconstruct the truth of her past from
the several clues she is offered throughout the novel. For example, when Esther meets Krook, he recalls Barbary, Clare, and Dedlock as names in the Jarndyce suit, but Esther doesn't notice or acknowledge that she notices her aunt's name in this list (Ch. iv; p. 41). When George insists that he recognizes Esther although he never met her, she does not question his statement, in spite of her admitting that "there was something so genuine in his speech and manner" (Ch. xxiv; p. 261). When Jo mistakes Esther for the woman who took him to the burial ground, Esther dismisses the event (Ch. xxxi; p. 327). When Charley tells Esther a strange lady took the handkerchief that Esther left at Jenny's, Esther doesn't consider the implications of her comment (Ch. xxxv; p. 377). Finally, when Esther recognizes the resemblance between herself and Lady Dedlock while at the church in Chesney Wold, she responds:

And, very strangely, there was something quickened within me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's; yes, away even to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass, after dressing my doll. And this, although I had never seen this lady's face before in all my life—I was quite sure of it—absolutely certain. (Ch. xviii; p. 190)

Esther's inability to understand the relationship between her and her mother does not result from an innate lack of perceptiveness. Here, as elsewhere, Esther's
psychological turmoil inhibits her perception when her observations deal with the past she attempted to repress when she buried her doll. Whether Esther denies her past by ignoring important clues, as Frank suggests, or fears revelation, as J. Hillis Miller suggests, her inability to assimilate her heritage seems an unconscious choice. The narrative style of the above passage indicates Esther's conflict. She moves from a general, vague feeling of remembrance to a positive confirmation that this lady does make her think of her past. She then proceeds to recall details from her childhood. The abrupt conclusion of her recollection, followed by the short, choppy phrases in which she insists she does not know the lady, indicates her struggle and her unconscious desire to push the connection between Lady Dedlock and the past out of her mind. Significantly, Esther's unconscious behavior is consistent with her conscious behavior. For example, Jarndyce asks Esther if she would like him to tell her what he knows of her past. Rather than aggressively confront her past, Esther replies, "If you think so,

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Guardian, it is right" (Ch. xvii; p. 180). Furthermore, after Lady Dedlock gives Esther the letter that contains the secrets of her past, Esther postpones reading it for "an hour or so" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 389). Thus, it becomes clear that Esther has trouble confronting her past and that Esther feels inferior and inadequate because of her feelings of guilt for her birth, feelings that originate from her godmother's harsh words.

Having considered Esther's inner struggles and the origin of these struggles, let me now elaborate on Esther's narrative in light of her character conflicts. First, Esther's repeated references to duty and her housekeeping keys throughout her narrative reflect the conflicts in Esther's character. Although Esther's repetition of "duty" annoys those critics who feel that Esther is unrealistically good, such as H. M. Daleski who states that her goodness appears as "the mask of the prig," her several calls on duty show Esther attempting to compensate for her feelings of inadequacy by persistently relying on the resolution spoken to her doll. Accordingly, Esther uses duty as a means to "win

some love." She also uses duty to assert her identity. Specifically, the role as housekeeper of Bleak House offers Esther an avenue by which to fulfill her need to be dutiful in order to win love as well as her desire to be a someone. Crawford Kilian argues that with her position as housekeeper Esther creates "a false conventionally 'good' self, intended to conceal, suppress, and transform her true self, which she sees as evil." Kilian adds that although Esther does gain an identity, she does so "only at the cost of continuing to submerge her true self."27 Although Kilian feels that Esther acquires an identity by assuming a role based on a projection of what she wishes to be, Esther seems instead to accept her housekeeper role in order to give her empty life some immediate purpose and to temporarily assign herself an identity, from which she will ultimately divorce herself when she accepts her true self.

Furthermore, Esther often uses duty to avoid confronting her problems, as Axton suggests, or to suppress her feelings, as Valerie Kennedy argues.28

27 Kilian, p. 319. See also Frank, p. 96.
Accordingly, Esther often jingles her keys or repeats her resolution to be dutiful when she becomes troubled by thoughts concerning her past and her unworthiness as an individual. For example, when after her illness and disfigurement she learns of Allan's heroism in the East-Indian seas, Esther admits to the reader that she feels Allan did love her. She had always felt unworthy of Allan because of her illegitimacy, but now she feels particularly unworthy because of her altered appearance. Concluding that any relationship between them is impossible, Esther uses duty as an avenue of escape: "I could go, please God, my lowly way along the path of duty, and he could go his nobler way upon its broader road" (Ch. xxxv; p. 381). In addition, one evening after witnessing the growing affection between Ada and Richard, Esther feels "low-spirited," although she admits she knows not why. Immediately, however, she denies herself the selfishness of indulging in her personal unhappiness and chides herself, "you ungrateful heart!" To mask her personal feelings, she resorts to duty by keeping herself "busy" with some ornamental work for Bleak House (Ch. xvii; p. 179). Similarly, after Jarndyce reveals to Esther that Boythorn was once in love with her aunt, Lady Dedlock's sister, who ended her relationship with Boythorn to care for Esther, Esther's feelings of guilt resurface. Again, she
resolves to forget herself and resorts to duty: "... how could I ever be busy enough, how could I ever be good enough, how in my little way could I ever hope to be forgetful enough of myself..." (Ch. xliii; p. 460). Once again, after Jarndyce's proposal she comments, "The deep traces of my illness, and the circumstances of my birth, were only new reasons why I should be busy, busy" (Ch. xlv; p. 464). Finally, when Ada is upset because of her secret marriage to Richard, Esther naturally blames herself for Ada's disturbance. To reassure Ada of her love, Esther resolves to "be as brisk and busy as possible" (Ch. 1; p. 520). Hence, Esther often resorts to duty as a means of coping with her personal conflicts. Therefore, Esther's repetition of "duty," although it may cause her narrative to become tiresome and annoying to some, significantly reflects problems within Esther's character.

Esther's narratorial references to her nicknames, namely "Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden" (Ch. viii; p. 74), may also become tiresome, but, again, these references are fitting to Esther's character. First, the nicknames her friends have conferred upon her further deny Esther of her own identity and further reinforce her role as housekeeper to herself and others,
as is evident in Esther's comment, "my own name soon became quite lost among them" (Ch. viii; p. 74). Furthermore, as Axton demonstrates, Esther's several nicknames

...refer to the witches, hags, comic old dames, and widows of folklore, nursery rhyme, and street song. However much they may be terms of endearment when used by Esther's friends, they nevertheless underline the girl's fear that, being tainted by the circumstances of her birth, she is so repulsive that she can never hope to "win any love to herself" and that her role in life is to be that of a sterile and unloved dame or spinster.29

Thus, the significance of Esther's nicknames and the frequency with which she mentions them further emphasize Esther's internal struggles, revealing that beneath her appearance as housekeeper her conflicts still remain.

Esther's continuous self-deprecation throughout her narrative further demonstrates Esther's feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. She begins downgrading herself on the opening page of her narrative when she states, "I know I am not clever. ... I had always a rather noticing way--not a quick way, O no!" (Ch. iii; p. 11). She seems to want to point out one of her admirable qualities, namely her "noticing way," but,

at the same time, she feels unworthy of such a compliment. As Zwerdling states, "she has been bullied into denying any sense of her own worth." Therefore, she qualifies her self-praise, deprecating herself by noting that she is not quick. She also makes it clear that she is not clever, a point she will make frequently. For example, when she speaks of the girls at the neighborhood school, where she was a day boarder, she comments that they were "far more clever than I was, and knowing much more than I did" (Ch. iii; p. 12). And later at Bleak House she tells Jarndyce, "I am not clever" (Ch. viii; p. 74). When Jarndyce asks for Esther's advice about Richard's future, she responds, "O my goodness, the idea of asking my advice on such a point" (Ch. viii; p. 75), again underestimating her worth. When Jarndyce asks her if he is right in his decision to postpone Ada and Richard's marriage, she notes, "He who was so good and wise, to ask me whether he was right!" (Ch. xiii; p. 138). Thus, Esther's obvious feelings of inferiority display themselves in the self-deprecation throughout her narrative.

