

**Centers of Consciousness: Protagonism and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel**

**Anna Elizabeth Clark**

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## ABSTRACT

### **Centers of Consciousness: Protagonism and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel**

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Since Aristotle, we have categorized characters in terms of relative quantity and proportion. From Henry James's "center of consciousness," to E. M. Forster's theory of "round" and "flat," to Deirdre Lynch's "pragmatics of character," to Alex Woloch's influential "one and many," scaled distinctions between "major" and "minor" characters have remained unchallenged since the *Poetics*. Yet, such classifications don't speak to the ways characters generate interest and consequence disproportionate to their textual presence. My dissertation counters scaled definitions of character by proposing a form of characterization called *protagonism*. Here, limited amounts of text yield the kind of capacious subjectivity we normally associate with copious amounts of dialogue or exposition, as formal narrative features such as point of view and interpolation produce richly compact portraits, often of otherwise ancillary figures. Protagonism may lack the "exhaustive presentation" that Ian Watt claims is inherent to the novel, but it is nonetheless rich in the personality and specificity we typically associate with protagonists. Indeed, many canonical novels, especially those of literary realism's highpoint in nineteenth-century Britain, resist the character hierarchy implied by distinctions such as major and minor. In addition to manifest examples such as Collins's "experiment" with many narrators in *The Woman in White* (1859), we can count instances in which novels juxtapose quantitatively significant characters in qualitative terms. From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), where the title character's protagonistic potential is

undermined by his creature's arresting autobiography, to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in which readerly affections are split between a Jewish hero, an egoistic heroine, and a narrator's attempt to relate "everything" to "everything else," novels that are far from generic outliers fit uneasily into scaled models of characterization, even when their titles and critics imply otherwise. Protagonism is how such novels disrupt the impulse for sustained identification with a single exceptional perspective, directing attention towards characters who might otherwise appear nondescript, inscrutable, or threatening.

As my project traces protagonist's adaptable formal applications, it considers a version of figurative individuality based not in self-differentiation, but in what I refer to as social recognition: in contrast to readings of the nineteenth-century novel as a site in which individual and social *agon* find expression before an ultimate reconciliation or synthesis, protagonist's brief, concise, and instantaneous markers of richly individualized perspective foreground the *perception* of subjectivity over its descriptive representation, flattening out tensions between individuality and its inscription within a social body. Narrative techniques such as focalization, free indirect discourse, and autodiegetic narration all serve to produce the kind of reflexive recognition more commonly associated with sight, evoking a precise subjectivity at first "glance." This version of literary individuality both reflects and complicates the social purpose that Victorian authors such as Dickens and Eliot claim for the novel. As Eliot suggests in "The Natural History of German Life," literature should "amplif[y] experience and exten[d] our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot," resisting stock figures and stereotypes to produce a readerly relationship with realist characters that is deliberate, sustained, and self-reflective. This view of the novel's

morally instructive capacity is refracted in recent arguments by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, who argues that readers' engagement with the novel's prolonged form and involved descriptions cultivates their ethical imagination. Yet for both Eliot and latter-day critics, the readerly experience of identification with characters remains suspect, if still implicitly desirable, risking what Wayne Booth has described as an "immature" experience of literature divorced from its "aesthetic experience." Protagonism reveals such dissonances while also showing how characterization itself is a means for the novel to explore individuality's social obligations. Protagonism models the inclusive social sympathy Eliot seeks; it also demonstrates the limits and failures of such collective ends.

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For John



## Introduction

But why always Dorothea?  
George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

### I. EQUIVALENT CENTERS OF SELF

We take for granted that the realist novel works by largely by description. In the words of Roland Barthes, the “concrete details” that accumulate in realism’s prose signify nothing so much as “we are the real.”<sup>1</sup> Description situates the reader in the realm of the ordinary and everyday, while at the same time revealing a self-conscious consideration of nature of reality and our ability to represent it.<sup>2</sup>

There is one facet of the realist novel, however, that defies this commonsense alignment between description and the literary representation of the everyday world: characterization. As I will argue, realist characterization, particularly in the nineteenth-century British novel, deploys a host of narrative strategies that give rise to a sense of characters’ significance and interior depth *without* the use of detail-packed description.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect.” 1968. In *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986) 141-48.

<sup>2</sup> Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 11-12. Levine paraphrases Lukács in his description of the “alienation” signified by realist description.

