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BLEAK HOUSE:
THE MYTH OF SEPARATE SPHERES IN NARRATIVE EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the form of the double narrative in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, and the interplay of the two distinct and gendered narrative voices. I will examine the ways in which gender stereotypes during the Victorian era dictated paradigms of narrative expression and how Dickens used those conventions in his portrayal of the omniscient and masculine third person narrator and the feminine first person narrator. I argue that the rhetorical techniques employed in narration resist the stereotypes of male and female narrators and authors. My intention is to dispel the idea that these narrative voices conform to Victorian gender conventions and prove that the separate spheres of masculine and feminine narrative authority are more ideal than actual.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Investigating Gender Paradigms.....	6
Victorian Expectations in Literature.....	6
<i>Bleak House</i> as a Perpetuation of Gender Conventions.....	9
Nonconformity of the Male Narration.....	20
Equality in Esther's Narration.....	27
Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography.....	39

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens was a prolific Victorian author who was known for not only his engaging stories but also their intense societal critique. His novels explore in depth the failures of prevailing social conditions in an attempt to expose to his reading public the ineffectiveness of these ideas and institutions; as Barbara Hardy describes, his “passionate and scrupulously researched social concern is at the heart of his life and writing” (xiii). He often presented his material in such a forceful way as to astound and, at times even distress, his readers. Yet Dickens’ immense popularity allowed him to experiment in a variety of ways with his later novels, despite the element of shock that tended to accompany his societal condemnation of social issues such as poverty and ineffectual institutional bureaucracy.

One such experimental novel is *Bleak House*, a text that has been hailed by many critics to be the best novel that Dickens ever wrote. Within it he introduces a complex narrative structure with two distinct narrative voices, a technique not very commonly employed at that time in Victorian literature. Dickens created this novel with a first-person female narrator, Esther Summerson, and the other a third-person anonymous narrator, widely regarded as omniscient. And though Dickens does not state anywhere in his novel that the anonymous narrator is a male, Virginia Blain contends that “there is one point of unspoken agreement [among critics]: that of the omniscient narrator’s gender. He is unquestionably male. Even if he is nothing but a voice, it is a male voice” (67). Upon a first reading of the novel there seem to be many disparities in the content of what each narrator relates to the reader and, for the most part, both narrators would seem to stay within their own separate spheres of narration with the omniscient narrator

evidently focusing on Dickens' satirical critique and Esther on simply retelling her own personal history.

Blain explains, "Esther's is the 'inner' voice, his the 'outer' voice...The inner perspective, subjective viewpoint, the interest bounded by personal limits, these are all qualities typically, even archetypically associated with the feminine principle, while objectivity, impersonality and largeness of vision all belong to the masculine realm" (67). The anonymous, and presumably male, narrator is most concerned with public and social themes, and it is through this lens that the reader is introduced to the criticisms of society that the story attempts to portray. Barbara Gottfried expounds upon Blain's ideas, "The dual narrative perspectives... mirror the binary habit of mind endemic to a culture that insisted upon the beneficent separation between the public, impersonal (male) realm, whose major metaphor in *Bleak House* is the law; and the private, domestic (female) sphere, personified in Esther, which is meant to mitigate the letter of the law through greater attention to its spirit" (1). This unidentified, omniscient narrator focuses on the public spheres of Chancery and the upper classes as represented mainly by the Dedlock's, and the poverty-stricken neighborhoods and slums of London, as represented by Tom-All-Along's. Robert Newsom explains Dickens purpose in creating this novel that "Dickens's target in *Bleak House*, at the same time that it is the actual Court of Chancery at mid-century, is the nightmare that institutions tend to become. What perhaps most characterizes such institutional evil...is its inhumanity—its remoteness from any human dimension and its incapacity to deal with people as such" (65). He produces a witty and highly satiric commentary in a primarily objective form, although he does occasionally lapse into a more subjective and personal tone in infrequent displays of anger and

bitterness in order to combat that sense of inhumanity that he associates with institutions such as those that he portrays in his novel.

On the other hand, Esther's female narration centers on more domestic and personal matters, portraying themes such as morality and individual responsibility. In comparison to the third person narrator, Esther's narrative voice is sympathetic and subjective, whereas the former is commonly impersonal and objective. In addition to being a narrator of the novel, she is also one of the main characters, and a good part of the plot revolves around her own personal story, especially her journey for self-discovery and the revelation of her lineage. She is undeniably the moral center of the novel, surrounded by a corrupt London environment. Unlike the third-person narrator, she expresses no bitterness or anger at the social injustices that occur around her, only sorrow and love.

The very fact of Esther's gender was a contested issue among Dickens' reading public, because it was not considered appropriate for women to narrate literature. As a feminine narrator, Victorian literature stereotypically confines her to specific guidelines as to the content and presentation of her narrative. Her domain was in the realm of domesticity and earnest, direct address regarding a personal history. They were "allowed" to write only in these specified areas, in the sense that they were the only socially acceptable public outlets for respectable women. Robyn Warhol writes, "It was the professional act of writing for publication- transporting a woman's words outside the domestic sphere- that endangered her feminine reputation in the public's view" (168). In creating Esther as his narrator, Dickens was very much aware of the nineteenth century gender conventions and therefore he designed her character in such a way as to subtly

circumvent many possible objections to her as a feminine narrator. He was placed in the difficult situation of having to portray her in such a way as to evade criticisms that she transgressed the boundaries of her feminine, domestic sphere, yet still present a comprehensive social critique within a unified story told by two cooperative narrators.

I will argue that despite the apparent dissimilarity of the two narrative voices, there is more overlap in the narrators and their designated material than is generally assumed. All of the characters exhibit that kind of interconnectedness so prevalent in Dickens' fiction, a strategy which prevents the possibility of relating two entirely different stories. Both narrators have the same general opinions in the way that they portray other characters and sympathize with the poor and helpless, albeit different styles in doing so.

Kathleen Sell-Sandoval clarifies that "the doctrine of separate spheres was much less an actual reality (though it was applied to writers as though it were) than a clearly delineated map of appropriate traits, behaviors, attitudes, and emotions split down the middle by sex" (25). However, Sell-Sandoval appears to agree with most contemporary critics in expressing the idea that both Esther and the anonymous narrator maintain their own separate spheres of narration, and that Dickens composed his narrators in such a way that his readers would unquestioningly perceive them as assimilating to the narrow confines Victorian expectations for gender construction. In this analysis I will expound on this idea. Dickens did create his narrators to operate on the surface as prototypical gender standards, yet with his choice and descriptions of the two narrators, he actually subverts the stereotypes that his narrators at first seem to perpetrate in the way that each writes and in the overall message that each conveys.