30 Zwerdling, p. 432.
As a narrator Esther is unable to confidently articulate the compliments others pay her. This inability also demonstrates her conflict. Consider, for example, Esther's comment after Caddy and Prince's wedding:

Well! It was only their [Jarndyce and Ada's] love for me, I know very well, and it is a long time ago. I must write it, even if I rub it out again, because it gives me so much pleasure. They said there could be no East Wind where Somebody was; they said that wherever Dame Durden went, there was sunshine and summer air. (Ch. xxx; p. 324)

Esther first qualifies her statement by attributing Jarndyce and Ada's compliment to their love for her. She is then hesitant to accept the praise and considers rubbing it out. She refers to herself as "Somebody" and as "Dame Durden" instead of as "I" and her self-compliment is indirect; she records only what others say. Thus, Esther feels that she is good, and she knows that she is loved. She feels pleasure and perhaps pride in the compliments paid her. But because of her feelings of unworthiness she simultaneously feels guilt in acknowledging praise.

In several additional instances, Esther attributes the praises of others to their kindness or goodness. For example, during her first trip to the Jellyby home with Richard and Ada, Ada compliments Esther, calling her "dear," "good," "thoughtful," "cheerful," and
unpretending." Attributing her new friend's praise to Ada's goodness, Esther states, "It was in the goodness of her own heart that she made so much of me!" (Ch. iv; p. 32). Later at Bleak House, when Esther gets her housekeeping keys, Ada expresses confidence in Esther's ability to carry on as housekeeper. Again, Esther attributes Ada's praise to "the dear girl's kindness" (Ch. vi; p. 52). Similarly, Esther says of Caddy:

She almost--I think I must say quite--believed that I did her good whenever I was near her. Now, although this was such a fancy of the affectionate girl's that I am almost ashamed to mention it, still it might have all the force of a fact when she was really ill. (Ch. 1; p. 515)

Significantly, Esther feels "ashamed" yet compelled to relay Caddy's comment. In addition, Esther first dismisses Caddy's praise as "a fancy," and then she notes that the "affectionate girl's" belief may have "all the force of a fact," but, nevertheless, it is not "a fact." Therefore, although Donovan complains that Esther's "modest disclaimers ring false," and Monod claims that "a modest person's proclamation of her own modesty can hardly have a true ring,"31 Esther's hesitancy to accept and inability to articulate the praises

31 Donovan, p. 41; Monod, Dickens the Novelist, p. 415.
paid her actually continue to demonstrate her feelings of inferiority and inadequacy.

Donovan also criticizes Esther's narrative as "hopelessly sentimental," 32 but, again, Esther's sentimentality can be attributed to her personal conflicts. Because of her feelings of unworthiness and her desperate need for love, Esther becomes overwhelmingly grateful and touched by kindness paid her, perhaps because she does not expect love and kindness, as P. Eggert suggests, 33 or perhaps because she feels undeserving of the kindness of others. In any case, her responses often become sentimental, and she often seems extraordinarily grateful. The following passage, in which she speaks of her guardian, is typical of her reaction to those who show her love or kindness:

I could not help it: I tried very hard: but being alone with that benevolent presence, and meeting his kind eyes, and feeling so happy, and so honoured there, and my heart so full-- (Ch. viii; p. 72)

Thus, although Esther's sentimentality may seem annoying, sentimentality is fitting to her character.

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32 Donovan, p. 41. See also Broderick and Grant, p. 252.
33 Eggert, pp. 74-75.
Esther's declination as narrator to make honest, overt judgments of those toward whom she feels some animosity further reveals Esther's personal feelings of inferiority. Although Axton argues that Esther does not judge because she fears being judged, it seems more likely that Esther does not judge because she feels she has no right to judge. After all, she is burdened by the guilt of her birth. Recall that Esther reads to her godmother from the Bible, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone" (Ch. iii; p. 14). Nevertheless, Esther's unflattering descriptions of those whom she apparently disfavors indicate that Esther desires to judge yet suppresses that desire because she feels she has no right to judge. For example, although she calls her godmother a "very good" woman (Ch. iii; p. 12), she, at the same time, condemns the woman with her rendition of her godmother's harsh treatment of her. In addition, Esther does not directly express her ill feelings toward Mrs. Pardiggle, yet she implies that the woman is a bad parent:

We [Esther and Ada] had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they

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were weazened and shrivelled--though they certainly were that too--but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent. (Ch. viii; p. 77)

Having suffered from a lack of parental love and understanding herself, Esther is sensitive to the ways of several bad parents throughout the novel. She also indirectly condemns Old Turveydrop, another poor, self-interested parent, with her satirical description of him:

He was a fat, old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig. . . . He had a cane, he had an eyeglass, he had a snuff box, he had rings, he had wristbands, he had everything but any touch of nature. (Ch. xiv; p. 145)

Esther's description reveals that in addition to being a bad parent, old Turveydrop is fake, self-centered and interested only in appearances--qualities which annoy Esther for whom honesty is a prime virtue. Yet Esther refuses to directly express her true feelings for the man.

Esther attacks Mrs. Jellyby perhaps more than any other character, but, again, only with subtle references to the woman's disordered home and her discontented children. For example, her description of the "very untidy" and "very dirty" Jellyby home, "which was strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter" (Ch. iv; p. 28), reflects
on Mrs. Jellyby as a poor housekeeper, quite the opposite of Esther, who prides herself for her housekeeping duties. Furthermore, when Mrs. Jellyby acts unconcerned about her daughter's impending marriage, Esther remarks, "I was so unprepared for the perfect coolness of this reception, though I might have expected it" (Ch. xxiii; p. 253), and thus implicates Mrs. Jellyby as a disinterested parent. Esther's sympathy for Caddy Jellyby also reflects on Mrs. Jellyby as a poor mother: "We [Esther and Ada] were sorry for the poor girl, and found so much to admire in the good disposition which has survived under such discouragement" (Ch. xxx; p. 317). Throughout Esther's narrative it becomes apparent that Esther wishes to pass judgment on those who annoy her, for she certainly conveys distaste for these individuals indirectly through her often satiric descriptions of them, yet she restrains from overtly condemning them because she feels she has no right to judge.

Esther's narrative also reveals that another crucial result of Esther's insecurity lies in her inability to directly confront individuals or circumstances that cause her to feel uncomfortable. Specifically, as Axton points out, Esther frequently becomes inarticulate and uses confusion as a method by which to deal
indirectly with trying situations or with individuals whose behaviors she cannot reconcile.\(^{35}\) For example, at her first meeting with Skimpole, he tells her that he is "a mere child in the world," free from all duties and responsibilities. Esther responds, "I was confused by not exactly understanding why he was free of them" (Ch. vi; p. 53). To Esther, for whom duty plays a central role in living, Skimpole's avoidance of responsibility and his parasitism simply do not make sense. In her first meeting with Guppy, Esther also becomes confused by his attentively looking at her (Ch. ix; p. 93), a behavior that obviously makes her uncomfortable. Furthermore, Esther sometimes seems to use what Wilt calls "strategic confusion" as an excuse to avoid judging individuals who upset her.\(^{36}\) In her second visit with Mrs. Woodcourt, for example, Esther grows perplexed by the woman's behavior. Mrs. Woodcourt repeatedly compliments Esther, but, at the same time, the woman hints that Esther is no match for Allan. This conversation causes Esther's feelings toward Mrs. Woodcourt to vacillate; she feels the woman is "a

\(^{35}\) "The Trouble with Esther," p. 555. See also Ellen Serlen, "The Two Worlds of *Bleak House,*" *ELH,* 43 (1976), 559.

\(^{36}\) Wilt, p. 286.
"storyteller" yet "the pink of truth," "cunning" yet "innocent and simple." Esther is obviously perturbed by Mrs. Woodcourt and admits feeling "uncomfortable" at her visit, yet she simply dismisses the entire incident as her own lack of understanding (Ch. xxx; p. 315).

Importantly, Esther's accounts of her confusion become more frequent when the events that she relates become more stressful, particularly when she must attempt to write about her illness, her mother and the secret of her birth, and Allan. During her illness, for example, she becomes confused about where she is (Ch. xxxi; p. 335) and about the "divisions of time" in her life (Ch. xxxv; p. 370); her confusion here may be partially attributable to delirium brought on by the illness itself. In addition, when she first notices Lady Dedlock in church, she says that the woman's face was "in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (Ch. xviii; p. 190). Later she feels confused when through her mother's letter she learns of her birth (Ch. xxxvi; p. 389), when she accompanies Bucket in search of her mother (Ch. lviii; p. 586), and when she walks to the burying ground to identify her dead mother (Ch. lix; p. 614). Finally, shortly after she arrives home from Deal, where she has encountered Allan for the first time
since her disfigurement, she relates, "all that I had had in my mind in connexion with Mr. Woodcourt seemed to come back and confuse me" (Ch. 1; p. 516). Significantly, just as Esther often resorts to duty as an escape from her problems, she also frequently experiences confusion when she is confronted with trying circumstances, particularly circumstances relating to her illness, the secret of her birth, and her unrequited love for Allan. Thus, although Esther's frequent references to her confusion may seem monotonous, as may her references to duty and her nicknames, Esther's repeated accounts of her confusion throughout her narrative reflect her character by further emphasizing her personal insecurity and her inability to directly confront her problems.

