

Dickens's *Bleak House*: The Uncanny, Self-Deprecation, and a Consuming Force

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Abstract: This paper explores how Esther's habitual self-abnegation in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* highlights the terrifying nature of society's consuming and chaotic forces. Part One provides an overview of characters in *Bleak House* who experience misfortune or self-destruction, demonstrating a society in a state of dereliction that inevitably traps all who reside within it. Part Two explains that the protagonist, Esther, is already caught in this state of dereliction during her childhood, and reveals how Miss Barbary's harsh words uncannily resurface in Esther's mind, awakening her fears and doubts. Part Three explores Esther's attempts to build relationships and fulfill societal roles to escape her state of dereliction. Part Four illustrates Esther using writing to cleanse herself of her illicit origins in her struggle to meet the social expectations of middle-class women. Esther, however, never breaks free from her state of dereliction, developing instead pronounced pathological tendencies of self-erasure that ultimately consume her. What begins as a positive, adaptive sublimation devolves into a negative coping mechanism, serving only to manage her persistent, haunting feelings of the uncanny.

Keywords: Bleak House, Esther, dereliction, uncanny, a consuming force, self-deprecation

1. Introduction

Some traditional readings view Esther Summerson as a personification of middle-class traits. In "Dickens' Excremental Vision" (1970), Michael Steig argues that the traits she develops during her growth—such as goodness, purity, and order—serve as metaphors that oppose or transcend the dirtiness, disorder, and bureaucratic dysfunction of a corrupt society. Olga Stuchebukhov in "'Bleak House' as an Allegory of a Middle-Class Nation" (2006) also reads Esther's journey through life as an allegory that exemplifies the national ideal of middle-class norms. As a whole, Esther's character represents an idealized Victorian archetype in serving as a moral antithesis to the chaotic, neglectful world of the Chancery court. While these insights are valuable, *Bleak House* presents another voice regarding Charles Dickens's pessimistic perspective on the world of his time, positing that the novel reflects a real world in which, as J. Hillis Miller notes, "dereliction will never end, as long as the character is alive," since "it is the permanent condition of human existence" (Miller 1958, 196). When Dickens creates heroes and heroines who struggle to overcome threats of decay and decomposition, he presents the world as inherently prone to, and never free from, decay. This essay explores the life of Esther Summerson in Dickens's *Bleak House* and her inability to escape from a state of dereliction. Esther strives to suppress the uncanny feeling stemming from her aunt's words by shaping a positive identity. She achieves this either through her substantial social bonds or through an imagination that manifests in her narratives and magic tricks with her childhood doll. She cannot shake off "the uncanny"; instead, haunted by the uncanny, she becomes more fixated on sublimation by self-denial and thus ultimately remains in the state of dereliction.

2. A Consuming, Chaotic Force

At the beginning of *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens presents a consuming, chaotic force that acts as a

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corrosive agency breaking down all lives. This powerful force operates within legal, social, and political systems that fail to offer care or justice. The third-person narrator uses the fog and mud of the urban environment as a metaphor for this force, which Miller posits symbolizes a general descent into primal slime—a return to chaos that unfolds everywhere in the novel (Miller 1958, 195). Indeed, a consuming, chaotic force befalls all life in the novel—from the slum of Tom-all-Alone's, to Krook's shop, the Court of Chancery, John Jarndyce's Bleak House, and Chesney Wold. The characters of *Bleak House*, inhabiting a "self-enclosed life," speed toward their own decomposition in an active process (199). Men's desires drive this consuming force that ultimately leads them to destruction. Desire is represented as excrement in *Bleak House*. As Steig remarks in "Dickens' Excremental Vision" (1970), the term "excremental vision" in Dickens's novels *A Christmas Carol* and *Bleak House* is associated with traits of negative sublimation. Biological metaphors and metaphors related to scatological objects—such as constipation, feces, and cesspools—refer to inefficiency or stoppages in people's work and social institutions, while the metaphor of spontaneous combustion suggests that such stoppages lead to a destructive state of eliminatory processes. The world in Dickens' *Bleak House* mirrors a declined civilization where there are no longer any institutions that effectively protect all human beings. Scenes of stench, heaps of animal dung in the streets, and piles of casually buried corpses in the graveyard are metaphors Dickens employs for his description of a civilization in decay. There is no cultural standard in the city or town as men delve into their unlimited desires or "negative anal sublimation."

