

## **The Survival of an Injured Daughter: Esther Summerson's Narration in *Bleak House***

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It is well known that Charles Dickens (1812-70) endured a difficult boyhood. The young Dickens dreamed of becoming “a learned and distinguished man”; yet the Dickens household suffered a decline at about that time. The boy was obliged to work at a blacking factory to help the household economy. The experience left many deep scars on young Dickens. Since the boy's parents were quite happy about his work, the boy's pride was extremely hurt. He might have thought that he was a kind of a deserted child. His anger and resentment were turned especially bitterly upon his mother — because it had been his mother who stimulated his intellectual curiosity “to be a learned and distinguished man.”<sup>1</sup> Even though his anger against his mother did not soften until the late 1840s, he nevertheless admired her shrewd and efficient household management. He had an ambivalent feeling towards his mother: he could not forgive her, nor could he abandon or ignore her. It may safely be assumed that her outstanding household management was reflected in the figure of Esther Summerson, the heroine of *Bleak House* (1852)<sup>2</sup>.

Esther experiences a situation quite similar to Dickens' early circumstances. She lives an orphan-like childhood and is possessed by a great degree of trauma; nevertheless, she has high hopes. As an illegitimate daughter, Esther is obliged to face numerous bitter experiences in Victorian society. Yet, she leads a persevering and benevolent life. Thus we can understand how the haunting agony that made Dickens a man of great insight has also brought a similar achievement to the abandoned and orphan-like Esther.

In many of Dickens' novels the image of an “angel-in-the-house” is embodied in his heroines — as we can see in Esther. He praised women for their self-sacrifice and moral responsibility — qualities

which he might not have found in his mother. Dickens is known to have considered the significance of gender when depicting men and women in his novels; in other words, he liked to give the sexes their respective roles. Yet, at the same time, Dickens allowed a “pen” to the woman character, Esther Summerson, as a narrator, so that she could tell her own story. It was very difficult for a woman to write, read, and think independently at that time.<sup>3</sup> Then what made Dickens, a typical mid-Victorian, allow a pen to a woman? We can be fairly certain that though the heroine seems to be modeled on an angel-in-the-house, Dickens must have aimed at making her something more.<sup>4</sup>

Dickens adopted both female first-person and omniscient narrations in the novel. At first the former narration was thought inferior to the latter in its workmanship, because Esther’s role was not immediately understood. For example, George Henry Lewes was wrong when he described Esther as a “monstrous failure,” because a close look at these two different types of narration will reveal that they are quite equal in function and significance. Each of them is intricately interlaced, and the twine helps the story deepen. That is to say, on the one hand the omniscient narration vents its wrath against the injustice of the time or its pent-up discontents with the reading public; on the other, Esther’s first-person plays her part to heal those cruel situations. The first-person narrative is an effective technique in expressing mental development and the interior life of human beings. This paper is intended to investigate the way Esther fulfills her hopes within the fetters of moral standards in the 19th century society.

Many scholars believe that *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel contemporaneous with *Bleak House*, influences the character of Esther Summerson.<sup>5</sup> Both women belong to the middle class in the Victorian age in Britain. People of this class, especially women, suffered from severe social restrictions. Esther and Jane are also set in the same situation as orphans who are treated badly by adults, yet they are the architects of their own fortunes. However, their characters, strategies for surviving, and self-realization seem to be almost completely different. It will be useful to compare these two women characters in order to grasp the image of Esther Summerson more clearly. Esther has been criticised for her coyness and her indecisiveness by many critics. However, Alex Zwerdling acutely observes that her complex behaviour is due to trauma. What her aunt says and does scars Esther for life. I would like to develop the idea a little further.

It is worthy of remark that Victorian writers had to indicate “pas-

sion" without risking blatant indecency. This is the state of affairs in Victorian literary discourse. Naturally, Dickens seldom referred to sexual subjects. He did not go into the details of passion in his novels, to be sure, but this strategy was derived from his conviction that a writer had to feel the social influence of, and moral responsibility for, the art. In addition, Dickens always tried to win the confidence of his readers because he wanted to maintain a strong relationship with his public. Though he had a great desire to indicate "passion" in his novels, he bridled himself.<sup>6</sup> Considering the social context, Dickens was always a professional who cared to protect his dignity as a writer. Deliberation prevented him from defying the conventions. On the contrary, Charlotte Brontë adopted "passion" as one of the themes of *Jane Eyre*, a novel in which Jane achieves self-realization, and it may understandably have astonished Victorian reviewers.<sup>7</sup> Besides, the novel was sensationally published — the story of the novel was not only wrapped in mystery but also offered a disturbing theme, and the reading public were curious about whether the writer was male or female. Therefore we should notice that the success of *Jane Eyre* may have made Dickens feel uneasy. In addition, Dickens may have had difficulty accepting Charlotte Brontë's provincialism, coarseness, and sombreness as well as her eponymous character's rebelliousness, obstinacy, and assertiveness.<sup>8</sup> His irritation and rivalry with both Brontë and Jane may have led him to invent a woman character, one who stays within the Victorian gender limitations but also finally achieves self-realization. Thus, Dickens brilliantly projects Esther as a type of his ideal woman, with her self-sacrifice and moral responsibility, and as one who achieves self-realization.