Esther's frequent confusion, sentimentality, and inarticulateness reflect the conflicts in Esther's character and also seem to disqualify Esther as a good narrator. Yet Esther often proves herself to be a most articulate and adept narrator when she describes people, places, and situations from which she can remain somewhat distanced. For example, her description of the Dedlocks' home upon her first visit to Chesney Wold is particularly captivating and serves to demonstrate how well Esther can use language when she is not inhibited:

32
0, the solemn woods over which the light
and shadow travelled swiftly, as if
Heavenly wings were sweeping on benignant
errands through the summer air; the smooth
green slopes, the glittering water, the
garden where the flowers were so symmetri-
cally arranged in clusters of the richest
colours, how beautiful they looked! The
house, with gable and chimney, and tower,
and turret, and dark doorway, and broad
terrace-walk, twining among the balustrades
of which, and lying heaped upon the vases,
there was one great flush of roses, seemed
scarcely real in its light solidity, and in
the serene and peaceful hush that rested on
all around it. (Ch. xviii; p. 188)

Note Esther's fine use of detail and her ability to
describe: Esther also succeeds at creating a peaceful,
serene and an almost hypnotic mood, using alliteration
to contribute to the overall effect.

In addition, Esther masters poetic language, em-
ploying personification, metaphors, and similes to en-
hance many of her descriptions. Consider, for example,
her use of personification as she relates the setting
after Allan Woodcourt sees Vholes to discuss Richard's
deterioration: "It was one of those colourless days
when everything looks heavy and harsh. The houses
frowned at us, the dust rose at us, the smoke swooned
at us, nothing made any compromise about itself, or
wore a softened aspect" (Ch. li; p. 525). Esther's
ability to allow setting to reflect state of mind is
also significant here; the sombre setting reflects the
sadness of Esther, Ada, and Allan as they sympathize

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with Richard's plight. Esther uses metaphors effectively as well, particularly in her descriptions of Vholes. She aptly captures Vholes' character with predator (Ch. xxxvii; p. 406) and vampire (Ch. lx; p. 621) analogies. Finally, Esther frequently employs original similes to embellish her narrative. Note her description of Mrs. Jellyby's disheveled dress: "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 stray-lace--like a summer-house" (Ch. iv; p. 28). Also note her humorous description of Peepy, whose legs were "so crossed and recrossed with scratches that they looked like maps" (Ch. xiv; p. 140). Finally, observe Esther's use of simile to emphasize how young, premature Charley becomes lost in the scene as she emerges into the busy city: "We saw her run, such a little, little creature, in her womanly bonnet and apron, through a covered way at the bottom of the court; and melt into the city's strife and sound, like a dew drop in an ocean" (Ch. xv; p. 166).

As a narrator Esther is certainly capable of using language effectively. Esther also demonstrates a fine ability to recognize absurdity and humor in various characters and situations, usually situations from which she remains somewhat distanced, and to convey that humor.
in her narrative. One of the funniest interactions in the novel occurs between Jarndyce and Skimpole shortly after Skimpole's landlord claims the eternal child's furniture as rent payment, and Esther captures the moment magnificently:

"The oddity of the thing is," said Mr. Skimpole, with a quickened sense of the ludicrous, "that my chairs and tables were not paid for, and yet my landlord walks off with them as composedly as possible. Now, that seems droll! There is something grotesque in it. The chair and table merchant never engaged to pay my landlord my rent. Why should my landlord quarrel with him? If I have a pimple on my nose which is disagreeable to my landlord's peculiar ideas of beauty, my landlord has no business to scratch my chair and table merchant's nose, which has no pimple on it. His reasoning seems defective!"

"Well," said my guardian, good-humouredly, "it's pretty clear that whoever became security for those chairs and tables will have to pay for them!"

"Exactly!" returned Mr. Skimpole. "That's the crowning point of unreason in the business! I said to my landlord, 'My good man, you are not aware that my excellent friend Jarndyce will have to pay for those things that you are sweeping off in that indelicate manner. Have you no consideration for his property?' He hadn't the least." (Ch. xvi; p. 185)

Esther exposes the absurdity of Skimpole's illogical thinking and parasitism and depicts the comic scene with literary talent.

Esther narrates another of the great comic interludes in the novel, namely the events surrounding Prince Turveydrop and Caddy Jellyby's engagement and marriage. First Esther pokes fun at Old Turveydrop's deportment.
when she relates his reaction to his son's engagement:
"Mr. Turveydrop underwent a severe internal struggle, and came upright on the sofa again, with his cheeks puffing over his stiff cravat: a perfect model of parental deportment" (Ch. xxiii; p. 251). Similarly, Esther conveys Mrs. Jellyby's disinterest with regard to Caddy's excited announcement: "'O, you ridiculous child!' observed Mrs. Jellyby, with an abstracted air, as she looked over the dispatch last opened; 'What a goose you are!'" (Ch. xxiii; p. 253). The preparations for the wedding are also quite humorous, as Esther describes her attempt to dress the unconcerned mother-of-the-bride (Ch. xxx; p. 319) and to clean up the dirt-enveloped Jellyby home (Ch. xxx; p. 320). Esther's catalogue of the myriad of ridiculous articles that fall from the Jellyby closet is particularly striking, as she lists among them "mouldy pie," "books with butter sticking to the bindings," and "heads and tails of shrimp" (Ch. xxx; p. 320). Furthermore, Esther aptly conveys the comic interactions among the cast of absurd characters at the wedding, which include Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, two misguided philanthropists; Mr. Quale, another misguided philanthropist and the formerly chosen husband for Caddy Jellyby; Miss Wisk, an unmarried woman obsessed with the belief that the woman's place is not in the home; Old Turveydrop,
the model of deportment who repeatedly attempts to assert his superiority over the other wedding guests; and Mr. Jellyby, the father-of-the-bride and the most characterless character in the novel (Ch. xxx; pp. 321-24). As Esther notes, "A party, having less in common with such an occasion, could hardly have been got together by any ingenuity. Such a mean mission as the domestic mission, was the very last thing to be endured among them" (Ch. xxx; p. 322).

Finally, Esther's talent in conveying humor displays itself in her sketch of a very minor, pathetic yet comic character, Mr. Jellyby. Upon their first meeting, Esther describes Mr. Jellyby as a man who "never spoke a word" (Ch. iv; p. 31) but simply sat in a corner with his head against a wall (Ch. iv; p. 32). She adds that after dinner "he had several times opened his mouth . . . as if he had something on his mind; but had always shut it again" (Ch. iv; p. 32). Esther continues to poke fun at Mr. Jellyby's lack of character several times throughout the novel. For example, when Caddy excitedly embraces her father before her wedding, Esther observes, "He opened his mouth now, a great many times, and shook his head in a melancholy manner" (Ch. xxx; pp. 320-21). And at the wedding Esther notes, "It was the first time, I think, I ever heard him say three
words together. . . . I suppose he had been more talkative and lively, once; but he seemed to have been completely exhausted long before I knew him" (Ch. xxx; pp. 320-21). Later at the wedding Esther humorously comments,

I received a most unexpected and eloquent compliment from Mr. Jellyby. He came up to me in the hall, took both my hands, pressed them earnestly, and opened his mouth twice. I was so sure of his meaning, that I said, quite flurried, "You are very welcome, sir. Pray don't mention it!" (Ch. xxx; p. 324)

As we have seen, Esther proves herself to be highly qualified as a narrator. She is intelligent, observant, and perceptive, and she displays a fine ability to use language descriptively and poetically as well as to recognize and convey humor. Furthermore, as Doris Stringham Delespinasse points out, because she involves herself with others, she becomes a confidant to many, and, therefore, can relate the personal thoughts of others. 37 At the same time, however, Esther often becomes confused and inarticulate. Significantly, these

seeming inconsistencies or shifts in Esther's narrative, for which she has been criticized, reflect conflicts in her character. Esther is a young, good woman who suffers from a severe inferiority complex and identity crisis, which render her unable to perceive herself as an important human being. Consequently, while she exhibits all the qualities of a good narrator when she talks about others, she often stumbles when she talks about herself. Thus, as Kennedy argues, "Esther's language and behaviour operate in establishing the distinctive tone of her narrative, and, thus, her character." 38

38 Kennedy, p. 334. See also Axton, "The Trouble with Esther," p. 557.
Chapter 2: Esther: The Maturation of Character and Narrator

Many critics argue that Esther does not mature, despite evidence to the contrary throughout the novel. Harvey, Frank, and Mary Daehler Smith maintain that Esther is a static character, while Eggert argues that Esther's character is not resolved. On the contrary, although Esther begins as a self-centered, confused child suffering from an inferiority complex and an identity crisis, she ultimately evolves into an experienced, dignified woman able to confront her problems, to accept her past and her identity, and to appreciate her personal worth. Furthermore, although Esther's maturation is a slow process that does not become fully realized until the last chapters of her narrative, Esther's narrative reflects Esther's slowly maturing character throughout the novel, for as Esther gradually matures, so does her narrative. Specifically, as Esther the character becomes more confident in herself, Esther the narrator's references to duty, her nicknames, and her confusion gradually decrease and her

\[39\] Harvey, p. 149; Frank, p. 111; Smith, p. 13; Eggert, p. 81. See also Hirsch, pp. 136-38; Kilian, p. 327; and Zwerdling, pp. 437-38.