Consider, for example, these introductions of two different though equally typical protagonists. First, from *Middlemarch*:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by simple dress.<sup>3</sup>

And second, from *The Small House at Allington*:

Lilian Dale, dear Lily Dale – for my reader must know that she is to be very dear, and that my story will be nothing to him if he do not love Lily Dale – Lilian Dale had discovered Mr. Crosbie was a swell.”<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, these character introductions are noticeably distinct. The first bears the weight of authoritative judgment; the other is delivered as a casual aside in the midst of a conversation about someone else. *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea Brooke is anointed: the combination of a preface about a “modern day St. Theresa,” a volume titled “Miss Brooke,” and a first sentence highlighting her Vermeer-like loveliness leaves us no doubt and little choice about with whom we will first align our interest. In contrast, the narrator's bald declaration in *The Small House at Allington* of Lily's favored position speaks to her status as one among many potential favorites – there is nothing innately exceptional about her. Dorothea is placed into a cast of accompanying characters; Lily is plucked out of one, and even then, only temporarily. What is shared by these introductions, however, is a rendering of characters' centrality that is coincident with their first appearance on the page. We know, of course, that Eliot's Dorothea and Trollope's Lily are both paradigmatic Victorian heroines: attractive, likeable young people whose romantic dramas predominate in the plots of their respective novels. Yet,

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<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 261.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Small House at Allington* (New York: Penguin, 1991) 16.

perhaps because of their cultural currency, we have tended to overlook how these characters become narratively prominent for reasons that have nothing to do with their minutely described motivations or sympathetic emotional lives.

I start with Dorothea and Lily to draw attention to how such characterization renders the protagonist role both inevitable and oddly tenuous. Even as novels attach narrative importance to a single prominent figure, they create heroes and heroines who, as likeable as they might be, can come easily in and out of view, and exist alongside other characters who are equally and often more compelling figures. Taking their cue from Aristotle's *Poetics*, readers and critics often take for granted that the protagonist is the character who talks the most, takes up the most textual space, or who is simply most central to the plot. I would argue, however, that the Victorian novel often tries to get us to think otherwise. If *Middlemarch*'s narrator ultimately seems compelled to ask "why always Dorothea?" about that heroine, many novels have no need for such a question. Indeed, *Middlemarch*'s many plotlines and extended focus on several central figures suggest that "why always Dorothea?" is more expressive of self-consciousness about the nature of the protagonist role than desire to deflect attention away from Dorothea.<sup>5</sup>

I am suggesting, then, that the novels of this period are preoccupied by an approach to character and characterization I call *protagonism*: the narrative facilitation of many characters' embodiment of the rich individuality and organizing perspective we normally associate with a protagonist. Protagonism is, in other words, the novelistic

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<sup>5</sup> See Robyn Warhol, "'It is of Little Use for Me to Tell You': George Eliot's Narrative Refusals." *A Companion to George Eliot*. Ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 46-61. Warhol suggests that the narrator's attempt to direct attention away from Dorothea is a sincere attempt to win sympathy for her husband. Using free indirect discourse to both "exhibit" and "inculcate" *Middlemarch*'s narrator then slides into "disnarration," giving us a sympathetic version of a Casaubon who could have existed, but doesn't.

realization of what *Middlemarch*'s narrator calls "equivalent centre[s] of self." Protagonism's narrative features emerge when we downplay the importance of description and textual proportions and focus instead on the concise means of representing perspective, consciousness, and character that the novel has at its disposal. In protagonism, signifiers of interiority such as point of view or focalization, free indirect discourse, and interpolated documents and stories become vital aspects of novelistic representations of character, and the means by which novels can reconcile many "centers of self" with a limited amount of textual space. Just as Dorothea and Lily have their textual prominence and vitality of consciousness signaled by a brief narrative appearance, so too can seemingly minor characters be momentarily imbued with independent perspectives and a sense of depth. Even in novels with a dominant first-person perspective, such as Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, reported dialogue, framed narrations, and interpolated documents may still generate the precise individuation of a character's perspective that typifies protagonism. Here, even quite brief inclusions of characters' speech or biographies can have the focalizing power of more extended interpolated stories such as "The Man of the Hill" in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, or Cardenio's narrative in *Don Quixote*. These momentary centralizations of otherwise insignificant characters' perspectives illustrate how protagonism works less by overt pleas for sympathy than by formal demonstrations of discrete consciousness.