## I

*Bleak House*, one of Dickens' social problem novels, is advanced by means of an omniscient and a woman's first person narration. The former narration exposes and rages over injustice, falsehood, and irresponsibility, which were killer conditions in 19th century British society. The latter, Esther's, understands and relieves the people who has been suffering badly from these social organisms.

The story centres on a quarrel over an inheritance, the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. The parties concerned row over their share of this suit to gain something at all costs. Feeling chagrin at the lingering suit and looking forward to hearing of a bare possibility, some of them tire of waiting and die poorly. They are, so to speak, victims of the institu-

tion. What's more, many neglected children appear and draw around Esther. Most of them are excluded from good fortune and happiness because of being tortured by the selfishness of their parents or the social organism. Therefore, the corruptness of the law and the rottenness of the official world and fashion as well as expediency are tilted or sometimes made the target of ironical remarks by the angry and accusing omniscient narrator. The corruption and rottenness are metaphorically depicted as fog, mud, webs, and darkness.

Esther, by contrast, speaks in a compassionate tone. As her name suggests, she lights up the gloomy and chaotic world of the novel in order to lead the oppressed people to a safe area. Where do the differences of tone in the two narrations come from? We have to grasp the roundness of Esther's character in order to understand it. The point is that Esther herself is portrayed as an oppressed person right from the start of the story. She has been distressed about her birth and origin since her aunt told that "your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers" (19). The aunt simply gives some quite irresponsible and merciless blame to little Esther and obliges her to be submissive, self-denying, and diligent. Consequently, she is unable to discover her merits and tends to belittle herself as if she were an insignificant woman. Critics would describe her hesitation causing by a loss confidence as coyness. Brontë is also contemptuous of Esther's weakness and twaddle.<sup>9</sup> However, I would like to emphasise that her negative personality must be caused by a petrification which comes from her trauma. In any case, despite what her aunt says, Esther bravely takes a vow to strive to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to someone, and to win love. Esther dispenses love to the needy, because it is the very thing she needs to be given. It should be emphasized that the most important thing for her is the winning of some love, for she has been starved of maternal affection since her childhood. She confesses that "I had never heard my mama spoken of. I had never heard of my papa either, but I felt more interested about my mama" (18). Her intuitive thinking about her mother is on target, because meeting her triggers Esther's restoration to confidence. Moreover, she has longed for someone who is able to understand and accept her. It is love that Esther thirsts for.

Speaking of love, Jane Eyre has also been starved of love from early childhood. Young Jane confides to her friend Helen who sympathetically understands and accepts Jane that "if others don't love me, I would rather die than live — I cannot be to be solitary and hated,

Helen" (81). In order to gain their desires Esther and Jane struggle against the shackles of convention, which demanded very high ideals from women. The image of the ideal womanhood was formed and prevailed through the 19th century society by means of advice books. Sarah Ellis's *The Women of England* (1843), which guided the Victorian people to gender roles, was the most widely read.<sup>10</sup> Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin made the notion of an angel-in-the-house take root in the people's mind through their books: *The Angel in the House* (1854) and "Of Queens' Garden" from *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). Though Patmore praises a woman for her love, intuition, and beauty, he considered women to have an absence of eagerness for action and ability in clear-sightedness which are the attributes of men. His apparent woman-worship means in practice the reverse of male chauvinism. Moreover we interpret Ruskin's depiction as obliging women to lead a life of self-renunciation and live simply in order to make a man's home happy. It is astonishing that women were not expected to be independent human beings. Yet Jane denies that she is an angel. She asserts that women have feelings and can act independently:

I asserted: 'and I will not be one [an angel] till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me — for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate.'

(292)

When Rochester, the love of her life, requests Jane to be an angel, she flatly refuses to do so. She firmly says that she is not an angel, and she has no intention of being one. She asks him not to force her and hails herself as an individual.

Esther, on the contrary, has tried to keep the vow genuinely since her childhood. She wants to be warmly received by her surroundings. In the process of growth, she is aware that she will become an image of ideal womanhood in the day when she keeps her vow. It might have been the moment to decide that she made it her strategy to survive. Taking the concept of the angel-in-the-house or self-renunciation into account, it is important whether the heroine is such an angel or not, because it does not seem to be possible for such an angel to live her own life.