I will first elucidate the ways in which Victorian society dictated the standards that were supposed to be followed by male and female narrators and authors and then investigate how the narrators and rhetoric used in the novel would appear to conform to these gender criteria, at least in a surface reading of the text. However, my intention is to show that despite what at first appears to be a concession to Victorian gender ideologies, the narration of *Bleak House* actually resists such a classification. Upon a closer analysis of both narrators and the techniques that they utilize in their narration, it becomes evident that while some of their respective characteristics align with gender stereotypes, many of them cross back and forth the borders of masculine and feminine narration, making it difficult, if not impossible, to incontrovertibly declare that Dickens' narrators comply with traditional gender designations. By making such overlap between the characters, and consequently the narration, it is apparent that the separate spheres of masculine and feminine narrative authority are more ideal than actual.

INVESTIGATING GENDER CONVENTIONS

I. Victorian Gender Expectations in Literature

In the nineteenth century there was an extensive distinction between the type of material covered not only by male and female authors, but also male and female narrators. What type of story was being expressed as well as the techniques employed in that narration varied based on the narrative authority so as to correspond to gender conventions and avoid the risk of the literature appearing subversive. Robyn Warhol discusses the literary outlets for Victorian women who were not given the autonomy to write freely but still maintained that they had something important to say. In order to “exert some political or moral influence on the ‘real world’ they turned to realistic fiction (23). She states,

What the women novelists did was to take two modes of potentially dangerous expression [public speaking and preaching] and combine them, forming a mode through which they could “speak” without exposing themselves. By taking up the strategies that men used in real-world discourse– the earnest exhortation, the personalized direct address to an audience, the insistence on speaking a *truth*– the women transformed those rhetorical moves into feminine codes in literary discourse. By moving preacherly rhetoric into print, they created a literary space where they could “speak” in relative safety (165).

In order to mediate between ambition and the aspiration to reach a large audience and the fear of impropriety, women chose to write in a way that resembled the power that men held in public speaking: realistic fiction. However, in writing realistic fiction women were still not given free reign to express any subject matter in whatever manner they pleased. While social conventions at the time forbid all writers from the expression of certain subjects, especially related to sexuality, men still had more leeway in publicly articulating less taboo subjects according to Victorian etiquette. Yet, limited to one genre of literature, women were even further constrained in that there was a specific set of

guidelines that women novelists or narrators were expected to follow to ensure that their stories did not cross gender boundaries and display any outward signs of immodesty.

Kathleen M. Sell-Sandoval writes about the differences between what was expected of the male narrator versus the female narrator, “Activities associated with narrating- observing or looking, knowing, interpreting, speaking- are, in the context of the nineteenth-century, gendered ‘masculine’ while being observed, being known, being interpreted and being silent are gendered ‘feminine’ (7). Generally a work of literature was expected to participate in the perpetuation of these cultural and societal norms if it was to achieve any degree of success. She elucidates on the given spheres of each gendered narrator,

Nineteenth-century critics created a gendered system of evaluation in which acts of representation, which seek to imitate reality are more feminine, in that they are imitative and seek to “teach by example” while extra-representational acts, in which a speaker/ narrator speaks for him/herself on his/her own authority and in the hopes of intervening in some way with the reader are perceived as more active and more masculine because these acts seek to influence not by example, but by direct intervention, in the direct voice of the narrator rather than through the voice of a character. Thus, a female narrator who engages in extra-representational discourse is seen as transgressing gendered boundaries and violating fictional and discursive properties (10).

Thus female narratives were restricted to imitation or a faithful representation of life; emotions and close observation were their domain. Conversely, men were assigned the more intellectual and imaginative tasks of contriving plots and developing characters.

The ideology of the Angel in the House was a prevalent icon during the Victorian era, and it largely influenced much of the writing of that time. Elizabeth Langland explains that “it shows that the wife, the presiding hearth angel of Victorian social myth, actually performed a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived. The prevailing ideology regarded the house as a haven...but the

house and its mistress in fact served as a significant adjunct to a man's endeavors" (290-1). The Victorian angel was the model for the nineteenth century woman, and a notable stereotype for feminine literary characters. John Ruskin further defines the designated criteria for each gendered narrative authority,

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest... But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle and her intellect is not for invention or recreation, but sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial (77).

Women risked imperiling their respectability and virtue by entering into the realm of the masculine narrator because it propelled women into a public arena where they were no longer protected by their decorum and morality. Elsie B. Michie expounds on this idea that women novelists "confronted a definition of femininity as split between a proper, private, realm, the home, and an improperly public one, the 'streets' ... Her activities as a professional author might make her seem an 'improper woman' (5). The appearance of impropriety was an enormous liability, given the context of Victorian prudery and the unchaste connotations of a woman who strayed from the cultural construction of women. The Victorian woman "publishes her novel and is then troubled by the way others perceive and address her" for her action in leaving the home sphere and seeking a place amongst the public world of men (83). Women were supposed to remain in the private sphere, locked up in the house where domestic duties were paramount, where as men, contrastingly, had very few domestic duties and were therefore given more latitude to pursue the course of action they chose to be most expedient.

On the other hand, if the female narrator narrated within her assigned sphere she faced much less risk of criticism and condemnation as too “public” a figure. Yet this carried with it numerous problems for the feminine speaker. The “personal” voice of the female persona contained much less narrative authority; its power as a narrating presence was diminished to telling only the events that were subjectively witnessed and the interpretation of the speaker’s own experience. Sell- Sandoval explains the dilemma that accompanied this reality, “Writers speaking in a ‘female’ voice, then faced an implicit double-bind—either their voice had only limited authority and could be mistaken as ‘autobiographical’ so that their life, it was assumed, could be read in the fiction; or, in using the third-person, they would be viewed as transgressing their ‘proper regions’ in taking up a position that was implicitly viewed as male” (11). It is because of this curtailed authority that many female narrators would choose to speak in a way in which they were not expected, but in doing so they would implicitly face the backlash of society for the appearance of impropriety.

II. *Bleak House* as a Perpetuation of Gender Conventions

On the surface both narrators of *Bleak House* appear to perpetuate gender conventions and stereotypes; they seem to accord with the nineteenth century doctrine of separate spheres for feminine and masculine narrators in much of their content and narrative style. As Sell-Sandoval explains, “in upholding a difference in voice that is based on gender and that assigns the ‘limited’ perspective to a woman and the ‘omniscient’ perspective to a (presumably) male voice, Dickens conforms to the norms of his society and nineteenth-century conventions of writing” (20).

The omniscient, third person narrator opens the novel with a vivid depiction of the London fog and the scene surrounding the Court of Chancery. The intense description and the way that he paints such a forceful picture of gloom for the reader demonstrates the extent of his power over his portion of the text,

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds (13).