Take, for example, the thoroughly secondary Harriet Smith in Austen's *Emma*. Even Harriet is subject in certain key passages to the same free indirect discourse that is associated almost exclusively with that novel's heroine. After first meeting Emma, the narrator reports that Harriet was "delighted with the affability with which Miss

Woodhouse had treated her all the evening, and actually shaken hands with her at last!”<sup>6</sup>

The ironic distance that often attends a free indirect perspective is here softened, as our glimpse of Harriet’s own conscious center not only confirms Emma’s assessment of her naïvely sweet personality, but also lends it a poignant reality. What has been for Emma a pleasant, self-gratifying encounter is, for Harriet, the culmination of an apparently long-desired hope, signaled by that fervent “at last!” For just a flash, we see Emma and Harriet’s friendship wholly from Harriet’s perspective, and it appears as not only a source of girlish amusement, but also an affectingly sincere wish come true. Though present momentarily, the protagonism of Harriet’s character shapes our understanding of Emma as fully as Emma’s perspective shapes our reading of her friend. Harriet’s “center of self” gives us an early sense of the genuinely human consequences of Emma’s misguided matchmaking, anticipating and establishing the very moment of regret and realization on which the whole of the novel’s plot will turn.

In its insistence on the potential significance and centrality of many characters, protagonism resists the inherently asymmetrical take on novelistic characterization proposed by Alex Woloch’s influential *The One vs. the Many*. Here, Woloch outlines what we might think of as a zero-sum character economy, in which minor and major characters struggle for a finite amount of “character-space” – or, the conceptual arena in which “our sense of a character as an actual human” overlaps with the textual space a narrative allots to a character. I share Woloch’s interest in the distribution of narrative attention among many characters and the tension between literary realism’s interest in

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*. Ed. Fiona Stafford (New York: Penguin, 2003) 25.

both “deep psychology” and “social expansiveness.”<sup>7</sup> But I depart from him in his assertion that narratives’ – and particularly novels’ – characterizations are forced to confine many characters into flattened “worker” or “eccentric” roles in order to fully represent the realism of one or a few dynamic figures. Woloch’s theory of character echoes many prior concepts in both its emphasis on a major/minor taxonomy and its assumption that characters’ psychology is largely a function of particularized description and detail. Indeed, Woloch’s presentation of “one vs. many” further entrenches the idea of a major/minor character binary. If E. M. Forster’s description of “round” and “flat” character plays with how our sense of characters’ interiority regularly exceeds the amount of information presented on the page, describing how that sense is sparked more by the depiction of characters’ independent agency than by description, Woloch’s character categories remain tethered to his insistence on the fixed criterion of narrative space as the primary determining factor in their asymmetry.<sup>8</sup> Though Woloch’s definition of “character-space” encompasses character as both a function of text and a realistic expansion of its textual signifiers, his readings tend to present the latter category as circumscribed by the former.

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 19.

<sup>8</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1955) 67-73. Likewise, Woloch’s major and minor categories appear surprisingly static, unlike those of Forster, who notes instances in which a character, such as *Mansfield Park*’s Lady Bertram, may slide from flat to round and back again (Forster 73-5). Missing in general from Woloch’s treatment of character are descriptions of characters who transverse or complicate traditional major/minor distinctions, figures such as *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond, for instance, or those reoccurring characters from Trollope’s novel series, whose reappearances, even in ways that are peripheral plot, deliberately invoke their past centrality in a kind of “surprise guest star” manner. Another way of articulating the difference between my theory of character and Woloch’s would be to say that while he views *Middlemarch*’s dispersed field of character and complicated relationship to the idea of the protagonist as an exception, I see it as a nineteenth-century norm (Woloch, 31-2).

The limitations of such an approach are exemplified in its application to novels with first-person narratives, such as Dickens's *Great Expectations*. In his analysis, Woloch suggests that Pip's narration exploits the "intrinsic and unavoidable" asymmetry of first-person novelistic narration. While, Woloch argues, first-person novels often attempt to "compensate ... for the structural imbalance that is compelled by first-person narrative" by presenting an unreliable narrator or by including multiple or framed first-person narrations, *Great Expectations* exploits this asymmetry by presenting a major character only from an interior perspective, and minor characters only from an external view.<sup>9</sup> Here, the way in which a single character's voice dominates the narrative is the strongest evidence of his centrality.