When desire is combined with money, it often creates a world devoid of humanity. Dickens's novels are replete with characters who relentlessly pursue money for personal gain. In *Bleak House*, Smallweed the moneylender and the lawyer Mr. Vholes are typical profit-driven individuals. Smallweed greedily claims Krook's inheritance in court and relentlessly pursues debts from Mr. George, ultimately driving the latter into severe financial distress. Mr. Vholes exploits Richard Carstone's relentless involvement in the *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* case, gradually draining him of all his money through litigation fees. Mr. Robert Rouncewell, a prosperous ironmaster representing the rising, industrious middle class of the 19th century, while not a villain, creates a new commercial industry that combines machinery, smoke, and grime: a new physical manifestation of the combination of money and desire resulting in the erosion of humanity, as people are forced into mechanically performing labor that drains their very being.

Driven by human desires, this chaotic force consumes wealth, hope, and life, and its metaphorical representation of the slow movement of fog and mud underscores the terror of a prolonged death. Although Krook dies of spontaneous human combustion, most characters in *Bleak House* are slowly being consumed in a protracted inhuman decay. As Samuel M. Sipe in "The Intentional World of Dickens's Fiction" (1975) observes, Dickens's man-made objects and human characters inhabit a dehumanized and alien man-made world that has lost its original meaning or intention. Dickens's man-made objects, which have lost their intentions, undergo a protracted decay or "maintain a tenuous life" until they are destroyed (Sipe 1975, 12)—his human characters exist within the protracted process of depersonalization in a disturbing environment (16). Deprived of any spontaneity, Dickens's human characters lose, in Paul de Man's terms, "totality" (6-7); they become things (16), falling into the destiny of being manipulated or killed as objects. In *Bleak House*, Nemo (Captain Hawdon) and Jo both die without dignity: their deaths are marked by poverty, illness, and despair. Hawdon is a former officer who becomes an impoverished legal scribe, eventually dying of an opium overdose. He is hastily buried in a filthy, overcrowded, and unhallowed pauper graveyard in Tom-all-Alone's. Jo is a destitute, illiterate street sweeper who earns his living by sweeping the streets of London. His misfortune leads him into Tulkinghorn's morbid conspiracy against Lady Dedlock, resulting in his expulsion and eventual death from a serious illness.

Nemo, Jo, and other vulnerable individuals, when helpless, cannot rely on social assistance and can only helplessly allow the forces of destruction to slowly devour them. If the purpose of the social and judicial systems is to combat the forces of destruction, then in *Bleak House* they are rendered dysfunctional, or worse, they assist the forces of destruction, becoming predatory institutions that destroy lives and fuel misery with “dilapidated” structures of moral confusion and social stagnation.

The ruinous effects of the consuming, chaotic force are ubiquitous; not only does the destructive force plunge the poor into deeper despair, but it also consumes both the lives and fortunes of the wealthy. The eeriest aspect of the novel lies in the fall of the wealthy and those of high social standing, illustrating the omnipresent nature of destructive forces. Lady Dedlock is a prime example, and her misfortune is central to the novel. She is trapped by rigid social codes of the Victorian era. After Tulkinghorn discovers her secret, she attempts to avoid catastrophe by fleeing her family in desperation. She disguises herself as a poor person, trying to conceal her whereabouts. This disguise does not enable her to escape destruction, but instead leads her to death. She ultimately freezes to death in front of the iron gate at the grave of her former lover, Captain Hawdon. Her death proves that destruction is ubiquitous. As Robert E. Lougy argues in “Filtch, Liminality, and Abjection in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*” (2002), everyone—whether they have established a social status or are unable to obtain its protection—is pushed toward liminality or a gray area, a marginal and uncertain state. The boundary between the dwellings of the dead and the living is ultimately dissolved; the living reside adjacent to a graveyard full of decaying tombs, and the rich who attempt to separate themselves from the poor also lose their protective layers. As Miller observes, the characters of *Bleak House*, inhabiting a “self-enclosed life,” descend toward their own decomposition in an active process (Miller 1958, 199).

In the novel, obsession is also a form of desire associated with destruction. For example, Krook is known as the “Lord Chancellor,” and he amasses a vast collection of old books, papers, and letters only to satisfy his desires stemming from a morbid obsession with possessing these “secret documents.” This fanatical desire ultimately leads to his death by spontaneous combustion. Mr. Tulkinghorn, the lead solicitor and legal advisor to the aristocratic Dedlock family, is another example of a character driven by a morbid obsession to possess the secrets of others. His meticulous tracking of Lady Dedlock’s secrets and movements ultimately leads him to his own destruction. Dickens also employs Richard Carstone, Miss Flite, and Mrs. Jellyby to illustrate that obsession can lead to ruin. Their demise through obsession is directly contrasted with the stable and disciplined life built by the middle-class characters in the novel, yet Dickens does not believe that self-disciplined middle-class individuals can escape destruction. While Richard Carstone and other characters head towards self-destruction due to their obsessions, Esther exhibits another extreme—an “altruistic obsession” dedicated to responsibility. As the chapter “A Progress” implies, Esther seeks to establish a proper relationship with others, thus transforming her desires through socially acceptable sublimation, which entails integrating her childhood doll into her re-narrated story. However, her positive sublimation becomes negative as it turns into a coping mechanism for dealing with her haunting, uncanny feelings. Unlike the obsessions that consume Richard and other characters, the one that consumes Esther is caused by her own diligent and selfless personality.