Here the narrator is showing not only his omniscience but also his complete authority over the presentation of the story. Audrey Jaffe comments on the possession of “superior knowledge” of the anonymous narrator in her book on literary omniscience. She says, “As novels work to achieve the effect of reproducing a complex social whole, they simultaneously assert their ability to manage a vast, potentially unmanageable amount of information” (9). In the passage that I have quoted above from Dickens’ novel, it is obvious to see the large, comprehensive picture that is painted of the state of London and Chancery with his opening description, as well as the broad extent of his knowledge.

Conversely, it is hard to imagine Esther construing a scene with the same breadth and magnitude as the omniscient narrator, for the manifest reason that she depicts for the reader the scene that is unfolding within her range of vision. As a contrast to the anonymous narrator, the opening lines of Esther’s narrative begin in a much more personal account, focusing in on her life and thoughts,

I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. I can remember, when I was a very little girl indeed, I used to say to my doll, when we were alone together, ‘Now, Dolly, I am not clever, and you know very well, and you must be patient with me, like a dear!’ And so she used to sit propped up in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me – or not so much at me, I think, as at nothing – while I busily stitched away, and told her every one of my secrets (27-8).

Here Esther begins to demonstrate what would appear to be the extent of her “portion of these pages; her story is to be the recitation of her own personal history, beginning as far back as her childhood. There is nothing in her opening narration that is at all reminiscent of the opening passage of the anonymous narrator only two chapters previous. Whereas Esther’s description abounds with sentimentality and innocence, the omniscient narrator’s widespread depiction of the London fog practically drips with sarcasm and contempt. His commentaries function as a meandering camera, encompassing visions of London scenes one moment of London scenes and the next zooming in on individual characters the next. In the world of literature, where knowledge is power, there can be no doubt in the reader’s mind in these first few chapters of the vast extent of the narrator’s authority compared to the limited power of Esther’s.

The style and subject matter of each individual narrative also does not seem to leave much room for interpretation. Ruskin outlines the desirable qualities of a female in the Victorian era,

She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service – the true changefulness of woman (78).

Esther strives to personify all of the qualities of wisdom, gentleness and modesty that Ruskin here defines. She is a modest, reserved narrator who is neither very assertive in telling her story nor judgmental, at least not on the surface of what she says. Sell-Sandoval clarifies, “Esther’s use of rhetorically ‘feminine’ strategies may be better understood as a means of mitigating—through reticence, obliquity, modesty, selflessness—the dangers of having to tell a story about herself” (162). Her use of these “feminine strategies” is obvious throughout the entirety of her story; even in the opening extract of her account she flaunts her modesty by claiming that she is “not clever” and that she will have a difficult time writing the story that she was entreated to tell. She continues to make comments that emphasize her humility in order to compensate for undertaking to enter into so public a domain as writing. Later in her narrative she states,

I don’t know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible, and I am sure, when I find myself coming into the story again, I am really vexed and say, ‘Dear, dear, you tiresome little creature, I wish you wouldn’t!’ but it is all of no use. I hope anyone who may read what I write, will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them, and can’t be kept out (137).

In these quotes from Esther’s narrative and in countless others, Esther demonstrates her apprehension at the idea of writing her story. She attempts to stress that the writing she is doing will always be subordinate to the other, more important occupations of her life; the act of reproducing her tale will not detract from the domestic duties that she has around Bleak House. She even says to Mr. Jarndyce that, “it is right to begin with the obligations of home, sir; and that, perhaps, while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them” (83). Here she acknowledges the true place of the woman, inadvertently recognizing that she is stepping outside of her

domestic sphere yet attempting to transmit to the reader that she knows the home is the most important place for women to be. Much later, at the very end of her narrative she carefully points out to her reader, “Full seven happy years I have been the mistress of Bleak House. The few words that I have to add to what I have written, are soon penned; then I, and the unknown friend to whom I write, will part forever” (985). Once she is finished with the story that she has been communicating to her reader, she is done writing forever. Writing will not be a permanent activity for her; as a respectable woman her duties are better placed elsewhere, and now that she has told her story she can concentrate on more suitable activities.

The expression of the unidentified narrator is humorously sarcastic and presents descriptions of bitter irony at the injustices he encounters on the streets of London. This satiric wit is evident in many instances, such as his portrayal of Mr. Chadband as “a large yellow man, with a fat smile, and a general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his system,” as well as his first introduction of Sir Leicester when he states, “He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without the Dedlocks. He would on the whole admit Nature to be a good idea (a little low, perhaps, when not enclosed with a park-fence)...He is an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man” (304-5/21-2.) This type of satire and the ironic commentary that accompanies it was very much the domain of a traditionally masculine narrator.

The anonymous narrator’s interests with his narration focus around a few key locations and people: the suit of Chancery, the slums of London, and the upper classes as represented by the Dedlocks. These places, for the most part, are public locations, with

the possible exception of the Dedlocks, although in a way the aristocracy was actually a very public institution in that it represented the ruling classes of the country. The first chapter introduces the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit of Chancery, and from the very beginning the reader gets a sense of the ineffectiveness and corruptness of the institution, at least through the narrator's perspective,

This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance; which gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give – who does not often give – the warning, 'Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!' (15).

Inherent in this statement is the lack of justice that the institution of Chancery embodies, an acrimonious parody of the supposition that a court of law should be devoted to justice. The language that the narrator uses presents his first social criticism; by employing words such as “decaying,” “blighted,” and “ruined,” among others, he is presenting Chancery as destructive, an establishment which sucks the life out of all those tangled in its web rather than promoting equity among its citizens.

In the succeeding chapter the anonymous narrator establishes the direction of his second main social commentary: the outmoded and ineffectual aristocracy. He introduces the reader to the Dedlock family and their habitual arena of Chesney Wold. He compares the estate to the court of Chancery, and likewise Sir Leicester is portrayed in much the same way. He says, “Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are things of precedent and usage,” referring to Chesney Wold by terms such as “stagnant” and “mouldy” (20). Sir Leicester embodies a type of moldiness as well; the

narrator emphasizes his gout and old age to show his decay just as he shows the decay of Chancery.

The reader does not really become acquainted with the third prominent domain of the third person narrator, the blighted area of Tom-All-Alone's, until slightly later in the novel with the presentation of the poverty-stricken characters. He describes it as a

ruinous place...a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants... Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint (256-7).

Again the narrator chooses to use imagery of decay and disease to describe this slum and his contempt for those who had a hand in making it such. This establishment is also linked to the Court of Chancery, as it is soon shown that it is actually a property in dispute in the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, one that has been left to rot in the squalor of the area.