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ability to make and record overt judgments, to speak articulately about herself, and to perceive humor in herself and convey that humor gradually increases. Thus, Esther's character remains consistent with her narrative throughout the novel.

Before discussing the maturation of Esther the narrator, consider the maturation of Esther the character, beginning with her illness, the turning point in her development. Esther's illness marks the first step in her development toward a more mature understanding of herself and her role in the world in which she lives. Before Esther reaches understanding, however, she must suffer blindness, confusion, and despair. Significantly, Esther's unconscious efforts to repress her past and deny her identity manifest themselves in her blindness. As Frank contends, Esther's blindness symbolically suggests her "unwillingness to see." 40 Yet, ironically, during her blindness Esther experiences the dreams or visions that lead to her broadened understanding. Initially, however, Esther's loss of sight is accompanied by confusion in which the "divisions of time" and her roles in life, namely her roles as "child," "elder girl," and "little woman," become jumbled

40 Frank, p. 99.
and fragmented (Ch. xxxv; p. 370). Esther's confusion reflects her need for an identity, a need that is accentuated in the following dream segment: "I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again" (Ch. xxxv; p. 370). Although Garrett Stewart argues that Esther's dream is actually a death wish, it seems more likely, as Ian Ousby suggests, that her "labouring" signifies her struggle toward the truth of her identity, the truth which she will soon learn from Lady Dedlock during her recovery at Chesney Wold.

While Esther's dream of the "colossal staircase" clearly reveals her need to discover her identity, the dream of the "flaming necklace" signifies Esther's growing awareness of herself and her relationship to the world. Esther's marked self-awareness that she is only one member of a larger, complex network becomes apparent in this second dream segment:

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Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be part of the dreadful thing? (Ch. xxxv; p. 370)

This insight significantly demonstrates a major step in Esther's maturation. The passage reveals a change in Esther's character as she shifts from a position of self-centeredness to one of more universal awareness. As Kilian notes, "it is important to see that the necklace symbolizes Esther's view of human society, in which she is caught against her will." Though Esther wishes to isolate herself from the "starry circle," she knows that she is part of the circle and can no longer be "set apart." Esther's understanding here indicates that her attitude does not remain childish. Furthermore, as a result of her maturing attitude toward herself and her place in the world, Esther gains emotional strength, for as she begins to recover, she states, "I could . . . be as happy in my weakness as ever I had been in my strength. . . . I became useful to myself, and interested, and attached to life" (Ch. xxxv; p. 371). Thus, as Ousby notes, "Esther emerges from it

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43 Kilian, p. 321. See also Dunn, p. 166; Eggert, p. 79; Frank, p. 100; Miller, p. 208; and Ousby, p. 983.
[her illness] tested and matured, ready for her recognition scene with Lady Dedlock."

While Esther's illness marks a significant time in Esther's maturation, it is certainly not the final step. In order for Esther to mature fully and find her true identity, she must discover her real parents and learn of her personal history. It is during her recovery at Chesney Wold that Esther learns these secrets. At this time she again encounters Lady Dedlock, who reveals that she is Esther's natural mother. Significantly, Esther first calls on duty and responds to her mother as she believes a dutiful daughter should: "I told her that my heart overflowed with love for her; that it was natural love, which nothing in the past changed, or could change . . . [and] that my duty was to bless her and receive her" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 386). Later, however, when Esther is alone, she seems stronger; for the first time in her narrative, she is able to abandon duty and to speak of her mother reproachfully, expressing regret and anger that she "had never learned to love" her mother, that she "had never been sung to sleep," that she "had never heard a blessing" from her mother, and that she "had never had a hope

\[44\] Ousby, p. 982.
inspired" by her mother (Ch. xxxvi; p. 388). Esther here reveals that her mother is an irresponsible parent, like so many others she has met.

Although Esther seems stronger in that she abandons duty and reveals her feelings, she soon becomes weak again after she reads the letter her mother had given her, which contains the remainder of the story of her birth. She immediately responds with despair: "I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had not breathed. . . . it was right, and had been intended, that I should die at my birth" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 389). Her guilt also resurfaces, as she selflessly blames herself for her mother's sin: "I felt as if the blame and shame were all in me" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 390).

Esther's moments of despair are short-lived, however, for once Esther knows the circumstances of her birth, she is no longer burdened by the mystery. When the facts are known, her energy is no longer devoted to repression. Instead, she must deal with the truth. Her reading of the loving letters from Ada and Jarndyce helps Esther to cope with her problems because she feels loved and recognizes her own worth. She is then able to confront the past that has tormented her and to comfort herself:
For, I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived; not to say should have been reserved for such a happy life. I saw very well how many things had worked together, for my welfare... I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it. (Ch. xxxvi; p. 391)

Esther progresses. She had never been able to make such a resolute observation concerning her past. Furthermore, although Esther's psychological conflicts continue to recur, they recur less frequently, and she never again experiences the extreme despair that she had felt at Chesney Wold.

Esther's facial disfigurement, a consequence of her illness, provides yet another disappointment in Esther's life, which Esther must and does learn to accept. Hirsch argues that Esther's "scars renew and reinforce her earlier sense of personal inadequacy." 45 Hirsch, however, fails to recognize that although Esther's immediate response to her new appearance is to feel unworthy, particularly of Allan's love, which has always been a problem for Esther, she quickly accepts her new appearance, commenting, "Heaven was so good to me, that I could let it go with a few not bitter tears, and could stand there arranging my hair for the night.

45 Hirsch, p. 138. See also Kilian, p. 324.
quite thankfully" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 380). Furthermore, as the novel continues, Esther's concern about her new looks decreases, reappearing only a few times, particularly when she sees Ada and Allan.

Esther's disfigurement also lessens the resemblance between Esther and Lady Dedlock and physically dissociates the two. In fact, when Lady Dedlock reveals her secret to Esther, Esther thanks "the Providence of God . . . that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 386). Esther's disfigurement also symbolically separates Lady Dedlock's sin from Esther's sense of inherited guilt or evil. Thus, one can associate Esther's decreasing concern for her appearance with her decreasing feelings of guilt for her birth and, therefore, with her gradually increasing sense of personal worthiness. It is also likely, as Tom Middlebro suggests, that Esther's disfigurement helps Esther to feel confident and worthy because it causes Esther to look inward, to rely completely on her inner qualities. 46 She learns that even with her new appearance, she is loved. Jarmdyce's proposal of marriage after her illness makes

46 Middlebro, p. 258.
Esther feel even more accepted and gives her additional confidence and courage.

Esther's acceptance of her changed appearance as well as her increased feelings of confidence and courage become most apparent in her practical joking with Guppy, who had previously asked Esther to marry him (Ch. viii; p. 95). Called to Guppy's house on business, Esther decides to take advantage of the situation and to amuse herself by initiating a humorous exchange with Guppy at her own expense. As she enters his home, Guppy amorously responds, "This is indeed an Oasis" (Ch. xxxviii; p. 411). Later, however, anticipating Guppy's reaction, Esther lifts her veil and displays her changed face. She notes, "I could hardly have believed anybody could in a moment have turned so red, or changed so much, as Mr. Guppy did when I now put up my veil" (Ch. xxxviii; p. 411). Esther presses Guppy even more by bringing up his proposal. Guppy responds by stammering and stuttering. Enjoying her little joke, Esther allows Guppy to continue for a short while, before she finally lets him know that she declines his offer of marriage. Esther continues to needle Guppy for some time before she leaves. She then relates to the reader that Guppy chases her down the street and stops her to ask for further confirmation that his proposal is nullified.
Esther's ability to poke fun at Guppy at her own expense and to enjoy Guppy's comical yet unflattering reaction to her changed appearance is certainly a healthy quality and a sign of a maturing individual. Furthermore, her ability to view a personal situation objectively and to perceive and relate the humor of that situation signifies her maturation as a narrator.