3. Esther’s Psychological Development

Esther’s psychological development is deeply influenced by her childhood and early schooling at a boarding school named Greenleaf. Her aunt’s words motivate her to accelerate her learning and growth

at school, but she still cannot escape their uncanny influence.

Esther is raised in an inhuman, cold way by her aunt, Miss Barbary. She is not physically abused by her aunt, but under Miss Barbary's oppressive and unloving discipline, Esther develops the unhealthy personality trait of self-denial. As the twelve-year-old child Esther looks forward to having a birthday in the way that other children do, Miss Barbary admonishes her: "It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!" (*Bleak House* 19). Miss Barbary then adds, "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers" (19). Indeed, Miss Barbary intends to annihilate a portion of humanity within Esther, insisting that Esther be an "illegitimate child" in atoning for her mother and living as a nonexistent being. She rejects Esther as her niece, perceiving her to be a sinful being who must live a tenuous life, thus urging her to submit to hard work and self-denial (19). Being deliberately isolated from other children, Esther becomes an inarticulate child. What is worse, Miss Barbary never reveals the reality about Esther's parents; thus, Esther holds fears and doubts about her birth. Even though Miss Barbary died, Esther is still haunted by the memory of her godmother in nightmares (Rogers II 2017, 71), as the godmother's words have long-lasting effects that manifest as childhood trauma (Zwerdling 1973, 430).

Miss Barbary's words are deeply ingrained in Esther's consciousness and often uncannily resurface, influencing her personality and behavior. Just as the Sandman disturbs Nathaniel in the tale analyzed in Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny," Miss Barbary's words resurface in Esther's mind, reawakening buried fears and doubts. In "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud examines the origins of uncanny feelings and their impact on the psychological development of individuals who encounter such phenomena during childhood. In Daniel Sanders's *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*, the German word *heimlich* is noted as having two contradictory meanings. First, it refers to "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly" (Freud 1919, 222)—a sense roughly equivalent to the English word "canny." Second, it refers to what is "concealed, kept from sight [...] withheld from others" (223). Because *heimlich* can mean "concealed," it ends up overlapping with its opposite, *unheimlich*. Consequently, the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is not just the opposite of familiar; it is something secretly familiar that has been repressed and then returned (241, 245), with the "un-" prefix serving as the token of repression (245). To give an example of "the uncanny," Freud examines Hoffmann's "The Sandman." In the story, the protagonist Nathaniel recalls a childhood tale told by his nurse about the Sandman, a monster who throws sand into the eyes of children who refuse to go to bed, making their bleeding eyes pop out of their heads (228). Within Nathaniel's imagination, the narrative spirals into fear. He begins to envision the Sandman as a mysterious visitor—the lawyer Coppelius—who threatens to blind him and, he believes, murders his father in a fiery alchemical experiment. The trauma of losing his father and the fear of the Sandman are so deep that Nathaniel becomes a neurotic patient. His recollection of his father's death and his fear of the Sandman are intertwined with his new experiences in adulthood (229). For example, Nathaniel projects himself onto Olympia, an automaton made by Professor Spalanzani, and associates the Sandman with Giuseppe Coppola, an optician who installed Olympia's eyes (229). Nathaniel succumbs to delirium at the sight of Olympia's eyes and lunges at Spalanzani to strangle him. Meanwhile, Coppola, in a quarrel with Spalanzani over the ownership of Olympia, makes off with her body, leaving her eyes lying on the ground (229). Freud identifies Nathaniel's fear of losing his eyes and his derangement at the sight of Olympia's "gougged-out" eyes as "the dread of being castrated" (232). The recurrence of delirium in Nathaniel's life is the result of the uncanny: the repressed recollection of childhood fear returns when a new experience provokes the same feelings of dread and helplessness (234). Influenced by the Sandman story from his childhood, Nathaniel fears having his eyes gouged out; influenced by

Miss Barbary's words, Esther fears being affected by her mother's "disgrace."