Jane Eyre, a woman of proud and susceptible nature, tries to increase her possibilities from early childhood. Because her great res-

olution, insightful visions, and strong passions are always to the forefront, she is sometimes a troublemaker in relation to her surroundings. Moreover, it is very important for her to be faithful to God and herself. It is almost impossible for such a character to be in harmony with other people. When her love, which is in defiance of class, is almost achieved, she leaves Rochester, her lover, behind. He is committing the crime of bigamy. Even though it seems to be inevitable to do so, she would not allow him to behave in such a way. She meanders around pennilessly, and then lives with the people who saved her life. Shortly afterwards, they turn out to be her relatives. She understands the true nature of home, nevertheless, and finally returns to Rochester. The reason why she does this is that her cousin St. John Rivers makes a proposal to her. At first he seems to be eligible for her. However, St. John Rivers proves to be an image of the patriarchal terrors. He is in practice “the exaction of the apostle, who speaks but for Christ, when he says — ‘Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me’” (501). Accepting his proposal means the destruction of her life and all her hopes. It must be impossible for Jane to deny herself and follows the patriarch, therefore, she appreciates her own mind and she flies from St. John.

Knowing Rochester has lost his fortune, eyesight, and an arm, she determines to marry him. As Jane has struggled to discover her real place in the world, Rochester’s handicaps are not an obstacle to marriage.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Jane has received a fortune from her uncle at this point and Rochester’s legal wife is dead, so she finally marries Rochester on equal terms with him. Judging from these points, we can safely say that a motif in *Jane Eyre* is the preference for love with sexual and human equality, which involves the necessity for women to be independent both economically and personally.

Conversely, it appears that Esther leads quite a different life to Jane’s. Esther seems to be an angel, an image of ideal womanhood in the Victorian age. She does not appear to defy conventions, and live her life within social limitations. However, it does not mean she lives in peace. Her state of mind may be approximate to Snow White’s in one of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales. Snow White realises her powerlessness and thinks how she can cope with her problem in order to survive when a huntsman leaves her behind in a forest so as to save her life from her mother’s murderousness.<sup>12</sup> As Snow White resists the indignant queen, so Esther resists her austere aunt. Esther is a good girl, just as Snow White is, and this is why both girls can survive

their harsh realities. Dickens wished his heroine to be a good girl in order to survive the harshness of her life. Just as Jane does, Esther flounders to discover her real place in the world of her own way. Esther's posture towards her life should link with the conception of what Dickens thinks is a woman's proper way of living. The most important virtues of his ideal woman must have been devotion as well as sagacity and shrewdness. He therefore, wanted his heroine to have these aspects. Dickens may have intentionally adopted the form of an angel-in-the-house in *Bleak House*.

## II

Esther Summerson is a somewhat dubious narrator — for she occasionally belittles herself excessively and often uses ambiguous phrases. I will investigate how she veils her emotions and opinions in the subtext of her narrative. She, however, sometimes reveals her real intentions. Also, from time to time, her behaviour varies with the criterion of her own image. I intend to let Esther throw off her disguise and approach us in her true colours.

First, I take her indecisiveness as one of the impediments to arrival at a conclusion. After her aunt's funeral, Esther without relatives is offered Mr. Jarndyce's proposal of receiving a good education at Greenleaf in order to become a governess. What Esther does first is she wraps her dear old doll, her one and only conferee, in its own shawl, and quietly lays it in the garden-earth. We can interpret the act as Esther's attempt to break with her past and make a fresh start. She gradually confirms that the resolution which she made on her birthday — to try to be industrious, contented, and truehearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love — is sure to work well:

. . . whenever a new pupil came who was a little downcast and unhappy, she was so sure — indeed I don't know why — to make a friend of me, that all newcomers were confided to my care. . . . I never saw in any face there, thank Heaven, on my birthday, that it would have been better if I had never been born.

(26)

As Esther understands unhappy and oppressed people, they come to adore her. It seems that the joys of gaining acceptance with people lead her to appreciate herself. However, she easily loses this awareness.

Several years later, when she has been living a happy life in

Greenleaf, she is offered a position as companion to Mr. Jarndyce's wards: Ada Clare and Richard Carstone. She consents to the plan with reluctance because she has become accustomed to the life there. However, she promptly renounces her wish and considers that "I must not take tears where I was going, after all that had been done for me" (28). Is it proper for us to think that Esther should be blamed for her indecisiveness? She gradually recovers her confidence thereafter. Beyond all expectation, she finds Mr. Jarndyce, Ada, and Richard to be amiable and they lead Esther to regain confidence.