The narrator links all of these worlds through the language that he adopts and the interconnectedness of plot and character. By doing this, he creates an environment where Chancery becomes a representation of the rest of society; the social critique and satire of the male narrator becomes ever-present in his tale. As Shirley Galloway explains,

Just as a biological parasite will weaken and destroy its host, the parasitical corruption of a national institution will eventually weaken and destroy the rest of society. Thus, the primary symbol of Chancery and its effect on the society is that of disease resulting from moral corruption and social parasitism with death looming behind... The social and physical disease created and spread by Chancery becomes a metaphor for the corruption of the entire society.

Because the anonymous narrator is the masculine one, it is supposedly his domain (as opposed to that of Esther) to speak out about the political and social defects that Dickens desires to address. Through these three public worlds it is possible to see the way that Dickens has created his narrator to constitute a part of the overall message of *Bleak House* that his feminine narration should not be allowed to address, ultimately conforming to the gender expectations of his era.

Esther, as well, seems to conform to gender expectations in that what she chooses to convey to the reader tends to be related to either her own personal history or the domestic atmosphere around her at Bleak House. Beginning in the third chapter, her narrative is told in the past tense, as she is telling it from seven years distance as a married woman with children of her own. Esther's writing offsets the often harsh and straightforward tone of the omniscient narrator with her disparaging and tentative prose. She is sympathetic where her counterpart is cynical; she is optimistic when he is foreboding and fatalistic. Her compassionate nature as a narrator is shown when she describes her godmother in the very beginning of her narration,

She was a good, good woman!...but she never smiled. She was always grave, and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the difference between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her – no, could never even love her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was, and how unworthy of her I was; and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better heart (28).

Though the reader gains the sense, through this passage as well as others describing various interactions between Esther and her godmother, that the latter is neither a very tolerant nor a very merciful woman, Esther's words here would suggest otherwise. She is very forgiving of the wrongs that people have done to her, choosing instead to gloss over

their faults and focus more on their good qualities. Her godmother may have been an ungenerous and miserly lady, but Esther maintains that she was a “good, good woman,” thus holding fast to the rules that governed feminine writing and its necessary sensitivity and sanguinity.

Esther is really the main matronly figure of the novel. Depicted against humorous and exaggerated versions of problematic mothers in the novel, such as Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, Esther is the only one who is adept both at keeping a house and caring for those who inhabit it. In fact, it is Esther who actually takes care of Mrs. Jellyby’s children, especially Caddy and Peepy, thereby supplanting her in her own family and essentially caring for two families. Mr. Jarndyce recognizes her role in the household, accurately assigning to her a few very matronly names to go along with her matronly personality, “This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them” (121). Even within her writing her position is cast as the domestic caretaker. She confirms her role at the end of the novel when she says, “I have never lost my old names...Dame Trot, Dame Durden, Little Woman! – all just the same as ever” (988). She is careful to portray herself in this motherly manner so as not to be seen as transgressing gender boundaries; even though she is undertaking the masculine action of writing, she is still extensively concerned with feminine matters.

Also important to note are the housekeeping keys that Mr. Jarndyce gives Esther almost immediately after she comes to live at Bleak House. According to Elizabeth Langland, the woman’s “regulatory presence is symbolized in Victorian novels by

housekeeping keys,” which instantaneously places Esther in a sphere distinctly coded feminine because she is perpetually jingling her keys throughout the novel (295). The keys suggest “that a woman by nature diffuses a charm and order that turn the home into a refuge from the capitalist competition of the marketplace,” and are therefore a tangible symbol of Esther’s femininity and her placement as a female stereotype in the novel (298). These housekeeping keys may connote an idea of Esther’s authority and symbolize her regulatory power, but it is only a power over that sphere which Victorian stereotypes maintained that women should exercise a degree of control, the household. It would seem, from the presence of these keys, that Esther’s primary duties are those that she executes at Bleak House, not the writing of this novel.

It is generally agreed by critics that Esther is the moral center of the novel; her outlook on life and behavior provide a guideline not only for the other characters to follow, but also for the reader. While the reader can catch glimpses of morality among other characters, Esther is the only one who seems to present a unified vision of honesty and virtuous conduct. Her direct, candid approach to narration contrasts strongly with the abstract manner of the omniscient narrator, who seems to condemn society without being able to offer a concrete juxtaposition to the corruption that he details. Just as the role of the woman in the Victorian household was constructed to be someone who could advocate and enforce the morality of the family, Esther as a character was designed to balance out the immorality of the world around her. Christine van Boheemen-Saaf suggests that,

Esther Summerson’s character and actions provide a counterpoint to the dismal reality of London, suggesting the possibility of an alternative to the vision of the impersonal third-person narrator who seems the spokesman for a desacralized world. Esther’s private, first-person narrative, centering on domesticity and

human relationships is presented as a contrastive remedy to the darkness called up by the omniscient narrator...It might even be possible to feel that Esther's happiness nullifies the terror and alienation evident in the impersonal narrator's vision (90).

A model of morality is manifest in everything that Esther says and does. Growing up with the assumption that she is an orphan and the knowledge that her mother was her "disgrace," surrounded only by the devout and slightly fanatical Ms. Barbary and Mrs. Rachael, Esther develops a desire to make up for the immoral circumstances of her birth and live up to the principles of her godmother of "submission, self-denial," and "diligent work" (30). Though Esther may not understand the entirety of her godmother's explanation of her parentage and illegitimate status, she knows enough to understand the shameful nature of her birth. She makes a resolution, even as a small child, saying, "I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confusedly 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" (31). The way that she views the other characters that she meets, at least giving them the benefit of the doubt and presenting them to her reader with as much optimism as she can muster, flaunts her goodness and generosity of spirit. Even Harold Skimpole, who is arguably one of the most despicable characters in the novel, receives a favorable impression from Esther. Though she points out the fact that she "had always rather a noticing way," she still chooses to portray Skimpole the benefit of the doubt in her description of him (28). She says of him,

He was a little bright creature, with a rather large head; but a delicate face, and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him. All he said was so free from effort and spontaneous, and was said with such a captivating gaiety, that it was fascinating to hear him talk...There was an easy negligence in his manner, and even in his dress (his hair carelessly disposed, and his neckerchief loose and

flowing, as I have seen artists paint their own portraits), which I could not separate from the idea of a romantic youth (89).

As readers, we know that Esther is narrating her story from seven years in the future, so she has already encountered the malignity of his character, yet she still cannot bring herself to give him the introduction that he deserves; rather, she focuses on what few redeeming qualities he does have. It is almost as if she cannot see the faults in other people, or that she chooses not to because the goodness of her heart will not allow her to think ill of anyone. Her morality gives her yet another characteristic which would lend to accordance with the categorically defined female narrator.