Esther's acceptance of Allan as her husband also reflects her increased feelings of self worth and maturation. Previously, Esther's guilt prevented her from acknowledging Allan's presence. Although she was attracted to him, she felt unworthy of his love. Consequently, whenever Esther mentions Allan's name, she becomes self-conscious and her prose style becomes immature. Yet the Esther who writes this novel writes seven years after the events have taken place and, therefore, after she is matured. Thus, her immature prose style when she mentions Allan may seem incongruous. Consider, however, that Esther's ability to use her prose to reflect her earlier immaturity proves her to be an adept narrator. She attempts to recapture her past feelings and reactions with her narrative style, and she succeeds. Note Esther's account of her initial meeting with Allan:

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. (Ch. xiii; p. 138)

Esther speaks freely about the other guests at the family dinner, but she is hesitant to mention Allan. Esther considers not mentioning Allan at all, but she feels compelled to write about him. Thus, she casually mentions him at the close of her discussion. Esther, however, does not acknowledge him by name. She hesitantly moves from "not a lady" to "a young surgeon." When she finally expresses her opinion of Allan, she qualifies her admiration by saying she merely agreed with Ada's assessment of him. Her self-consciousness about discussing Allan, however, demonstrates her attraction to him. Later, Esther again "forgets to mention" that Allan comes to dinner at Bleak House. She notes, "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" (Ch. xiv; p. 154). Esther's prose here is immature; she interrupts her initial sentence with qualifying parenthetical clauses and follows this sentence by two fragmented sentences. As Kennedy notes, "the passage . . . suggests, by the grammatically incomplete
nature of most of the clauses concerning Woodcourt, Esther's reluctance to talk about the young doctor, even though he dominates her thoughts."47

Similarly, when Esther discusses Allan's visit before he leaves for China and India, she again hesitates before she mentions his name: "We had a visit on the next day. Mr. Woodcourt came" (Ch. xvii; p. 181). Furthermore, as she continues to discuss that visit, her prose again becomes immature: "I believe--at least I know--that he was not rich... I think--I mean, he told us--that he had been in practice three or four years" (Ch. xvii; pp. 181-82). And when she wishes to express sorrow that Allan is leaving town, she uses the plural "we" instead of the singular "I" to mask her feelings as group feelings: "We thought it a pity he should go away" (Ch. xvii; p. 182). Similarly, she later writes, "he seemed to be very clever in his profession--we thought" (Ch. xxx; p. 314). Esther is obviously attracted to Allan from their first meeting, yet she feels unworthy of his love. Her feelings of unworthiness increase when Mrs. Woodcourt stresses the importance of birth and heritage. Mrs. Woodcourt states that "wherever her son Allan went, he would remember his pedigree" (Ch. xvii; p. 182) and that Allan "may not

47 Kennedy, p. 343.
have money, but he always has what is much better—family" (Ch. xxx; p. 313).

Because Esther feels inferior and unworthy of Allan, she is unable to act upon her own romantic desires. As a result, she fulfills this need by participating in Ada and Richard's relationship. When Ada and Richard first express their love to one another, Esther says, "They brought a chair on either side of me, and put me between them, and really seemed to have fallen in love with me, instead of one another" (Ch. xiii; p. 138). She later comments, "I was a part of all their plans, for the present and future" (Ch. xiii; p. 138). Even after Ada and Richard are married, Esther twice states that during her visits Ada sat at her one side while Richard sat at her other (Ch. li; p. 528 and Ch. lx; p. 623). More limitedly, Esther also participates in Caddy and Prince's relationship. Esther relates Caddy's comment that Prince had such a high opinion of Esther that "it's enough to make anybody but me jealous . . . nobody can respect and love you too much to please me" (Ch. xxiii; p. 247).

To compensate for her unfulfilled amorous desires, Esther not only participates in her friends' romantic relationships, but she also seems to look to Ada as a substitute for a male companion. As Zwerdling suggests, "Esther's adoration of Ada is a displaced form of
romantic love." Similarly, Eggert states, "All her sexual impulses have been sublimated into a love-idealization of Ada of the type we normally associate with adolescence. As Eggert points out, Esther's attraction to Ada is not a lesbian attraction. Instead, Esther seems to direct her love to Ada because Ada is her closest companion and, as such, her most immediate source of love. Note that Esther frequently speaks to Ada in language of love that would normally be associated with a male/female relationship. Esther repeatedly refers to Ada as "my darling," "my dear," "my pet," "my love," and "beautiful star." Furthermore, after Esther witnesses the growing love between Ada and Richard, she kisses Ada on the cheek while Ada is asleep and directly afterward becomes "low-spirited," almost as if she were jealous of Ada's love for Richard (Ch. xvii; p. 179). Esther is also anxious about Ada seeing her face after her disfigurement for fear that Ada will be disappointed (Ch. xxxvi; pp. 391-92), just as she is later hesitant to let Allan see her new face (Ch. xlv; p. 472). When Ada finally sees Esther and remains unaffected by Esther's scars, Esther relates,

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48 Zwerdling, p. 431. See also Kennedy, pp. 341-42.
49 Eggert, p. 79.
O how happy I was, down upon the floor, with my beautiful girl down upon the floor too, holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek, bathing it with her 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. (Ch. xxxvi; p. 392)

Esther's rendition here certainly sounds more like the interaction between a man and a woman than that between two women. Later, when Esther burns the flowers that Allan had sent her, she first puts the flowers to Ada's lips and says, "I thought about her love for Richard" (Ch. xliv; p. 464). By burning Allan's flowers, Esther obviously resigns any slight hope she may have had for love between her and Allan. Moreover, she reluctantly gives up Ada to Richard as well. Her feelings for Ada persist, however, for when Esther goes to Ada's new house after Ada is married, Esther experiences despair, as if she has lost a lover:

O how I cried! It almost seemed to me that I had lost my Ada for ever. I was so lonely, and so blank without her, and it was so desolate to be going home with no hope of seeing her there, that I could get no comfort for a little while, as I walked up and down a dim corner, sobbing and crying. (Ch. li; p. 530)

Finally, before Esther leaves Ada's to return to Bleak House, she notes, "I put my lips to the hearse-like panel of the door, as a kiss for my dear" (Ch. li; p. 530).
Esther's participation in her friends' relationships and her displaced romantic love for Ada demonstrate her immaturity. Esther, however, gradually dissociates herself from the two couples' relationships and ceases to use Ada as a substitute for a male companion when she attains the sense of self worth and maturity that permit her to engage in her own romantic relationship with Allan. Once Esther recognizes her positive qualities, and once she feels like an important individual, she begins to feel that she is worthy of Allan's love and that she can offer Allan happiness. Thus, Esther's accepting Allan as her lover and husband reflects her growing maturity.

Further evidence of Esther's increased assertiveness and maturity as both a character and a narrator is apparent in her growing ability to make and record conscious judgments. As I discussed in Chapter One, although Esther's descriptions of disagreeable characters are often satirical, her early observations lack firm, conscious judgments of these distasteful individuals. Furthermore, the opinions she maintains initially are largely formed by the opinions of others, especially Jarndyce. As Esther learns to deal with her guilt, however, she gains self-confidence and becomes capable of forming opinions and making judgments inde-
pendently of Jarndyce. The best example of this development in Esther is in her changing opinion of Skimpole. Initially, Esther feels Skimpole is "a mere child in the world" (Ch. vi; p. 53), an opinion shaped by Jarndyce's view. Although even at this time Esther sees inconsistencies in Skimpole, she refers to them as "seeming inconsistencies" and feels unable to reconcile them, "having so little experience and practical knowledge" (Ch. vi; p. 61). Later, however, Esther perceives Skimpole's destructive influence when he takes advantage of Richard. Because she has gained more assertiveness, she is able to make a conscious judgment of Skimpole. She says, "Richard could scarcely have found a worse friend" (Ch. xxxvii; p. 396). Now she wonders how Jarndyce, with all his experience, could be so intrigued by Skimpole's "avowal of his weakness and display of guileless candour" (Ch. xxxvii; p. 396). She even confronts Skimpole, telling him he shirks the responsibility that everyone is obliged to assume (Ch. xxxvii; p. 402). In a later conversation with Bucket, Esther recognizes Skimpole as "passing the bounds of childish innocence" (Ch. lvii; p. 587). When Esther tells Jarndyce of Skimpole's destruction, Jarndyce laughs, still seeing Skimpole as a child who could not influence anyone. Ultimately, however, Jarndyce accepts Esther's judgment and learns that Esther is right. Hence, the
roles of teacher and student, guardian and dependent are reversed.