Second, Esther presses her image on us as one of gentleness, goodness, and cheerfulness in her story, but we understand that she has an essentially different nature, too. For one thing, the truth of the matter is that Lady Dedlock is the natural mother of Esther Summerson. The Lady and Esther, also the Lady and Hortense, the Lady's housemaid, resemble each other internally as well as in their appearance. Esther describes her mother's first impression: "Neither did I know the loftiness and haughtiness of Lady Dedlock's face at all, in any one" (225). The Lady and Hortense are haughty and easily inflamed women, but Esther herself has a marked tendency to behave in a way similar to the Lady and Hortense. When Mr. Guppy, a clerk of the law firm, Kenge and Carboy, proposes to Esther, she refuses and blames him. It is indeed quite an unexpected offer. The point is that he makes a guess at her background, her illegitimacy: the relation to Lady Dedlock, when he makes a proposal to her. When Mr. Guppy plays his last card "I know nothing now, certainly; but what might I not, if I had your confidence, and you set me on?" (114-115), the offer upsets her very much. He touches her on a sore point. She is irritated by his confidence in ferreting out someone's secrets and her heart aches for his estimation of her as cheap. She tries to control her anger owing to the habit of restraining her feelings. However, that night, all alone, she is not able to conclude the matter by laughing it off:

I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry about it. In short, I was in a flutter for a little while; and felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden.

(115)

We can interpret this emotion which she has always concealed. We can also understand that it is not her accustomed character, but the



Lady's. These incidents show she dwells upon her origins and suppresses her feelings in her daily life. Guppy's offer makes her realise again she is an insignificant person.

For another, it is clear that the turning point in her life is her falling ill. Having feverish dreams, she faces in her inmost thoughts many things that she has never noticed. Her philosophy of life entirely changes. Esther talks thus about her dreams:

While I was very ill, the way in which these divisions of time became confused with one another, distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them.

(431)

Sigmund Freud analyzes in his *Interpretation of Dreams* that one's real intentions sometimes emerge at such moments. Freud interprets dreams to be a royal road to the kingdom of unconsciousness and believes that unconsciousness always influences upon consciousness. Even though Esther every day suppresses the feelings and ideas that she regards as taboo, her real intention emerges and awakes her to the fact that it is an excessive repression. Esther is trying to reach the top of an enormous staircase, which seems to be endless in her dream. She often stops ascending because of an obstruction to her progress, then strives to get to the top again. There is a close relation between her dream and her sense of an unreasonable repression in the pursuit of this strategy.

Another dream concerns a glowing circle in the darkness. She functions as a part of it, but her real intention is to get rid of this connection: "And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?" (432). This shows that up to this point her roles have been a burden to her. These dreams, in short, make her notice difficulties in pursuing her strategy.

Third, Esther doesn't recognise her identity until she loses her beauty. She has not seen herself in a mirror when she talks about the following matter. Esther has not recognised her altered face; nevertheless, she has already composed herself, "How little I had lost, when the world was so full of delight for me" (443). It is surprising that she regains her composure and can manage to talk about the beauty of

nature, and can even talk about “hope” in the passage.

She wants her feelings to be mended first in preparation for meeting the harsh realities of life, and then she looks at herself in a mirror. As Gilbert and Gubar analyse it, a mirror exercises such authority. A mirror judges a person by how she looks and it is the patriarchal judgement.<sup>13</sup> The voice of the looking glass and the voice of the patriarch might not admire Esther’s beauty any longer. This means that she has not measured up to being an ideal woman. She desperately tries to compose herself. Then her mother, Lady Dedlock, comes forward:

For I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived; not to say should never have been reserved for such a happy life. ... I had had experience, in the shock of that very day, that I could, even thus soon, find comforting reconcilements to the change that had fallen on me.

(454-455)

Esther is even satisfied with her alteration because she is convinced of her mother’s love. She has longed to see her mother since her childhood. Through the devotion of Esther for her mother, she even expresses a feeling of gratitude for her alteration. “... the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness...”(449). She fears the relationship between herself and Lady Dedlock will be discovered by her mother’s opponents. Her self-definition deepens and she finally recognises her identity.

Finally, most outstanding of all, Esther tries her luck:

It would still have been a great relief to me to have gone away without making myself known, but I was determined not to do so. “No, my dear, no. No, no, no!” ... I untied my bonnet, and put my veil half up... .