The third-person narrator expresses bitter humor and ironic critiques of the ineffectiveness of prevailing social institutions and the treatment of the poor. The exposition of his side of the story is endowed with masculine traits and a heavy display of his authority over what he is presenting to the reader. In contrast, Esther would appear to display a more reserved, characteristically feminine and even at times a motherly attitude in her presentation of the text. She stays within the traditional restraints of a nineteenth-century woman's narrative, confining her narrative to a personal recital of historical events, as well as giving the entire novel a sense of morality on which the third-person narrator can base his striking commentary. However, upon a closer reading of the novel it becomes obvious that the assigned roles of the narration of both the omniscient narrator and Esther are not necessarily what on the surface they seem to be.

III. Nonconformity of the Male Narration

Dickens' third-person narrator does seem to conform to the customs of a conventional male presence. He utilizes a very authorial voice in his depiction of a

satirized London and its citizens, and his omniscience would give him a broad perspective into the minds and actions of the characters that comprise his half of the story. While omniscience in a third-person point of view is precisely what is ascribed to a male narrator, it is the way that Dickens' narrator chooses to employ his omniscience that calls into question his accordance with masculine conventions. At some times, the narrator refuses to explain to the reader explicitly what it is that the characters are thinking, though it is obvious that he knows what they are thinking through what he chooses to illustrate of the character's actions and body language. Laurie Carlson explains this phenomenon of the narrator, "He is not limited to guessing what other characters are thinking: given his omniscience, he *knows*...His knowledge makes him a reliable narrator because he can inform us about things with an authority no one else possesses. Yet at times the third-person narrator also chooses *not* to reveal someone's thoughts" (154). This is a technique that the narrator seems to employ frequently with Lady Dedlock, limiting what the reader can know about her to only what they can analyze from her actions in order to deepen the dramatic effect of the eventual discovery of Esther's origins. Specifically, there is a scene in the novel with Mr. Guppy and Lady Dedlock when he reveals his knowledge of Esther's presence and connection to her,

Mr. Guppy stares. Lady Dedlock sits before him, looking him through, with the same dark shade upon her face, in the same attitude even to the holding of the screen, with her lips a little apart, her brow a little contracted, but, for the moment, dead. He sees her consciousness return, sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water, sees her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, sees her force herself back to the knowledge of his presence, and of what he has said. All this, so quickly, that her exclamation and her dead condition seem to have passed away like the features of those long-preserved dead bodies sometimes opened up in tombs, which, struck by the air like lightning, vanish in a breath (466).

It is clear through the narrator's description of Lady Dedlock's reaction to Guppy's revelations that she is shocked by the information. Yet there is no direct mention of how she feels at that moment or of what she is thinking. The narrator's circumvention of the direct thoughts of Lady Dedlock brings into question the idea of reliability, a concern generally associated with a more personal, first person account. When telling a story from memory it is inevitable that some of the details may be misremembered or exaggerated, but a broader, third-person perspective should not be suspected of inaccuracy. Imperfection in a narrative voice is assigned to women; they are unable to tell everything that happened and everything that the characters were thinking because they simply do not know. Refusing to share everything that he knows with the reader brings the third-person narrator into the domain of feminine narration.

Additionally there are the problems associated with the omniscient narrator's disinterestedness and objectivity. There are both subtle and overt passages where the narrator displays a subjective narration with regards to his characters and the events that transpire. In and of itself, the social commentary that permeates so much of the narration is not at all objective. The narrator describes events and characters in such a way as to not simply influence the reader's opinions of them, but to more or less force his opinion on his reader. This is most obvious in his multiple portrayals of Sir Leicester. He mocks Sir Leicester for much of the novel, saying things such as "Sir Leicester Dedlock is only a baronet, but there is no mightier baronet than he. His family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable. He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks" (21). The narrator's depiction of Sir Leicester continues on in this ironic manner through most of the novel, and the reader

begins to feel as he does regarding the nature and value of the aristocracy. However, at the end of the novel the narrator begins to describe the man with a completely different approach; rather than ridiculing the character, the narrator begins to pity him. He states, “His noble earnestness, his fidelity, his gallant shielding of her, his general conquest of his own wrong and his own pride for her sake, are simply honourable, manly, and true. Nothing less worthy can be seen through the lustre of such qualities in the commonest mechanic, nothing less worthy can be seen in the best-born gentleman” (895). After Lady Dedlock’s secret had finally come to light and Lord Dedlock lay ill in bed, he continues to protect the honor of the love of his life. In this light, the narrator is now insisting that the reader share his sympathy and compassion for Sir Leicester, and it is hard not to feel that way, despite the previous derision that the narrator had heretofore showered on the gentleman. Despite the wrong that Victorian society claims was committed against Sir Leicester, the narrator is emphasizing his admirable ability to not only forgive Lady Dedlock but to defend her to those who would speak ill of her. Carlson states, “He has his obvious sympathies (Jo, Bucket, the Bagnets, Snagsby) and his antipathies (Vholes, Doodle, Coodle), and he wants us to share them” (156). Even though he seems at first to be impersonal, there is absolutely nothing objective about the third-person narrator’s depiction of his characters; he does not allow the reader to make their own judgments because his forceful descriptions compel the reader to feel the same way that he does, and in that subjectivity he tends to resemble more the epitome of a female narrator rather than the ideal of a male, who would leave his reader to make his own conclusions on the information presented.

In his depiction of the major events that occur within the novel, the omniscient narrator often presents the material with detachment. He describes Tulkinghorn's death with perfect self-possession, saying,

What's that? Who fired a gun or pistol? Where was it?...Has Mr. Tulkinghorn been disturbed? His windows are dark and quiet, and his door is shut. It must be something unusual indeed, to bring *him* out of his shell. Nothing is heard of him, nothing is seen of him. What power of cannon might it take to shake that rusty old man out of his immoveable composure?...For, Mr. Tulkinghorn's time is over for evermore; and the Roman pointed at the murderous hand uplifted against his life, and pointed helplessly at him, from night to morning, lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart (749-52).

There is absolutely no emotion in the way that the narrator portrays Tulkinghorn's death; he is just relaying the facts without feeling anything about it, not sympathy, not sadness, no anger. However, this impartiality does not last for the entirety of the novel.

There are other times throughout the novel when the omniscient narrator displays an extremely conspicuous bias within the story. He is categorically supposed to present a narrative that is at once bitter and ironic, yet also detached and unemotional. However, this does not always seem to be the case. The most prominent example of the narrator's passion for the story and the characters within is during the death of Jo. The passage is forceful and poignant, and it is hard to overlook the narrator's intensity in describing the anguish he feels over the little boy's death, as well as his indignation at those who allowed for it to happen. He tells of the discourse between Jo and Allan Woodcourt with such extreme emotion that seems to be lacking from most of his other text,

'Jo, my poor fellow!'

'I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I'm a gropin – a gropin – let me catch hold of your hand.'

'Jo, can you say what I say?'