Since it is difficult to separate her from the cause of Esther's fear, we can view Miss Barbary as a terrifying mother-figure. Similar to Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby—the typical monstrous mothers who have lost totality by fabricating children "with venom" (Dever 1995, 43; Rogers II 2017)—Miss Barbary is a monstrous mother-figure who imposes a harsh, fear-based upbringing on the child. As Arthur L. Rogers II notes in "The Dickens in Esther: Autobiographical Implications in *Bleak House*," Miss Barbary's excessive strictness leaves Esther with two primary symptoms: Obsessive-Compulsive tendencies and an inability to articulate particularly powerful emotions (73-74).

Later, John Jarndyce arranges for Esther to attend a boarding school, intending for her to learn domestic skills—a "perfectly" Victorian education for middle-class women. Esther's education aligns closely with social expectations, even shaping her into the "angel of the house." Although she is no longer forbidden from making friends as was the case in her childhood, she still has no opportunity to evolve her personality there. Instead, she develops even more pronounced pathological traits, including an extreme, almost self-effacing, humility. To maintain her "perfect usefulness," she learns to conceal her true desires and pain. No one at boarding school forces Esther to be a "good person," but her extreme kindness and self-discipline stem from her childhood psychological development and the Victorian social norms of the "ideal woman" that she is taught at school. From Esther's self-erasing personality, we can see that both the family and social spheres she encounters are permeated by a consuming force. While trying to be a good person or an angel at home, she simultaneously develops obvious pathological characteristics of self-erasure.

Esther's obsession with cleanliness and order reflects behaviors labeled as "Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms" (OCS). Though not a serious mental dysfunction, OCS serves as a coping mechanism in response to the pressure to behave well (Rogers II). For Esther, it is a way to mask the uncleanness she feels as an illegitimate child. It is a defense mechanism against the "excretory" chaos or social stigma deep within her (Steig 1970, 352). It is also relevant to the traits of "anal-retentive" personality. According to Freud, if a child is guided to behave well during the anal period—the period of learning cleanliness and order—the child will develop into a civilized being and adapt well to social life as a mentally healthy individual. Unfortunately, Esther exhibits an excessive obsession with cleanliness and order rather than a healthy standard of tidiness. As William Axton points out, her underlying goodness masks a distinctly morbid personality (1965, 549). Steig laments for Esther: she is "an embodiment of positive value and love, as well as order, regularity and 'duty'" (Steig 1970, 351), which is good for society, but she herself has paid the price for the good character she has cultivated since childhood (351-353).

Apart from this, Esther's behavior is characterized by an inability to express herself. Esther cannot articulate her emotions or boldly criticize others. This is relevant to her inclination to self-erasure. Axton notes in "The Trouble with Esther" (1965) that, when reminded of her unworthiness or ambiguous origins, Esther avoids emotional turmoil (551). When praised, she displays either self-effacement or oblique self-congratulation (549-550). When she becomes aware of others' wrongdoings, her narrative shows indirect commentary or tacit critical observations (553-554). To shield herself from societal condemnation regarding her 'disgraceful' birth, Esther habitually suppresses her true thoughts and feelings throughout her childhood and education. This habit of self-erasure eventually follows her into society.

4. Repression, the Uncanny, and Sublimation

Esther and her mother face very similar situations. They are both trapped by Victorian gender norms. Her mother, in order to escape the lower and middle classes, is constrained by upper-class norms, while Esther strives to conform to Victorian expectations regarding middle-class women. Both subjects seek 'sublimation' within 'civilized society'—a way to satisfy their desires without violating social norms while achieving security, order, and personal fulfillment. However, both ultimately suffer from psychological pathologies. This passage analyzes Esther's sublimation, a process triggered by her uncanny feelings of fear and emotional repression. It is normal for humans to strive to conform to social norms if they desire safety. Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* expounds how and why men shift from 'brutal' beings to 'civilized' beings. According to Freud, civilization began when humans activated their protective mechanisms to resist the destructive forces of nature (Freud 1930, 89). Conscious of the danger of their primitive impulses, men recognized the necessity to tame them, which ultimately led to the development of civilization (90). Freud emphasizes that the development of civilization, which prioritizes cleanliness, is an inevitable result of human biological evolution (106). As human beings adopted an upright gait and experienced a decline in olfactory stimuli, smell was replaced by sight. This reliance on visual stimuli, alongside more visible genitals, then exposed them to increased dangers (99-100). To defend their organs, they demanded security through repression; as such, they developed civilization (106). Thus, the development of civilization and the repression/suppression of sexual desire and of aggressive instincts occurred simultaneously. The psychological development in individuals corresponds to the shift from brutality to civilization. "Civilization is a process in the service of Eros," the life instinct (122). Through parental discipline, infants begin learning to tame their instinctual impulses as early as the anal period, and this training during the anal period leads them to develop a sense of order and cleanliness demanded by civilization (97). Their primitive instinctual impulses are tamed and redirected through a sublimation of the instincts, helping them surmount fear and avoid the violence of nature. If infants fail to tame their anal eroticism, they might fall victim to neurotic illness (84). Anal eroticism is not eliminated during the anal period; it is modified as "aim-inhibited affection" (102) acceptable to civilization. Men with an anal character can still find pleasure in scientific work, artistic creativity, professional work, and other activities, while they are required to control their instincts in accordance with the norms of civilization (95). Their sense of sublimation compensates for their renunciation of instinct.