As Esther the character matures, Esther the narrator's references to duty, her confusion, and her self-deprecation decrease. While Esther often resorted to duty as an escape when she became troubled by her mysterious past and her irreconcilable love for Allan, once she learns the secrets of her birth and once she gains self worth, she is able to accept both her past and Allan's love. Duty first fails to help Esther during her illness, a crucial time in Esther's maturation, when she writes, "My housekeeping duties, though at first it caused me great anxiety to think that they were unperformed, were soon as far off as the oldest of the old duties at Greenleaf" (Ch. xxxv; p. 370). Although Esther again turns to duty later, she does so less frequently as her narrative continues.

Similarly, Esther experiences less confusion as she matures. While earlier Esther had been confused by Guppy's attention, as she becomes more assertive, she is able to view Guppy's actions humorously. While Skimpole's professed childishness once had confused Esther, as she becomes more sure of herself, she is able to confront Skimpole about his irresponsibility. While Mrs. Woodcourt and Allan also had confused Esther, as Esther begins to recognize her self worth, Mrs. Woodcourt no
longer threatens her, and she is able to accept Allan as her husband. As Ousby notes, Esther's final moment of confusion occurs when Esther mistakes the dead woman for Jenny instead of Lady Dedlock. Once Esther recognizes the dead body as her mother's, Esther's confusion ceases. Significantly, the death of Lady Dedlock seems to finally release Esther from her guilt for her birth and, thus, becomes another crucial step in Esther's maturation. According to Stewart, Lady Dedlock's death functions symbolically as Esther's rebirth, for the mother dies "in order to bring the daughter, for the first time safely and securely, into the world." Similarly, Frank argues, "in dying for her own sins, she [Lady Dedlock] seems also to atone for those which have accrued to Esther as an essentially innocent participant in the 'dreadful thing' that is the human condition."

Finally, as Kennedy suggests, Esther's self-deprecation decreases as Esther becomes more secure.

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50 Ousby, p. 982.
51 Stewart, p. 476.
52 Frank, p. 110.
53 Kennedy, p. 335.
In fact, toward the end of her narrative Esther says of Caddy:

[She] call[ed] me all kinds of precious names, and [told] Allan I had done I don't know what for her . . . I was just obliged to get into the little carriage and calm her down, by letting her say and do exactly what she liked. (Ch. lxv; p. 654)

Although Esther is not specific about the praises Caddy pays her, she does not negate the praise; she even notes that she allowed Caddy to continue to say "what she liked." Thus, Esther's narrative mirrors Esther's maturation as a character, for as Esther matures, so does her narrative.
Chapter 3: Esther: From Daughter to Wife

An analysis of Esther's maturation remains incomplete without an evaluation of her relationship with her guardian, John Jarndyce, who is probably the most influential person in Esther's life. Some critics recognize Jarndyce's influence. Frank, for example, notes that Jarndyce "provides Esther with an opportunity to define herself," and Daleski states parenthetically, "Esther's success (with Mr. Jarndyce's aid), that is, is meant to be representative of what can be done through a combination of effort and due assumption of responsibility." Neither Frank nor Daleski, however, develops his observation.

Jarndyce becomes almost a surrogate father to Esther, providing her with parental love and a home that Esther yearned for yet never knew as a child. Furthermore, Jarndyce provides Esther with an education, a responsible position as housekeeper of Bleak House, and the experiences necessary for her maturation. Although Esther's potential for love, compassion, and determination is initially apparent, she needs Jarndyce's

54 Frank, p. 93; Daleski, p. 973.
assistance to acquire the love she seeks and to mature into a loving, respectable, and dignified woman.

Jarndyce first provides for Esther's education when, upon the death of Miss Barbary, he assumes the role of Esther's guardian and sends Esther to the school at Greenleaf. Had Jarndyce not intervened in her life, Esther's fate possibly would have been like those of Jo and the orphans of Tom-all-Alone's. Although Esther is determined "to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted," she would have remained alone, homeless, and poverty-stricken in a society in which the institutions designed to provide for orphans are either corrupt or inept. The officials of these institutions, according to Liz of Tom-all-Alone's, "must have been appointed for their skill in evading their duties, instead of performing them" (Ch. xxxi; p. 328). Jarndyce, in contrast, accepts responsibility for Esther and places her in an environment at Greenleaf in which she can become educated and, perhaps more importantly, in which she can work "to win some love" from her teachers and peers. Thus, Esther is able to fulfill her need to be industrious and responsible, as well as her need to care and be cared for, for she comments, "I had plenty to do, which I was very fond of doing, because it made the dear girls fond of me" (Ch. iii; p. 19). Duty is
important to Esther, as I discussed in Chapter One, because she feels that "doing" results in acceptance, care, and love.

After Esther completes her education, Jarndyce provides her with a more permanent position at Bleak House, in which her need to be dutiful and responsible is more fully realized. First, Jarndyce indirectly teaches Esther the obligations of the home and hearth. Jarndyce purposely arranges for Esther, Richard, and Ada to spend a night at the Jellybys', where Esther first confronts Mrs. Jellyby's misguided philanthropy and witnesses effects of neglect on the Jellyby home and children. As Jarndyce intends, Esther's perception of and sensitivity to the importance of a healthy family life, which she lacked as a child, allow her to learn from her experience. She tells him, "It is right to begin with the obligations of the home . . . while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them" (Ch. vi; p. 49).

Mrs. Jellyby's habits lead Esther to become aware of the destructiveness of irresponsibility and later to recognize the same irresponsibility in Mrs. Pardiggle and Harold Skimpole. Unlike Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Mr. Skimpole, Esther has the capacity to be responsible, a quality that later allows her to take action in helping others.
Jarndyce also provides Esther with the position of housekeeper of Bleak House. Esther willingly accepts this role, having already resolved that industry will win her love. At Bleak House, as at Greenleaf, Esther equates duty with attaining love. She wins love from Richard and Ada, and when Jarndyce asks her to marry him, she feels her industrious efforts have won his love: "I rang my housekeeping keys and gave them a kiss before I laid them down in their basket again" (Ch. xlv; p. 464). Although Kilian and Frank argue that in her role as housekeeper Esther creates a "false self" from which she never escapes, these critics fail to consider Esther's position at Bleak House as an important step in her effort to achieve a sense of identity. Her role as housekeeper of Bleak House and the love she gains while in this role permit Esther to begin to accept her own worth as an individual. Eventually, she is able to transcend this role.

The experiences Esther undergoes under Jarndyce's guidance also help her mature and ultimately lead her to a broader understanding of London society and its corruption. After arranging Esther's meeting with Mrs. Jellyby, for example, Jarndyce introduces Esther to Mrs. Pardiggle, another misguided philanthropist. When she escorts Mrs. Pardiggle to Jenny's house in Tom-all-
Alone's, Esther comprehends the ineffectiveness of the philanthropist's mission. Unlike Esther, Mrs. Pardiggle lacks compassion and understanding. Esther perceives her as "business-like and systematic" (Ch. viii; p. 81), a woman with "a mechanical way of taking possession of people" (Ch. viii; p. 82). She also perceives the philanthropist's general failure in her endeavors, both with Jenny's family and her own.

Furthermore, Jarndyce offers Esther his knowledge of the futility of the Chancery and the Jarndyce suit. He reveals to Esther the origin of the suit (Ch. viii; pp. 72-73), and he conveys the futility of pursuing or anticipating a profitable resolution to the suit, given the ineffectiveness of the legal system:

We are always appearing, and disappearing, and swearing, and interrogating, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and motioning, and referring, and reporting, and revolving about the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites, and equitably waltzing ourselves off to dusty death. (Ch. viii; p. 72)

Later Jarndyce reinforces his negative feelings about the suit when he virtually pleads with Richard to abandon "the family curse" (Ch. xxiv; p. 258), as he calls it. Esther trusts Jarndyce's judgment and recognizes the destructive effects of the court on its victims, such as Gridley, Miss Flite, and ultimately Richard, whom Esther also warns and counsels on several occasions.
Most importantly, Jarndyce's example teaches Esther to live uncorrupted in a corrupted society. Jarndyce's saving of Tom Jarndyce's old, dilapidated Bleak House and his refusal to involve himself in the Chancery case demonstrate to Esther his ability to remain uncorrupted. Murray Krieger finds Jarndyce's lack of involvement in Chancery problematic:

To be born into an unsettled case is to be thrust into a senseless world that one must struggle to straighten out before the leisure of living can begin. And if the nature of that court precludes chance of anything being settled, then the struggle is a desperate and ill-fated one but cannot be abandoned on that account. For one is not free to abandon it.  