'I'll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it's good.'

'OUR FATHER.'

'Our Father! – yes, that's wery good, sir.'

‘WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.’

‘Art in Heaven – is the light a comin, sir?’

‘It is close at hand. HALLOWED BY THEY NAME!’

‘Hallowed be – thy –‘

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day (733-4).

The narrator’s investment in this event is obvious in the compassion with which he describes it. He places in the scene most of the major sympathetic characters of the narrative, with the sole exclusion of Esther: Allan Woodcourt, George, Mr. Jarndyce, and Mr. Snagsby; they are the characteristically ‘good’ characters of the novel, and in putting them at one of the most intensely emotional scenes, the narrator is implicitly labeling Jo as one of the good characters as well. The reader will always feel more empathy for the death and suffering of a good character than for an evil one, for the central reason that they did nothing to deserve the pain they received. Jo is only a child; at his young age he has been given very little opportunity to negatively influence the world around him. The narrator does his utmost to persuade the reader to sympathize with Jo, the good character, but not with Mr. Tulkinghorn, the evil character, and it is for that reason that the third person narrator talks so passionately about the death of the former and so impersonally about the death of the latter. The switching of attitudes and the narrator’s emotional attachment to his characters is what feminizes his narration.

And then in the final lines of the paragraph the narrator turns from sympathy for Jo to anger towards mankind for sanctioning that something so terrible happen to someone so young and innocent. He accuses all of his readers of selfishness and indifference to the plight of others, at once returning to his bitter and mocking tone, yet

this time his irony is infused with real emotions, “Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.” He is no longer impartial but is taking a personal interest in Jo’s case and he shows that passion in his direct address to the reader. Barbara Hardy explains the actions of the narrator,

He moves the action from Jo’s death and demands our compassion for the real world in which author and readers live, and will not let us stay with the luxury of literary compassion which he has made us feel, and which we genuinely if too easily feel for imaginary characters, imaginary suffering and imaginary death. He insists that we leave the text and remember what we do not need to imagine, the real lost children ‘dying thus around us every day’. He shocks the complacent reader and reminds us why and for whom he was writing (104).

He is really outraged, not only at the characters in his story that caused and allowed the death and suffering of Jo in the squalor of Tom-All-Alone’s, but also by the people in the real world, the world outside of the novel, the world of the reader, who allow the exact same thing to go on every day around them and yet do not lift a finger to save the poor from the effects of a poverty that most could not control. In this passage the third person narrator is by no means impersonal and unprejudiced; his prejudices ring loud and clear to the reader, and in doing so he transcends the line between male and female narration. In addition, the anonymous narrator even transgresses the point of view of narration. In the last sentence of the passage he directly addresses the reader, switching from his habitual mode of third-person to the more personalized mode of first-person, which is Esther’s territory for the majority of the novel. Warhol elucidates,

Critics have come to see Esther’s narrative as the location of femininity in *Bleak House*. The engaging moment after Jo’s death, however, shows signs of the feminine carrying over into the heterodiegetically narrated parts of the novel, enabling Dickens to achieve his sentimental effects even within this multivalent,

metaliterary structure. Like his female contemporaries, Dickens did not disdain the rhetoric of sensation: the power and popularity of his novels attest to the potential effectiveness of crossing gendered boundaries of narrative intervention (156).

Though it at first appears that the narrator maintains his sphere of narration and conforms his narrative to male technique and structure, it is obvious from these previously quoted passages that these gendered narratives only appear to conform to the distinction of separate spheres, yet in actuality the distinction is much less distinct than a surface reading would suggest.

IV. Equality in Esther's Narration

Esther's narration, like that of the third-person narrator, blurs the distinction between male and female narrative in more subtle ways than are at first apparent, and probably in ways that Dickens' nineteenth century audience never even noticed. Robert Newsom explicates that "Esther, who presents herself as timid and easily flustered, deferential to authority and even not especially bright...is much keener and less deferential than she indicates" (69-70). She is definitely not the character that she presents herself to be; the rhetorical techniques that she employs in writing her story show an attempt to evade gender expectations and deceive the reader in thinking that Esther is the perfect embodiment of who a female narrator was supposed to be. Sell-Sandoval clarifies,

She is trapped by the power of femininity which would deny her the power to observe and judge accurately and by her own desire to see the good in everyone. Consequently, she must develop a narrative strategy, sometimes frustrating in its seeming coyness and indirection, that allows her to express judgment without sounding overly assertive or "masculine" and without giving up her essential goodness, one part of which is her ability to see the good in others (166-7).

Esther *does* judge the other people in the novel; as I commented earlier she even tells the reader directly that she has “rather a noticing way,” but she masks her observations with good words in an attempt to see the good in everyone and to look past the faults of the other characters. In an essay on gender stereotypes in Dickens’ fiction, Natalie McKnight asserts that, “Assertive women are often portrayed as monsters in Victorian fiction precisely because assertiveness is a male trait and therefore seems unnatural when adopted by a female who is supposed to be angelic” (192). Esther always finds a way to make her point and tell her story, and in this way she avoids the trap of male assertiveness that McKnight explains is a sure sign of villainy in a female character. Her opinions do sneak forth from beneath the guise of compliments, and it is not hard to discern Esther’s true feelings towards another character, despite how well she may hide it from herself. When a lady that Esther is conversing with states her incredibly unfavorable opinion about Mr. Turveydrop, exclaiming, “I could bite you!” Esther’s response is far from impartial. She says in reply, “I could not help being amused, though I heard the old lady out with feelings of real concern. It was difficult to doubt her, with the father and son before me. What I might have thought of them without the old lady’s account...I cannot say” (227). In presenting the feelings of the old lady with regards to Mr. Turveydrop’s arrogance and pretension, Esther subtly presents her own opinions as well, ingenuously agreeing with the old lady without explicitly stating what she thinks. Though she does not write her judgments in a candid manner, the reader is in no doubt as to what she thinks of the ostentatious dancing master.

Yet she does not only focus on the faults of the women in the novel. According to Newsom, “men in *Bleak House* are as much the targets of satire as are women for

precisely the failings of someone like Mrs. Jellyby, for example. Harold Skimpole is one among many of the novels representatives of bad men” (71). Esther’s interactions with Skimpole are another very good example of how she is able to satirize a character and use her evasive rhetorical tactics to present her reader with a very bad opinion of a character that she does not like. He is a man who has denied the possession of any responsibility, whether over his own life, the lives of his children, or, in this case, the life of Richard. When Esther goes to talk to Skimpole about Richard she remarks, “I delicately said, that there was a responsibility in encouraging Richard,” to which comment Mr. Skimpole states, ““Responsibility, my dear Miss Summerson?...I am the last man in the world for such a thing. I never was responsible in my life – I can’t be”” (603). In return Esther observes, ““I am afraid everybody is obliged to be,’ said I, timidly enough: he being so much older and more clever than I” (603). Here she admonishes him for his evasion of duties, although she does it in such a way as to seem to preserve a nonjudgmental demeanor. Jaffe further clarifies, “Esther can chastise Skimpole as long as she seems in awe of him...because she at the same time announces that she distrusts herself. Presenting herself as alienated from her own knowledge, Esther cannot be held responsible for what she knows or says” (175-6). She may be coy and shy, but she is not too shy to take Skimpole to task for the harm he is inflicting on Richard, and she manages to maintain a semblance of taciturnity in doing so.