(548)

When she sees Woodcourt, a young surgeon, after a long interval, she is afraid of his recognising her. At first she is unwilling to reveal her altered looks to him. However, she does so in order to try and renew the love affair. Her suggestive action, raising her veil to him, steers their love towards a resumption.<sup>14</sup>

When Woodcourt who has been growing to love Esther ever since they first met, and who still has the same feelings after she loses her beauty — confesses his yearning; however, Esther is already engaged to John Jarndyce, her guardian and benefactor. Though she under-

stands that Jarndyce loves her and his feeling is returned, her love for him is a daughterly love. She does want to accept Woodcourt, but she does not want to hurt Jarndyce. She takes a chance on winning her love. Consequently, she leads Woodcourt to persuade Jarndyce without a rupture. With Woodcourt, then, she uses nonverbal communication: suggestive attitudes and expressions and telling looks with some kinds of implication. Moreover, she doesn't clearly tell him her feelings; she leads him to understand what she really feels. She makes him confess his affections toward her, then she shows him her bitter sorrow:

“I should poorly show the trust that I have in the dear one who will evermore be as dear to me as now,” and the deep earnestness with which he said it, at once strengthened me and made me weep, “if, after her assurance that she is not free to think of my love, I urged it.”  
(731)

It could be termed a feint. It is indeed one of her admirable skills. Consequently, everything is settled, namely success attends her efforts.

In the same fashion, Esther uses her ability to persuade Skimpole, a person who takes advantage of others' generosity to cadge money or goodwill.<sup>15</sup> She negotiates with Skimpole in the following manner:

“... it has occurred to me to take the liberty of saying that — if you would — not — ” I was coming to the point with great difficulty, when he took me by both hands, and, with a radiant face and in the liveliest way, anticipated it. “Not go there?”  
(726)

Esther considers Skimpole to be one of the causes of Richard's distress. She visits him alone to ask not to sponge off Richard for any expenditure. Skimpole is personally gentle and well-informed, but not reliable. He is a man who watches his opportunity for stealing somebody's money and evades taking responsibility in his daily life. Again, she uses nonverbal communication: making significant gestures, and adopting certain tones of voice and eye movements. They lead Skimpole to understand what she wants. It is an ability which she has cultivated: she has always tried to avoid coming into conflict with her surroundings; besides, she listens to someone very carefully and then admirably persuades them.

So far I have shown Esther in her true colours. At first, it is not possible for her to appreciate her own worth. She usually conceals her

haughtiness and a temper under her gentleness, goodness, and cheerfulness. She understands that she is not permitted to reveal such a nature if she wants to be loved. However, having feverish dreams, she realises her self-repression is quite excessive and wants to alter the situation: to play her role or be an angel-in-the-house. Her illness causes the loss of her beauty; nevertheless, she doesn't consider that it is a loss of her worth. The surroundings' attitudes account for her confidence: her friends have not changed their attitudes toward her at all. They still love her. Moreover, she even rejoices at her alteration, when it confirms her mother's love for her. Hope revives in her. "I read the letter. I clearly derived from it — and that was much then — that I had not been abandoned by my mother"(452). Likewise, as there is no resemblance between them any longer, the relation between Esther and her mother seems not to be noticed by her mother's opponents. Her philosophy of life has entirely changed and she understands what she must be. She has recognised her identity by this stage. What needs to be emphasised is that the most admirable point is her great ability as a negotiator. Esther takes the chance of seizing her happiness and manoeuvres Skimpole in the way that she wants. Her tactics, which are significant gestures and ostensible motions, touch Woodcourt and make Skimpole aware of her intention. When she accomplishes these, she still seems to be an angel in appearance.

When we look at Esther's hidden nature, we understand that Esther might have been a 'Jane Eyre' to Dickens. He intrinsically hoped a woman would be clear-sighted and independent. Over and above that, as he had ambivalent feelings about how a woman should be devoted, he could not wholly admire Jane. Therefore, he will have created his ideal woman character as clear-sighted and independent, but devoted as well.

### III

So far I have demonstrated Esther's concealed nature and abilities. I have also shown her transition from a woman of self-resignation to one of self-assurance. In this section, I will show how Esther transforms herself from the image of an angel-in-the-house into a strong-minded woman. I would also like to consider Dickens' strategy in depicting Esther as a strong-minded woman.

Esther seems to be an image of the angel-in-the-house, but her character must be derived from Dickens' spirit of rivalry and also the

time's demands; in brief, it is based on his strategy. To borrow an argument from Ellen Moers, Dickens understood what Jane's "voyagings toward liberty" and "experience" were like.<sup>16</sup>

Jane flounces away from Thornfield, Rochester's house, in anger and fear. She does not regard the marriage with Rochester as suitable when he first proposes to her. We can suppose that Esther's journey to Deal overlaps with Jane's lonely one in her novel. Both heroines pass individually through difficulties during their journeys, and consequently confirm the deepest desires, and these experiences aid in the progress to their happiness. As Dickens was aware of *Jane Eyre*, he must have plotted to reject Jane's offensive elements: "the dangerous independence of spirit" (Moers, *Agitating* 22) as well as "the Byronic pride and passion" and "the refusal to submit to her social destiny" (Gilbert and Gubar 338). He must have also wanted to adopt Jane's favorable parts: clear-sightedness and independence.