Richard is certainly "not free to abandon" the case, for he comments, "one can't settle down while this business remains in such an unsettled state. When I say this business, of course I mean the--forbidden subject" (Ch. xxiii; p. 245). Jarndyce, however, can abandon Chancery because, unlike Richard and the other victims of the court, he realizes his own limitations in a society dominated by corrupt institutions. Although he realizes that he cannot change the nature of Chancery, he has the will to withstand corruption. Miller

agrees that Jarndyce can remain uninvolved in the case of Chancery, but only because of his fear of revelation. Miller, however, fails to recognize that Jarndyce understands the futility of involvement in the court and foresees the outcome of his case. Early in Esther's stay at Bleak House, Jarndyce tells her,

There is, in that city of London there, some property of ours . . . I say property of ours, meaning of the Suit's, but I ought to call it the property of Costs; for Costs is the only power on earth that will ever get anything out of it now. (Ch. viii; p. 73).

Jarndyce's perception here proves to be correct, for ultimately the entire Jarndyce estate is "absorbed in costs" (Ch. lxv; p. 656).

In addition to teaching and guiding Esther, Jarndyce also acts as a role model for her, for although Esther always believes in virtuous activity as a genuine possibility, her belief is reinforced frequently when she witnesses Jarndyce's several displays of kindness and generosity. She sees the extreme of Jarndyce's benevolence in his charity to the philanthropists, who come to him for "whatever Mr. Jarndyce had--or had not" (Ch. viii; p. 76). Although Jarndyce financially supports these philanthropists, he is obviously aware of

57 Miller, p. 170.
their misdirection and ineffectiveness. For instance, he tells Esther "that there were two classes of charitable people; one, the people who did a little and made a great deal of noise; the other, the people who did a great deal and made no noise at all" (Ch. viii; p. 77). Esther, of course, recognizes Jarndyce as one who does "a great deal." Esther also understands the practical aspects of Jarndyce's generosity when he aids the Neckett children. Similarly, she later is able to aid and care for sick, homeless Jo. Esther also sees Jarndyce's patience in his treatment of the parasitic, irresponsible Skimpole and the indecisive, misdirected Richard. Influenced by his kindness to herself and Ada, Esther exhibits the same kindness when she assists Caddy and Charley.

Finally, Jarndyce inadvertently and indirectly affects Esther's future. It is because Jarndyce takes Esther to the church at Chesney Wold that Lady Dedlock sees her. This event eventually leads to the revelation of Esther's past. It is because Jarndyce takes Esther to the Badgers' that she meets her future husband, Allan Woodcourt. Thus, because Jarndyce took Esther into his household, his kindness has placed her in an environment that makes happiness accessible to her. Had she remained an orphan on the streets of Tom-all-
Alone's, it is unlikely that Esther would ever have met Lady Dedlock or Allan.

While Jarndyce is not the only contributor to Esther's maturation, he is certainly the greatest influence in her development and, as such, deserves critical attention. Yet most critics dismiss Jarndyce as simply a good man or criticize him as too good, too benevolent, eccentric, and ineffective as a character.\(^58\) Angus Wilson goes so far as to call him "a nonsuch."\(^59\) Despite such criticism, Russell M. Goldfarb recognizes that Jarndyce is actually a complex character whose benevolence and generosity are not as incredible as they may appear.\(^60\) First, the reader sees Jarndyce only through Esther's narrative. In her adulation of Jarndyce, Esther dehumanizes him,

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\(^59\) The World of Charles Dickens, p. 234.

\(^60\) For further information see Goldfarb, "John Jarndyce of Bleak House," SNNTS, 12 (1980), 144-52.
portraying him as an idealized individual. Second, Jarndyce's goodness seems incredible because he is immersed in a corrupt society and juxtaposed to so many evil, irresponsible, and selfish characters, such as Tulkinghorn, Skimpole, Grandfather Smallweed, Wholes, Krook, and Reverend Chadband. Third, Jarndyce is not totally selfless. In addition to seeking trust from Esther, he also looks to Esther as a possible wife. In an early conversation with Jarndyce, Esther refers to him as a "Guardian who is a Father to her." She notices, "At the word father I saw his former trouble come to his face" (Ch. xvii; p. 181).

Finally, Jarndyce is flawed. As I noted earlier, Jarndyce is aware of the limitations of one man acting upon the corrupt institutions in a corrupt society. In spite of this awareness, Jarndyce remains benevolent and generous. Yet this benevolence and generosity are often indiscriminate; he lacks perceptiveness, or he conveniently ignores the possibility of its detrimental effects. For example, Jarndyce knows that the philanthropists' missions are ineffective, but he continues to support them financially. Although he sees the deterioration of the Jellyby home because of Mrs. Jellyby's obsession, he seems to ignore this. He rationalizes his position and justifies his support because "she means well" (Ch. vi; p. 49). Likewise, Jarndyce
sees that Richard's professional indecision is harmful to Richard's future, but Jarndyce again ignores these observations and supports Richard's indecision by setting him up in the various professions Richard pursues. First, Jarndyce establishes Richard in the medical profession, then in the legal profession, and finally in the military. Jarndyce also supports Skimpole's irresponsibility and parasitism by nurturing Skimpole's needs. It is also possible, as Goldfarb suggests, that Jarndyce "buys" Skimpole for his own entertainment, for Skimpole's perverse thinking certainly amuses Jarndyce on several occasions. Thus, although Jarndyce attempts to help others and to maintain a benevolent role, the assistance he renders is often illusory. Ultimately Jarndyce becomes the victim of his own illusion when he is blinded to Skimpole's motives by his desire to fulfill his own need to be good.

Eventually Esther becomes more sensitive than Jarndyce to the problems in the Jellyby home. She sympathizes with Caddy, Peepy, and the rest of the Jellyby children because they do not receive the care and love that children need, as Esther knows well, having suffered from a lack of parental love herself. She even pities Mr. Jellyby, whom Mrs. Jellyby has virtually

61 Goldfarb, p. 147.
transformed from a man into matter. Esther also becomes more sensitive than Jarndyce to Richard's problems. She sees Jarndyce reinforce Richard's indecision by supporting his inconstancy in his choice of a profession. She even attempts to direct Richard herself by advising him and by persuading Ada to do the same, although both fail in their endeavors. Finally, Esther also informs Jarndyce of Skimpole's destructive influence on Richard, a fact that Jarndyce initially disbelieves and that Jarndyce probably would not have perceived on his own. Thus, although Jarndyce is the necessary force in Esther's growth, she advances beyond him in her perceptiveness and judgment.

Still, Jarndyce's generosity also provides positive effects. He is a good character, actively seeking to do good, and he genuinely assists Esther, Ada, and Charley. Although his generosity to Skimpole and Richard fails, these failures do not negate his goodness and virtuous intention. He provides for Richard and Skimpole what he provides for Esther, but, unlike Esther, Richard and Skimpole lack the sensitivity, perceptiveness, and trust to learn. Because Esther has these qualities, she gives Jarndyce what Richard and Skimpole cannot. After Esther's arrival, Jarndyce spends less time in the growlery, his retreat from the evil and corruption of society, because Esther offers him consolation and hope.
He tells her, "you have wrought changes in me . . . you have done me a world of good" (Ch. xliv; p. 461). Because Esther and Jarndyce have needs that they can satisfy for each other, they form a mutually beneficial relationship, a relationship Jarndyce cannot attain with Richard or with Skimpole.