One wonders what will happen when one seeks sublimation—becoming a good person—by overworking or repressing/suppressing emotions. In a world that declares her an illegitimate child, Esther strives to cleanse herself by becoming good. However, she develops a pathological personality that ultimately consumes her. We can see her inclination toward self-denial in her interactions with her doll and her social role as a little woman.

4.1 Dolly

In childhood, Esther is often alone and has no friends. Longing for someone to talk to, she regards her doll as a living being who can understand her. The doll represents Esther's desire for a mother, but it also holds the secret of her real parentage, which Esther wants to hide or erase. On the one hand, the doll is associated with Esther's desire for love, effectively serving as a double for Esther. As Schiffman observes, life is bestowed on Esther's Dolly, as if the doll were the double of Esther herself (Schiffman 2001, 164). Esther constructs a fairy tale through which she seeks to transition her identity from nonexistence to animation. In addition, through an interaction with Dolly, Esther constructs the mother-child

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relationship that is absent in her real life. Esther dresses her doll, talks to it, and takes care of it as if she were the doll's mother, or possibly—as Beehler suggests—Dolly represents Esther's mother. The humanization of Dolly reflects Esther's strong desire for life (Eros) and maternal love. Moreover, Esther confides all her secrets to her favorite doll, which is her only companion and listens to her talk about her mother.

Esther's situation mirrors Nathaniel's imaginary relationship with the automaton in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," a dynamic analyzed in Freud's "The Uncanny." The automaton doll Olympia does not evoke fear; instead, Nathaniel desires her as a living object. Freud interprets Nathaniel's love for Olympia as a narcissistic obsession with his feminine self (Freud 1919, 232). Not only is the automaton doll "a materialization of Nathaniel's feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy" (232), but it is also his invention of the double as a protection against extinction (235). Thus, the automaton doll could be linked to "animistic conception" of "the subject's narcissistic overvaluation" (240) stemming from Nathaniel's desire for self-preservation. Though he depends on his narcissistic object—an automaton doll—to envision acquiring love and protection from his deceased father, this illusion remains untenable. Like Nathaniel, Esther imagines herself as a doll acquiring parental love and protection.

On the other hand, Esther wants to "silence" Dolly because the doll knows too much about her "disgraceful" mother. Esther simply doesn't want the world to discover her secret. After Miss Barbary's death, as she is about to leave her childhood home, Esther buries her doll, Dolly. It is possible that the burial of the doll is due to self-deprecation, as Rogers II explains (Rogers II 2017, 80). This self-effacing inclination is rooted in Esther's unconscious so deeply that she gives up maternal acceptance (Zw-erdling 1973, 434) or abandons her motherhood altogether (Rogers II 2017, 80). Esther feels guilty about any form of self-indulgence and thus abandons her doll to become a self-disciplined adult (Zw-erdling 1973, 434). However, it is more likely that the doll-burial suggests her desire to disengage from her "disgrace."

In the days that follow, as an event touches her mother's secret and Esther feels overwhelmed by an uncanny feeling of fear, the doll is "reburied." For example, in Chapter 9, immediately following Esther's rejection of Guppy's proposal, Dolly briefly reappears, prompting Esther to weep. This distress stems from Guppy's promise to uncover information regarding Esther's history and its link to Lady Dedlock. Dolly and the memories concerning her mother simultaneously resurface, and an uncanny feeling overwhelms Esther as she recalls her aunt's harsh judgment of her disgraced mother. To suppress emotional turmoil triggered by her fear of becoming the target of public criticism, Esther "buries" the doll again. In Chapter 18, as Esther first sees Lady Dedlock during a church service at Chesney Wold, she finds the Lady's face strangely familiar, noting that it resembles her godmother's face. The face uncannily reflects itself in the glass whenever she looks into it, bringing back memories of her lonely childhood, which she shares only with her doll by whispering to it. For Esther, the face reflects not only her mother, but also the maternal "disgrace" she wants to bury. Thus, she "reburies" her doll, which holds the secrets of her past.