What's more, when we read Susan Shatto's work, we can understand how Dickens made an effort to characterize Esther Summerson. As Shatto points out, Esther appears to be modeled on Phoebe Pyncheon in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and Queen Esther in the Bible. Phoebe is "bright, orderly, efficient and 'a nice little house wife,' and with her 'gift for practical arrangement' which gives 'a look of comfort and habitableness to any place'" (45-46). The orphaned but beautiful Jewish Esther is chosen queen from among many virgins. Queen Esther, the consort of Ahasuerus, the Persian king, tried to save the Jewish people from annihilation without regard to her own peril. She was a person of goodness, devotion, courage, and self-sacrifice. It is surprising that there are many similarities between Esther Summerson and Phoebe and Esther from the Bible. Further, as Michael Slater insists, Dickens attempted to structure the novel with great pains — confessing his efforts to a young American lady.<sup>17</sup> We can understand Dickens' rivalry with *Jane Eyre*: the symbol of clear-sightedness and independence, as well as his admiration for Phoebe Pyncheon and Queen Esther: symbols of devotion. Aiming to combine devotion with clear-sightedness and independence, Dickens must have taken great pains and employed much scrupulous care to give Esther her character. As he recognized the changing times and the fact of "female energies," in the novel he might have presented a new woman figure, from "a different and new perspective," regarding the woman problem as "a major social theme." He treats his women characters as "more force-

ful, independent and capable”<sup>18</sup> than in his earlier novels. He seems to have had second thoughts about a woman’s proper place and mission, and his view of women surely had changed by the time he wrote the novel.

He includes twenty women characters in the novel. Not only Mrs. Jellyby and Pardiggle but others also act against his principles: women have to stay in their appropriate spheres. However, he seems to have accepted, in a manner, each of the women’s cases except those of Mrs. Jellyby and Pardiggle. As Virginia Blain says, he “had a great many things he wanted to say about women and their social and sexual roles” (67). No matter how he accepted women’s jumping out from their proper places, it might have been out of the question to accept the cases of Mrs. Jellyby and Pardiggle. Both of them neglect humanity and this is a continuing theme for Dickens. He is not so much making a fool of them as blaming them.

We perceive that Esther works well as a real philanthropist and a woman with a mission. He succeeds in emphasising Esther’s humanity, when we compare Esther with Mrs. Jellyby and Pardiggle. As Moers describes Dickens’ aim, Esther’s function is “to try to repair the social damage” and give people “right charity and right religion.”<sup>19</sup> Dickens makes Mrs. Jellyby and Pardiggle raise their voices, but nobody recognises the meaning. Dickens, likewise, makes Esther tone her voice down; then many of them are soothed and understand her sayings.

Esther’s hoping “to win some love” might include her need to love herself. After Esther has achieved self-definition, she gradually progresses toward being a strong-minded woman. As Gilbert and Gubar state, “self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative ‘I AM’ cannot be uttered if the ‘I’ knows not what it is” (17). While they show appropriate attitudes, as women writers should, these can be applied to Esther’s case. Let us return to Esther Summerson. Criticism regarded her hesitation as coyness and Brontë thought it twaddle. By contrast, Jane has definitely accepted herself, and asserted her opinions and rights clearly since childhood. Esther hasn’t understood her merit and accepted herself until she loses her beauty. She establishes a sense of identity at that moment. When she reads the letter from her mother, she confirms her mother’s fast love. She writes that “I clearly derived from it — and that was much then — that I had not been abandoned by my mother” (Dickens 452). She gains confidence. Also Esther breaks new ground to perceive how her mother

tries to convey her love and apology to her, yet the act drives her into a corner. She says, "I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived . . ." (Dickens 454). When she has gained self-confidence, she reaches maturity and becomes aggressive but only by degrees. She reveals the great ability that she has concealed. It now emerges that she has become a strong-minded woman.

Michael Slater appears confused about the ending of this novel; he seems not to understand that Esther has transformed herself into a strong-minded woman with the virtue of modesty. It is Esther Summerson who achieves self-realization within the Victorian gender limitation — combining it with devotion, mildness, and benevolence. She becomes a person magnanimous and brave enough to take a chance in her hour of need. Slater's confusion about the ending of the novel emerges as follows:

Dickens seems, in fact, to be trying to make Esther function both as an unreliable and as a reliable narrator at the same time and the result is, not surprisingly, unsatisfactory. If he had followed through his conception of her character as an illustration of the damage done to individuals in the 'Chancery World' of *Bleak House* he would have ended the novel with her entering into a self-sacrificing, essentially sterile, marriage with Jarndyce. Instead, he suddenly turns Jarndyce into a sort of *deus ex machina* ('I felt as if the brightness on him must be like the brightness of the Angels', Esther tells us) who ensures that Esther is saved from herself to achieve the happiness in love that marriage with him would have denied her.