Esther and Jarndyce's relationship, however, cannot become romantic. Jarndyce is father and teacher to Esther. In fact, when Esther meets Jarndyce at Bleak House, she notes that he kissed her "in a fatherly way" (Ch. vi; p. 48). Esther continues to look at Jarndyce in a "daughterly way" and later refers to him as "the best of fathers to me" (Ch. xxxvi; p. 388). At one point Esther even considers the possibility that Jarndyce may be her natural father (Ch. vi; p. 62). Jarndyce, on the other hand, considers Esther as a possible wife, not because he loves her romantically, but because he desires her as a companion in his old age. He asks her to be "the dear companion of his remaining life" (Ch. xliv; p. 463). Although Esther accepts Jarndyce's proposal and the two plan to marry, neither is romantically in love with the other, as is apparent in the events surrounding their impending marriage. First, Jarndyce does not propose to Esther directly; instead, he sends his proposal to her in a letter (Ch. xliv; pp. 462-63). Second, the contents of the letter are strikingly unromantic.
Jarndyce writes that their relationship will not change in their marriage, that he would "be unchanged in his old relation, in his old manner, in the old name by which [Esther calls] him. And as to his bright Dame Durden and little housekeeper, she would ever be the same, he knew" (Ch. xliiv; p. 463). After Esther accepts the proposal nothing does change; she continues to call Jarndyce "guardian," and he continues to call her by her nicknames and to refer to her as the future "mistress of Bleak House" (Ch. 1; p. 521) instead of as his future wife. In fact, the only change that occurs in their relationship is that Esther acquires a new seat near Jarndyce at Bleak House (Ch. 1; p. 521). Lastly, Esther's account of the time they share alone together lacks the enthusiasm one might expect from a woman in love: "I now went up to him and took my usual chair, which was always at his side—for sometimes I read to him, and sometimes I talked to him, and sometimes I silently worked by him" (Ch. lxii; p. 633).

Although Esther does not love Jarndyce as a husband, she, nevertheless, accepts his proposal because she feels indebted to him. She accepts his offer reluctantly, however, for directly after she reads his letter she responds,

I cried very much; not only in the fullness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect . . . but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. (Ch. xliiv; p. 463)
The loss Esther feels is the loss of the possibility of love with Allan, the man she really loves. As Middlebro suggests, for Esther to marry Jarndyce would be a mistake like the one her mother made when she gave up Hawdon, the man she loved, for Sir Leicester, a man able to offer her security and a prestigious social position. Although Jarndyce offers Esther security, he remains a father figure and, as such, he cannot become her lover. As Eggert points out, Jarndyce functions to fulfill Esther's need for parental love by offering her a second and better childhood. When Esther matures and surpasses Jarndyce in some of her perceptions and judgments, however, Jarndyce's work is over. For Esther to realize fully her own identity, she must remove herself from her role as Jarndyce's daughter and pupil. Although Esther would marry Jarndyce out of gratitude, an indication of her devotion, Jarndyce recognizes the love between her and Allan. Jarndyce must release Esther because it would be unrealistic for him to contrive what would be a mutually destructive relationship for his own ends. As an influential figure in Esther's maturation, Jarndyce prepares Esther for a workable,

62 Middlebro, p. 257.
63 Eggert, p. 77.
romantic relationship later in her life, but he cannot become a member of that relationship.

Although marriage with Jarndyce is impractical, Esther and Allan can form a healthy marriage characterized by generosity and, like Jarndyce, can live uncorrupted in a corrupt society. The active nature of their generosity makes them compatible. Esther says of Allan, "although he was, night and day, at the service of numbers of poor people, and did wonders of gentleness and skill for them, he gained very little by it in money (Ch. xvii; pp. 181-82). Like Esther, Allan has a selfless concern for others. Although Esther may idealize him in her narrative, as she does Jarndyce, Allan's generosity is also witnessed in the unidentified narrator's section of the novel. For example, while walking through Tom-all-Alone's, Allan encounters Liz, a brickmaker's wife who has been beaten by her husband. He assists her by cleaning her wounds and by tracking down the orphan, Jo, who has robbed her. Allan also feeds Jo, who is sick and homeless, and lodges the orphan at George's Shooting Gallery.

Like Allan, Esther is actively generous. Yet many critics find Esther a passive character; for example, Broderick and Grant call her a "passive waif." 64

64 Broderick and Grant, p. 252. See also Harvey, p. 149; Kilian, p. 327; and Stewart, p. 444.
These critics fail to consider that at Bleak House Esther consoles Ada in her troubled times with Richard, nurses Charley in her illness, and tries to counsel Richard in his dilemma. Esther also moves outside of her immediate environment when she assists Jenny and Jo of Tom-all-Alone's. Furthermore, she influences Caddy Jellyby. She befriends Caddy and acts as her confidant. She convinces Caddy and Prince to reveal their engagement to their parents. She prepares Caddy for her marital role by teaching her the household duties Caddy's mother had neglected to teach her, duties Esther exercises as housekeeper of Bleak House. She also helps Caddy plan and carry out the plans for her wedding. Finally, Esther and Allan together care for Caddy and her child during Caddy's illness. Thus, as Delespinasse points out, "Esther . . . consistently tries to control the tendency to evil and chaos by helpfully involving herself with others." 65

Although Esther and Allan temporarily assist the victims of misguided philanthropy, the Chancery, and Tom-all-Alone's, they cannot change the society that victimizes them. Still, Esther and Allan are able to find happiness in spite of the corrupt society. Yet because Esther is able to live happily with her husband

65Delespinasse, p. 264.
in a chaotic world, many critics find her position at the end of the novel fantastic and inadequate. Consider Barbara Hardy's analysis:

The reconciliation is too tiny, too unrepresentative to act as an exit from our total experience of this novel. The sense of narrowing is increased by Esther's unreality: if there is indeed hope to be found in human hearts, let them be more complex and groded by experience than Miss Summerson's.  

Leonard W. Deen also argues that the conclusion of Esther's story "is a sentimental and obviously inadequate solution to the serious moral and social problems Dickens raises." Deen adds, "The two narratives [Esther's and the unidentified narrator's] seem almost a product of schizophrenia, and Bleak House seems to be two novels: a melodramatic fairy-tale and an extraordinary bitter and inclusive social satire." Finally, Krieger states, "unfortunately, the serenely happy ending of the one [Esther's narrative] totally reduces the immense capacities for vision in the other [the unidentified narrator's narrative]."

The ending of Esther's story, however, is not as fantastic nor are the narratives as separate as these

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67. Deen, p. 54.
critics imply. Esther's story is of one individual immersed in the society depicted by the unidentified narrator, the self-destructive society characterized by Krook's spontaneous combustion. Moreover, the two narratives complement each other; they function together to present the reader with a truer picture of London society than either could alone convey. As Delespinasse points out, the two narratives "are intertwined to present a whole which may be different from its parts."69 Furthermore, Esther's ending is not a "serenely happy" one. In Esther's conclusion the problems of her society have not been resolved, and her conclusion makes no claims that they have. Esther and Allan know that they do not have the capacity to change society, but they do understand the value of helping others within that society. Their goodness, generosity, and active involvement help them to remain uncorrupted in a corrupt environment. Their solution, however, is a private one. The world of fog at the opening of the novel continues to exist, even though two people within that world have found the means to exist admirably and productively, achieving happiness and maintaining their own dignity.

Finally, Esther's identity at the novel's conclusion remains questionable to some. Kilian and Frank,

69 Delespinasse, p. 253. See also Grenander, p. 302.
for example, contend that Esther never discovers her "true self." In fact, at the end of her narrative Esther is able to define herself only in terms of her husband. She comments, "The people even praise Me as the doctor's wife" (Ch. lxvii; p. 665). One must remember, however, that in Victorian England it is likely that a middle class woman would aspire to marry well; that is, the role of "doctor's wife" would be an admirable identity in itself. A happy marriage, after all, is traditionally associated with order and harmony. Furthermore, although Esther notes that people may love her because she is Allan's wife, Allan appreciates her for herself. Consider Esther's response to her physical appearance. Allan asks her, "And don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?" Esther replies, "I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now" (Ch. lxvii; p. 665). In spite of Smith's suggestion that Esther cannot "perceive that the scars have faded," possibly Esther merely finds her physical appearance unimportant. Thus, as Ousby writes, Esther

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70 Kilian, p. 327; Frank, p. 111.
71 Smith, p. 13.
does "achieve a clear-sightedness" at the end of the novel.\textsuperscript{72} Having discovered her inner worth, she accepts herself beyond physical beauty. She is aware of Allan's love for her regardless of her appearance: "it was impossible that you \textit{could} have loved me any better" (Ch. lxvii; p. 665). Esther's development, however, may not be complete. Maturation is an ongoing process. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel Esther certainly has matured. She has also become a productive member of society, and although she cannot change significantly the pattern of the corrupt social fabric, Esther achieves personal happiness and identity in the family, the fundamental social unit.

\textsuperscript{72}Ousby, p. 981.


---------. "The Trouble with Esther." MLA, 26 (1965), 545-57.


Delespinasse, Doris Stringham. "The Significance of Dual Point of View in Bleak House." NCF, 23 (1968), 253-64.


Vita

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