To ensure her mother's existence without exposing her "disgrace," Esther buries the doll—symbolizing the concealment of this shame—and transfers it to another realm: a safe, controllable narrative of her own making. Esther plays the fort/da game in order to maintain the existence of her mother. Christopher Pittard, in "The Travelling Doll Wonder: Dickens, Secular Magic, and Bleak House," draws on Dickens's performance of the magician's trick, Rhia Rhama Rhoos. This trick involves making a small doll disap-

pear and reappear only to deliver messages. Just as the author creates delusion through his performance of the magic trick, Esther makes the doll reappear as a reconstructed memory or re-narrated story in order to shape the world she desires. In much the same vein, Beehler, in “The Doll’s Gift: Ventriloquizing *Bleak House*,” identifies Dolly as Esther’s mother, interpreting her reappearance in Esther’s adult life as the Freudian *fort/da* phenomenon—a child’s desire to gain mastery by transforming passive loss into active control. In other words, the domestic Dolly accompanies Esther in her adulthood as a magical, supernatural force, as well as an agent that provides comfort in her imaginary realm. The doll acts as a container for her sublimated desires; Esther transforms it to fit a re-narrated story. Yet the uncanny feeling of fear associated with Esther’s mother still exists and resurfaces whenever Esther recalls what her aunt said to her during her childhood.

4.2 Little Woman

As Esther enters adulthood, she begins to shape a new life in which she seeks an identity to replace the nothingness that her aunt indoctrinated her into accepting. To shape the world she desires, Esther must overcome life’s difficulties to develop the virtues demanded by the middle class. As a housekeeper, she finds her new identity (“little woman” or “Dame Durden”) and a new life by building positive relationships with others in Jarndyce’s *Bleak House*. Esther suppresses her own emotions and personal needs, and transforms them into more socially acceptable activities through her “Dame Durden” identity. This aligns with Freud’s concept of sublimation—a psychological defense mechanism. However, Esther acquires her good reputation and security of life through self-sacrifice, since she always puts others’ needs before her own. Esther is a tool of society.

Esther suppresses her feelings as she seeks to meet societal norms of being kind and compassionate. She hears and assists in solving the issues her friends—Ada, Richard, and Caddy—experience, yet she never reveals her own internal struggles to them. In Chapter XXXI “Nurse and Patient,” Esther contracts smallpox, but she does not let Ada see her condition because she does not want to ruin her perfect image as an angel-like Dame Durden in Ada’s eyes. In Chapter XXXVI “Chesney Wold,” Esther reunites with her mother, but her mother tells her to keep their relationship a secret and not to publicize it. Esther does not break down in front of her mother; instead, she rationally tells herself that she must protect Lady Dedlock, who is being threatened by the lawyer Tulkinghorn. Acting as a gentle and loving daughter, Esther represses her grief. In that instant, Esther feels a sense of abandonment by her mother again, yet she quickly suppresses the negative feeling by managing her emotions. In short, Esther conceals her genuine thoughts and feelings since they can trigger her sense of disgrace. Nobody truly understands her; consequently, the authentic Esther is absent in society.

In short, Esther erases herself as she conforms to social norms regarding middle-class women. Just like her father Nemo and the orphans in the novel, Esther is consumed. She constantly suppresses the feeling of disgrace, which uncannily appears as a child’s indelible Sandman. In her attempt to suppress it, she becomes obsessed with being good and, subsequently, pathologically self-deprecating. Shrouded in self-restraint, her life remains unchanged, permanently bound to a state of dereliction. Pathologically, her attempts to be a “good little woman” are constantly haunted by the “ghost” of her illegitimacy, a status inextricably linked to the unspeakable “shame” of her mother. In fact, the recurring words “shadow” and “shade” in *Bleak House* suggest that Esther is haunted by a secret, an uncanny feeling of shame. As Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. observes in “Looking Two Ways: A Pivotal Paragraph in

Bleak House and Esther's Missing Self-Reflection," there is no initial journey¹⁶ for Esther, but there is a permanent ghostly specter—herself or her mother in “disgrace”—that haunts her. Indeed, *Bleak House* is structured in “the way of irony, paradox, and indeterminacy” (Hennelly 2020, 293) through its window scenes and mirror visions (299-302). “Both mirror and window visions, whether at transitional dawn or dusk [...] focus upon spectral and sacral ‘reflections’ as they appear looking two ways, be they ambivalently prospective or ambiguously retrospective” (302). There is an “indeterminate agency of a spectral figure” (305), with “her own ghostly reflection” (303) semi-transparently silhouetted in the mirror (303), and it is her unrecorded reflection that renders her illumination uncertain.