(257)

Slater is questioning why Dickens produces a *deus ex machina* in his ending. Dickens, however, wanted to depict Esther's transformation from, as Slater expresses it, "one of life's walking wounded" into a woman who, again in Slater's words, is "finally released from the psychological and emotional straitjacket into which her early experience had forced her" (256). Dickens wanted his heroine to seize happiness by the hand and also didn't want her to boast about her own exploits. Esther, therefore, mentions that it is by the grace of the Angels. We should not dismiss the idea that, as I have suggested, Dickens wanted Esther to achieve self-realization in a different way from *Jane Eyre*'s. That is, Esther does not assert herself.

In the final chapter of the story, we find that Esther belittles herself and sings her husband's praises. It seems natural that we feel an antipathy toward her theatrical expression:

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 I am 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.

(769)

As I have already mentioned, Esther experiences a situation quite similar to Dickens' early circumstances. She lives an orphan-like childhood and has an obsession about not having been loved and received by somebody. Though she has high hopes, her predicament is always with her until she seizes her identity. That is just young Dickens' state. He had been subjected to a great degree of trauma in the blacking factory period. It was not possible for him to confess his pain to anyone else for a long time. The author must have hoped his heroine was finally released from her pain. When she hears Woodcourt's admiration for her, her obsession must vanish away:

"Heaven knows, beloved of my life," said he, "that my praise is not a lover's praise, but the truth. You do not know what all around you see in Esther Summerson, how many hearts she touches and awakens, what sacred admiration and what love she wins."

(731)

She has been longing to hear such lines from someone whom she loves. At that moment, she recognises that she has become a woman in accord with her vow. When she sees 'the grace of the Angels,' she expresses her feelings of gratitude, namely she blesses her husband from the bottom of her heart. This is the first and also the final words of hers without a double meaning in her narrative. We understand, at this point, that it isn't self-denial or coyness, but rather passionate feeling.

The points of my argument have been expressed in the preceding pages. *Jane Eyre* insists on her faith, belief, and desire directly from childhood; however, Esther Summerson's case is rather more complicated for us to understand. As she has been severely psychologically damaged by a loveless childhood and has not been able to achieve self-definition. Although she seems to have been an angel-in-the-house, this is grounded in the vow which little Esther makes. Confirming her mother's fast love, the surroundings' constant support, and the beloved Woodcourt's adoration, she overcomes her natural fear that nobody will love her. She, then, gains self-confidence and reaches maturity. This progress aids her in revealing the great ability that she has concealed,



and so she finally becomes a strong-minded woman.

#### IV

If “Didactic literature often reinforced” the notion of an angel-in-the-house to instruct “readers in how to adhere to proper behavior” (Ayres 4), the mid-Victorian Charles Dickens might well also have urged readers to follow this notion. Nevertheless, in practice he presented another image of womanhood through the heroine of *Bleak House* even as he outwardly showed an ideal of womanhood in his day. It must have derived from his well-developed plot. The more I read about the social background of the 19th century in Britain, the more I acknowledged that women of the middle class were in quite repressive situations.

Britain was rapidly industrialized in the early 19th century. This Industrial Revolution began in the middle of 18th century and was gaining momentum by the end of the century. The Revolution produced numerous new kinds of occupation for the middle class. As a result, the nation benefited from mass production; however, capitalism had developed and the system demanded a number of sacrifices. The society rapidly changed. The Victorians evolved their own standards of worth and ideology: they were sticklers for keeping up appearances and held fast to their extremely polite ethical views.

It seems that the combination of Evangelicalism with utilitarianism produced inconsistencies, but Evangelicalism spread over the whole nation, especially into the middle class, during the Victorian age. This ‘ism’ added the force of religion and moral ideology to the theory of utilitarian politics, society, and economy. Evangelicalism offered the middle class businessmen the vehement vigour which they needed. The Victorians owed their confidence to a spiritual vitality which was borne of Evangelical self-sacrifice.

The Victorian age was thus quite complicated. The Industrial Revolution made domestic industry decline and men worked at places unconcerned with their own homes. The ideology consequently differentiated a woman's place inside of the house, from a man's in the open world. Women were only expected to be angels-in-the-house “to make a man's home happy” (Williams 24). Because of the distorted image of women, women of the middle class were severely victimized. Some literature also acted as a spur to help the nation follow this notion.

Though many of Dickens' heroines seem to have embodied the

image of an angel-in-the-house, Esther turns out not to do so. However, as Slater observes, the plot and the heroine have been misunderstood.<sup>20</sup> The plot appears to include an epochal standpoint. She achieves self-realization at last, though fate had compelled her to live a limited and hard life. From a comparative study of *Jane Eyre* and *Bleak House*, it is possible to argue that Esther is not an angel-in-the-house. She is, rather, a strong-minded woman.

Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë were not acceptable to each other both personally and as writers. Brontë disliked both Dickens' ostentatious extravagance and his urbanite sophistication. Dickens had refused to depict passionate themes up until the publication of *Jane Eyre*, while Charlotte Brontë freely depicted them in a novel where Jane achieves self-realization. Dickens was irritated by both Brontë and Jane; his rivalry must have led him to produce a comparable woman character.

Esther and Jane were compared so as to clarify the similarities and differences between them and, as a result, it is made evident that their starting points and also their goals are the same; however, the ways they approach their goals are different. Further, Dickens didn't want his heroine to be an impudent, outspoken troublemaker, but demanded devotion and her being a good girl as well as both sagacious and shrewd. Dickens must have taken account of the ideal of womanhood in those days and adopted the form of an angel-in-the-house for his novel — because he must have understood his adaptation of the theme entirely answers to the time's demands, and is completely contrary to Jane Eyre's image.

In the process of showing Esther to be a strong-minded woman, Esther's sagacity and tactics through parts of her dexterous narration were explored. She usually conceals her true colours under her virtues. Although this stance is caused by her desire to be loved, she realises it is absurd to keep on playing this role that she wants to alter her situation. Her serious illness causes the loss of her beauty; nevertheless, she doesn't appear to consider that it is a loss of worth. The confirmation of her mother's fast love and her surroundings' steady support persuades her not to do so. Accordingly, she achieves self-definition and recognises her identity. She not only displays her sagacity and shrewdness but comes to display great ability as a negotiator as she makes the best use of her tactics. When she attains success, she still seems to be an angel in appearance.

I have demonstrated how Dickens made Esther a strong-minded

woman with mildness and benevolence. Esther has been severely psychologically damaged by a loveless childhood and has not achieved self-definition. However, she always tries to keep the vow little Esther made and to be a good girl. As Esther achieves self-definition, she gradually progresses toward being a strong-minded woman. Besides, by the grace of the beloved Woodcourt's adoration, she overcomes her natural fear that nobody will love her.

In concluding, I should note that what Dickens proposes as his idea of a woman's proper place must be still the home. However, he no longer insists on a woman staying inside the house or beside the hearth. Though Dickens is particular about the spheres for a man and a woman, yet he even accepts that she associates herself with social movements or works outside. With the evolution of society and the female energies of the day, his ideas must have been at odds. Dickens has depicted the women's place from a different viewpoint. His proposal for the new woman figure was not at first well received by critics; however, Dickens' plot and Esther's function came to be understood with the passage of time.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is the view of Michael Slater in *Dickens and Women* (California: Stanford UP, 1983), 10.
- <sup>2</sup> Citations of novels by Charles Dickens are from *Bleak House* (New York: Norton, 1977).
- <sup>3</sup> This point is argued by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 8.
- <sup>4</sup> Brenda Ayres states that ". . . the text constructs Esther as an exemplar of womanhood and a female advocate for domesticity, it also struggles to convey Dickens' understanding of women, and at the same time to convey a Victorian woman's attempt to understand herself." See Brenda Ayres in *Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 141.
- <sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Susan Shatto in *The Companion to Bleak House* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 7.
- <sup>6</sup> For Dickens' inclination to be careful with reference to passion, see Graham Storey in *Dickens Bleak House* (London: Cambridge UP, 1987), 86-87.
- <sup>7</sup> Brontë's passion was quite new to English fiction. See Gilbert and Gubar, 338.
- <sup>8</sup> See Juliet Barker in *The Brontës* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 815.
- <sup>9</sup> See Paul Schlicke in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 56.

- <sup>10</sup> Victorian social and literary discourse concerning women's roles are explained, see Ayres, 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Jane's state is understood, see Gilbert and Gubar, 368.
- <sup>12</sup> Snow White had been allowed to live because she was a good girl. Her sensibility is described, see Gilbert and Gubar, 40.
- <sup>13</sup> The authority of the mirror is analysed, see Gilbert and Gubar, 38.
- <sup>14</sup> See Ellen Moers in "*Bleak House: The Agitating Women*" *The Dickensian* 69 (London: The Dickens Fellowship, 1973), 20.
- <sup>15</sup> Inspector Bucket, a man of great insight, describes Skimpole, see Dickens, 682.
- <sup>16</sup> See Moers, 22.
- <sup>17</sup> Slater reveals that Grace Greenwood writes, over the initials 'GG,' in *The New York Daily Tribune* 5 July 1870. See Slater, 431.
- <sup>18</sup> See Moers, 13.
- <sup>19</sup> See Moers, 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Like many critics, Slater observes that "he [Dickens] has generally been judged to have failed artistically in his rendering of Esther's self-portrait . . ." See Slater, 255.