As Horace Skimpole is the least favorable person in Esther’s memoirs, he is the best example of how she presents a character that she does not like. After she goes to his house to confront him about his negative influence on Richard she presents a short description of what happened with Mr. Skimpole in the succeeding years,

As it so happened that I never saw Mr. Skimpole again, I may at once finish what I know of his history. A coolness arose between him and my guardian...on his having heartlessly disregarded my guardian's entreaties...in reference to Richard. His being heavily in my guardian's debt, had nothing to do with their separation. He died some five years afterwards, and left a diary behind him, with letters and other materials towards his Life; which was published, and which showed him to have been the victim of a combination on the part of mankind against an amiable child. It was considered to be very pleasant reading, but I never read more of it myself than the sentence on which I chanced to light on opening the book. It was this. 'Jarndyce, in common with most other men I have known, is the Incarnation of Selfishness' (935).

She here presents the end of what she knows about Mr. Skimpole in such a matter-of-fact tone, that it is almost impossible to miss her lack of feelings towards him. In addition, she sneaks in the comment about him owing Mr. Jarndyce quite a bit of money, even though she concedes that the fact really has nothing to do with anything that she is talking about and was in no way a reason for his estrangement from Mr. Jarndyce. In doing so, she is reiterating Skimpole's irresponsibility and the way that he used other people so that the reader can see what kind of person he was without being fooled by his good-humored manner and his clever justifications. She references her guardian several times in the passage, especially in the very last sentence, the man who is the very epitome of good in the novel. By emphasizing Skimpole's maltreatment of Jarndyce in his book, Esther is able to leave the reader with a very negative impression of Skimpole. Mr. Jarndyce is arguably the most kind-hearted and benevolent character of the novel; the reader has no way of escaping his innate goodness. Therefore, in contrasting him with Mr. Skimpole and saying that there "a coolness arose" between them, the reader is sure to side with Mr. Jarndyce, a character that is universally loved for his compassion and kindness. This view is even further enforced when the reader sees the last line of the passage, explaining that Skimpole called Mr. Jarndyce the "Incarnation of Selfishness," when we know him

to be the exact opposite. The irony here is that Skimpole is, in fact, pretty close to the incarnation of selfishness himself.

Another important instance of Esther's condemnatory nature is demonstrated in the statement she makes about Mrs. Jellyby upon one of their first meetings, when she states that, "it is right to begin with the obligations of home, sir; and that, perhaps, while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them" (83). Though she presents this opinion as an offhand comment, intended almost as a question to her guardian, it is clear that she feels Mrs. Jellyby is neglectful of her duties and a poor mother. She phrases her statement in such a way as to make it seem to the reader as if she is forming a principle for herself to live by, but what she is doing in actuality is intentionally creating a value judgment on Mrs. Jellyby in such a way as to make the reader read it and form an opinion in a like manner. Esther should be conservative and compassionate, not sarcastic and critical of the other characters in the novel; her use of irony and the presentation of a judgmental opinion strays from the realm of the female narration and overlaps with the duties of the third-person narrator.

As similarities like Esther's ironic commentary begin to develop between Esther's narration and that of her counterpart, it becomes increasingly hard to differentiate their stories by means of gendered rhetorical techniques. It is clear by this point that the anonymous narrator has created his story with a social and a moral objective. His striking critiques of London institutions and urban poverty permeate his text; all of his characters and the events taking place would serve to satisfy that objective. We, as readers, tend to think that Esther is only telling her story because of the entreaty of a friend. However, Esther also soon comes to realize that her narrative does not have to be

just a tale told for the pleasure of the reader; it too, like the account of her corresponding narrator, can have a social and a moral function. Dickens designed Esther as the moral center of the novel, and throughout the course of her story she acknowledges her altruistic ideas. She states in the opening chapter of her story that she desired “to do some good to some one” (31). When later speaking to the reader about the aftermath of her illness Esther communicates the reason that she choose to include such a traumatizing event in her story, “I do not recall them to make others unhappy, or because I am now the least unhappy in remembering them. It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity” (556). She here recognize both her desire and her ability to effect some kind of social change, however small it may be, with her narrative. Carlson expounds on this, “She tells her story out of generosity to benefit the readers by educating them, since her narrative inculcates a set of moral beliefs for the reader to learn and profit by, as Esther herself has done” (173). Esther allows that her tale can be more than just a personal memoir for pleasure’s sake; it has the ability to make a difference in the world, just as does the story of the third-person narrator.

Then there is the Victorian understanding of inequality between men and women, a custom well-established in cultural and literary tradition. In accordance with this belief, Esther’s memoirs should take a backseat to the comprehensive and extensive arena of the anonymous narrator, whose social critique would appear to be of much more importance than the autobiography of such an unimposing figure as Esther. At first, such inequality does seem to be present; the novel begins with the omniscient narrator, and his impressive power and authority over the text takes up more than half of the entire novel.

However, Esther's narrative is not necessarily inferior to that of her counterpart. In her opening lines she writes, "I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages" (27). She knows about the omniscient narrator's portion of the story, and her knowledge of this, which the other narrator does not seem to possess, would place her narrative on an equal playing field with his. Though he may be male and all-knowing, he clearly does not know that he is sharing his story, so that in this instance Esther's knowledge is greater than his. Her awareness of the other narrator's text would serve to mitigate implications of inequality between their stories.

In addition to Esther's understanding that she is sharing the narration of the story and her first-perspective, which would seem to be extremely limiting in its scope, which at times it is, in a way she is actually given more freedom to shape her story than is the anonymous narrator. As Carlson says, "The third-person narrator's text is more context-bound and less free-standing than Esther's, ironically suggesting a dependence on the other's narrator's text of which hers is free" (187). Esther could, theoretically, tell her story without the support of the other narrator, and it would not appear to be incomplete. There would be a lack of the comprehensive message that *Bleak House* attempts to portray because Esther would be unable to include most of the characters that appear in the third-person narration, but as a whole her story could stand on its own. In doing so it would just serve a different purpose and present a different message. The anonymous narrator, on the other hand, would not be able to do so. If he attempted to create a story without supplementing it with Esther's, he would either be left with too much unexplained plot, or he would have to take out many of his characters, thereby losing much of his societal commentary and sacrificing some of the main messages of his story.