5. Esther's Narrative

Esther begins writing her diary seven years after the death of her mother. She settles down with Allan Woodcourt in her new home, “Esther's Bleak House,” which Jarndyce gives her as a wedding gift, and under the encouragement of her husband, she writes her narrative. In her narrative, she builds her existence around her time at Jarndyce's Bleak House and the story of her mother. Esther's first-person narrative is not the only narrative; *Bleak House* is composed of dual narratives, alternating between a third-person omniscient narrator and a first-person narrator. The third-person narrator is traditionally viewed as an omniscient or, as Richard Gaughan argues in his essay “Their Places Are a Blank: The Two Narrators in *Bleak House*” (1992), as limited and purposeful in leaving blanks unexplained. The first-person narrator is Esther. She is not omniscient; she cannot zoom in on each character, nor can she use sarcasm to highlight absurdity. Esther's narrative is characterized by a limited perspective and a self-effacing manner. The two narratives—alternating between a third-person voice and a first-person voice—are inseparable, as both move toward a convergence around a consuming force. Just as the characters in the third-person narrative are consumed by destructive societal forces because of society's failure, Esther is herself erased in the first-person narrative because she obsessively conforms to traditional Victorian gender norms.

Logically, Esther cannot be the third-person narrator because she could not possibly know the stories of all the characters, even though some of their experiences are relevant to her. However, because she knows her mother's story, she breaks into the third-person narrative. This inference is based on the fact that she has read a letter her mother gave her, in which her mother wrote her own story. Beehler's essay “The Doll's Gift: Ventriloquizing *Bleak House*” (2020) proposes that Esther ventriloquizes her mother's voice in the third-person narrative. By doing so, Esther provides herself with an imagined account of her

¹⁶ The journey of the initiates refers to Holy Grail myths in which the hero Perceval pierces into a vale allegorically signifying a world of harmony or a world of illuminating integration (Hennelly 2020, 295-296), or based on Turner's liminal theory in which the initiates experience a phase of de-socialization, being temporarily cast in negation or darkness or trapped in an ambiguous indeterminate status before arriving at the phase of rebirth or return to society (298-299). For further reading, please see Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

mother's past, through which she can acquire maternal love (37).¹⁷ But the question remains as to why she does not detail her mother's story. Most likely, Esther's motivation is to cover her "disgrace" and that of her mother.

Clearly, Esther does not want to be overwhelmed by a sense of predetermined unworthiness brought about by her mother's past. She gives her biological father a passing mention but places her mother in a primary role; while the father is exempt from Victorian moral codes, the mother is confined by female expectations and branded a "disgrace." Esther wants to rewrite her mother's story and reshape her image. She does not delve deeply into her mother's past. Instead, she focuses on how her mother may have longed for a bond with her child,¹⁸ yet ultimately adhered to her own maternal philosophy regarding the "feminine virtues" of the time, thereby omitting her mother's secrets from the public narrative. While this seems like protecting her mother, it also shows how social norms can allow for the complete denial or erasure of the past. Just as she buried her doll at the end of her childhood, she "buries" her own mother in her narrative.

What truly motivates Esther to write is not the letter as "a gift" from her mother, but rather her desire to use writing to conceal her true self—including her mother's past and her own emotions. She habitually does not express her emotions, allowing grief to exert the minimum influence on her life no matter how grave the events she is forced to confront. When the emotional crisis occurs within the world she creates with Dolly, Esther immediately buries the doll alive (*Bleak House* 24). She falls into a coma during the smallpox infection and dreams of the past, subsequently becoming blind while recovering from her illness (431). Blindness acts as a force that resists not only the cruelty of disease but also the resulting negative emotions. When Esther meets Lady Dedlock in the forest on the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold, Lady Dedlock tells her daughter that they must part; Esther then protects herself from vulnerable emotions by persuading herself to be a devout daughter whose duty is to help her mother conceal the secret (449-453). When she seeks her mother with the help of Inspector Bucket and eventually finds her—dead beside the grave of her father—Esther temporarily loses consciousness (688). Losing consciousness helps insulate Esther from the horror of reality. Esther withdraws from the snow-covered scene that swallows up her mother—falling into a trance-like unconsciousness as a defensive response to her grief. Her narrative, characterized by confusion or a refusal to arrive at judgment, functions as a strategy to dispel inner conflicts and negative feelings—including fear, anger, and frustration—while simultaneously eluding the inherited, catastrophic "blankness" of Lady Dedlock (Wilt 1977). In her account of her mother's death in the bleak snow—which symbolizes the "blankness" of existence—Esther

¹⁷ Brianna Beehler believes the third-person narrative in *Bleak House* is transformed from the letter that Lady Dedlock gives Esther. The letter confirms Lady Dedlock's knowledge that Esther was dead and buried by Miss Barbary. Though Lady Dedlock did not abandon Esther when Esther was born, she forsakes her when she discloses their relationship to Esther in the Ghost Walk. Esther burns the letter so as to reject her erasure from her mother's life. See Beehler, page 31-32.

¹⁸ In Chapter XII, "On the Watch," Lady Dedlock looks out of the window and sees a mother and child being chased by a woman. The scene emphasizes her childless state and suggests that she might be thinking about the child she believed to be dead. In the novel, Lady Dedlock views the servant Rosa as a substitute for her own child. Realizing her past is about to cause a scandal, she chooses to send Rosa away to protect Rosa's reputation from being implicated.

does not provide a lengthy description of loss and sadness. Instead, she focuses on subsequent events relevant to her idealized life in a new Bleak House, which offers an alternative to the gloomy world that buried her mother.

Esther's narrative reveals her as a woman seeking a proper social identity that replaces her true self. She finds comfort in her narrative, a world overlapping reality and imagination, while ventriloquizing the voice of her mother and recording her own story. She intends to reconstruct a clearer image of her mother and forge a stable identity to achieve inner unity (Zwerdling 1973). Esther tries to fill the "blankness" with her narrative—her mother's, her own, and the one that falls between Esther and her mother. She avoids their unspeakable "shame" and presents herself as a woman of duty and compassion emblematic of the Victorian ideal.

At the end of the novel, Esther emphasizes that she is well-liked in her new home, Bleak House.

The people even praise Me as the doctor's wife. The people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake. (*Bleak House* 769)

She attributes her happiness to her husband. Esther remains unchanged, from school to Jarndyce's Bleak House and her new home, "The New Bleak House"; she has always been humble and eager to help others, seeking to overcome her origins of "disgrace." She truly lives up to others' expectations, a fine "Dame Durden." Esther intends to escape a state of dereliction ("disgrace") through writing, but what we see is her intensely self-deprecating personality in her unreliable narrative. She feels a new life coming forth precisely because smallpox has disfigured her face—a face that once resembled her mother's. In the mirror, she no longer sees a reflection of her mother, which spares her from a triggering, uncanny feeling of disgrace. Esther's narrative reveals a deeply self-deprecating personality rooted in childhood, resulting in the total erasure of her authentic self.

Although Esther eventually gains social status, her tendency toward obsessive and excessive self-erasure ultimately functions as a failure to fully escape the state of dereliction. The last scene of "The New Bleak House" doesn't contrast with desolation; rather, it ironically highlights it. The "bleakness" in the title of the novel indicates the abandonment of all the characters. The scene of snow, wherein Lady Dedlock dies, parallels the bleak landscapes described by the omniscient narrator, for both reveal the horror of a consuming destructive force. Just as the dispassionate third-person narrator uses images of fog to depict the Court of Chancery as a bureaucratically dehumanizing society, the first-person narrator uses snow in Lady Dedlock's death scene to symbolize an atmosphere of desolation¹⁹ that Esther wants to hide.

6. Conclusion

Esther's self-erasing, pathological personality traits—driven by obsession—reveal a terrifying, chaotic force that devours everything. This destructive force exists within legal, social, and political systems, eroding all life like a corrosive agent. While some innocent individuals are considered "abject" objects—

¹⁹ The two narratives, the third-person narrative and Esther's narrative, converge simultaneously in the plot when Bucket and Esther try to find Lady Dedlock. Esther's mother is found dead, which is "the culmination of the central plot," "a final drawing together of the social world into the destructive whole it has always been." See Gaughan, page 86.

beings of visceral disgust who suffer misfortune due to an unjust social system—most are destroyed by their own excessive obsessions. Some cling to illusions about the social system and indulge in vain hopes, falling into a vicious cycle. Some exploit the power of the judicial system or money lending to enjoy the thrill of controlling and destroying others' destinies. Some strive for justice, social status, or security—but ultimately perish. Haunted by the uncanny past and obsessed with cleansing her "disgrace," Esther seeks a sense of security through hard work and social recognition, yet her sense of disgrace still constantly resurfaces unnervingly, and she continues to fight this feeling in the same way. Trapped in this vicious cycle, she cannot escape her pathological tendency. Like everyone else, Esther is unable to change reality—the state of dereliction—and instead, she is consumed by a destructive force within the social system. She is a product of Miss Barbary's idealized middle-class virtues, and also a victim, because a social virtue mechanism lacking empathy can become poisonous, or at least ineffectual in the face of social corruption. Echoing the novel's initial imagery of waste and excrement, the concluding scenes surrounding the new Bleak House underscore that social and moral decay is intrinsically linked to systemic structures. Esther's story does not offer a glimmer of hope for a terrible world; instead, it reinforces its horror as it ultimately echoes the "bleakness" present in the novel's title.

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