The verb tense of each individual narrative also assists an equalizing force between the two stories. Esther is telling her as she is looking back on it, and therefore she has the power of hindsight, whereas the third-person narrator is telling his story as the events take place. In his narrative, then, he can only know what is happening at that exact time; though he can conjecture about what will happen in the forthcoming years, he has no real knowledge of what the future holds. However, since Esther is speaking with the advantage of time, she has every comprehension of what will happen next in her story. This adds a level of omniscience to her story that is lacking from the other narrator's. Though he has the ability to see into his characters' minds and to survey a large amount of people in his narrative, he is unable to predict the future, which Esther herself can do. As Carlson says, "Esther then is constrained by point of view, but not by time, whereas the omniscient narrator may be constrained by time but not by point of view" (188). Neither narrator is completely pansophical in the novel, because both have equal strengths and equal weaknesses, in point of view of narration.

She undoubtedly has power in her own story, which is an aspect that is traditionally lacking from a feminine narration which adds even more omniscience to Esther's persona. She is able to manipulate the reader, and she is able to pry into the lives of the other characters. Despite the fact that she is not completely omniscient and cannot ascertain what the other characters are thinking, there is strong evidence to suggest that she possesses a degree of omniscience. Jaffe comments that there are "times when she records conversations in such detail that, if the narrative's premise is to make sense, we must imagine either that she writes constantly or possesses an uncanny capacity for memorisation. For much of her narrative, that is, Esther might as well be omniscient"

(164). And as it is somewhat difficult to subscribe to the belief that she can remember everything that she hears in the exact way that it is said, it is therefore reasonable to assume that she maintains an influence over the actions and beliefs of other characters, or at least those that she records in her story. She takes center stage in the relationships between Caddy and Prince Turveydrop, as well as that between Richard and Ada. She often influences their decisions, especially with Caddy's decision to marry Prince, and she comes to be seen as almost a third person in the relationship; she is constantly reminding the reader of the closeness and love that she shares with Ada and Richard. Her presence permeates all of her narrative, whether or not she is the main focus of the events taking place, and it is in that strength of presence that Esther "comes to wield a not insignificant amount of 'unfeminine' power" (173). In the end, Esther essentially appears to be on equal footing with the anonymous narrator, through her rhetorical technique and her control over her own story and the lives involved in it. McKnight recapitulates Esther's position in the novel,

Dickens's young women characters are the ones most open to the charge of "stereotypes" because they so consistently reflect the gender expectations of young Victorian women...[they] all share the docile, dutiful and devoted characteristics of the Angel in the House ideal, while also exhibiting good housekeeping skills...[yet] these characters, while undoubtedly reflecting mainstream gender norms, also reveal contradictory and even dangerous patterns in these norms...So, while Dickens uses the stereotypical Angel in the House, he almost always does so in a way that reflects the fault-lines of the image (195).

Though the male narrator begins the first two chapters of the novel, his narrative actually ends several chapters before the completion of the novel as a whole. It is then left for Esther to finish out the tale and determine an outcome; it is her who becomes the conclusive authority, usurping the power of the third-person narrator and equalizing their narrative spheres.

CONCLUSION

During the nineteenth century it was much less common to see women writers and female narrators than to find literature written and narrated by men. Those that did make use of feminine expression were relegated to a specific genre of literature, realistic fiction, and regulated with criteria set forth by Victorian social conventions. Female narrators were supposed to confine their stories to private settings and their morals to domestic affairs. Their equivalent male narrators were given more liberty as to the genre of their literature, as well as the tone and message; men were allowed to occupy a public setting, commenting on world affairs, and they had the option to use rhetorical conventions which were denied to women, such as irony and satire.

As a masculine author, Charles Dickens was widely known for his use these rhetorical techniques and his social commentary on the state of affairs throughout England. However, he shocked much of his reading public when he first introduced *Bleak House*, a novel with two distinct narrators, especially as one of them possessed a feminine voice. The novel is divided by these two voices, one third-person omniscient and presumably male narrator, and one first-person female narrator, a character named Esther Summerson. On the surface these two narrators seem to conform to social and narrative precepts, both in their sphere of narration and in their style of speech. However, in taking a closer look at the expression of both narrators and the methods of articulation that they employ, it must be acknowledged that such a stereotypical reading of the novel and its narrators presents many problems. Rather, reading the two narrators as a concession to gender traditions in literature is more an ideal approach than an actual reality.

The male narrator may concentrate on social problems and present an ironic critique of prevailing English institutions, yet many of his choices in narration do not conform to his relegated role. While there is no doubt that he is omniscient regarding the characters in his half of the story, his use of his omniscience is not always shown to the reader. He makes decisions as to what to reveal and what to keep silent, obscuring what his characters are thinking at crucial moments and presenting the reader with only their body language to give them insight into the character's minds. In addition, his objectivity is called into question throughout the novel, most notably with events such as Jo's death and the narrator's passionate appeal to the reader, but also more subtly in his characterization of his characters. When the narrator does not like someone he is hardly impartial about it, and the reader knows his bias so well that he or she begins to feel in like manner.

There are complications with reading Esther's narration as a perpetuation of gender stereotypes as well. She may have a uncontroversial tone that accords with the feminine ideal of an agreeable nature and an affectionate attitude, but she does find a way to subvert these qualities and present her opinions to the reader without seeming blatantly judgmental. She has power to influence the reader with what she is saying, an authority traditionally denied to female narrators who were supposed to be telling straightforward tales of their lives.

The difference in authoritative power of the narrators is further tempered by the fact that Esther's narration is told from a future perspective, adding to her level of omniscience, where as the male narrator is telling the story as it is happening, so he has no more knowledge of imminent events than do the characters in his story. Their

inequality is also mediated by the fact that Esther is completely aware that she is sharing the narration of the novel with another narrator who does not seem to know anything about her. Though the omniscient narrator begins the novel, automatically putting the two narrators on an unequal footing, Esther's narrative closes out the last several chapters of the novel, emphasizing a more comparable perspective of the narrators in the end. McKnight capably recapitulates the idea that in *Bleak House* Dickens created a novel that defied palpable gender definitions, "Does Dickens rely on gender stereotypes? Certainly. Does he reveal the contradictions and dangerous tensions in these stereotypes? Absolutely. Does he transcend gender stereotypes? Almost always" (197). Though many contemporary critics continue to read this novel as a preservation of prevailing Victorian social and gender conventions, the narrators do not actually accord with this approach, and an in-depth analysis of the text leads to the conclusion that the idea of separate spheres of expression in *Bleak House* is nothing more than a myth.

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