But first-person narratives of all kinds are more permeable and decentered than Woloch's presentation suggests. True, inclusions of interpolated stories or texts and descriptions of other characters' interiority rarely remedy or even marginally compensate for asymmetries of characters' textual presentation. Yet other centers of consciousness still emerge. Consider the way that Pip's retrospective narration includes an extended dialogue between Pip and Joe in which the latter recounts the abuse he and his mother suffered at his father's hands, and how it continues to influence him:

"And last of all Pip – and this I want to say very serious to you, old chap – I see so much in my poor mother, of a woman drudging and slaving and breaking her honest hart and never getting no peace in her mortal days, and I'm dead afeered of

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<sup>9</sup> Woloch, 177-9.

going wrong in the way of not doing what's right by a woman, and I'd far rather of the two go wrong the t'other way, and be a little ill-convenienced myself."<sup>10</sup> Or, alternately, the way that Dickens's *Little Dorrit* interrupts the plot to include the thoroughly perplexing interpolated narrative of Miss Wade, titled, in self-consciously eighteenth-century fashion, "The History of a Self-Tormenter":

I have the misfortune of not being a fool. From a very early age I have detected what those about me thought they hid from me. If I could have been habitually imposed upon, instead of habitually discerning the truth, I might have lived as smoothly as most fools do.<sup>11</sup>

These very different examples, one the reported dialogue of a character recounted by a first-person narrator, the other a first-person biographical narrative inserted into a third-person novel, work in correlated ways to subvert any reliance on or identification with a single orienting perspective. Joe's speech illustrates a reflective self-awareness that highlights the absence of such qualities in the narrator. Indeed, after Joe's revelation, Pip notes that he "dated a new admiration for Joe from that night," a comment that only emphasizes the ways Joe exceeds the merely "admirable" role in which Pip continually places him. Similarly, Miss Wade's "confession" makes her character both more visible and more inscrutable. Her defensive assertion of herself as keenly discerning and no "fool" leaves us uncertain about whether she is manipulating us or unwittingly incriminating herself. That her narrative is left without further comment from the third person narrator upon its close only deepens this ambiguity. In the ways they depart from

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*. Ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 45.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*. Ed. Stephen Wall and Helen Small (New York: Penguin, 1998) 693.



and complicate other narrative perspectives while foregrounding their own, Pip's inclusion of Joe's speech and Miss Wade's interpolated story illustrate how first-person narration regularly occludes interior experience. Indeed, *Great Expectations*' plot depends on such occlusion, while the magnetic centrality of Miss Wade's character only increases with her impenetrability. Against Woloch's assertion, we can see that often in first-person narrative the character who seems most available to us is also the one whose interiority is most obscure. As my first chapter's reading of *Frankenstein* will suggest, such obscurity is largely revealed to us through the ways first-person narrators foreground the presence of other equivalent consciousness through dialogue, perspective, and focalization. These narrative features can destabilize diegetic centrality without ceding a majority – or even a modicum – of textual space.

## II. THE INDIVIDUAL TYPE

Protagonism's prehistory exists in characterization theories that consider how the thing we call character is at once located in while also being more than an amalgam of textual signifiers. Much analysis of character self-consciously frames itself in terms of the long-standing debate between "referential" or mimetic character (which considers the "real person" quality of realist character as an ethically and aesthetically central literary category), and "semantic" character (which disassociates character from its human referents in order to explore texts' structural significance and the ideologically fraught nature of identity).<sup>12</sup> In truth, though, takes on character from either side of the

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<sup>12</sup> For representative examples of referential character theory, see Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel*; Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature*; John Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character," *Poetics Today* 7.2 (1986) 227-250; and Rawdon Wilson, "The Bright Chimera: Character as a Literary Term" *Critical Inquiry* 5.4 (1979) 725-749.

referential/semantic divide offer considerably more nuance than this critical binary would imply. In their readings of narrative representations of thought and character's progressive development, referential character theorists such as James Phelan and W. J. Harvey are attentive to what it means for a character to "stand" for something, whether human being or ideology.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Russian Formalists such as Vladimir Propp and structuralists and post-structuralists such as Barthes are sensitive to how narrative forms or textual units can accumulate and circulate meaning. In these contexts, character is a way of thinking about the limits, possibilities, and mechanisms of literary representation, a concept closely attuned to both the intuitive and inherently strange aspects of textual signification.<sup>14</sup>

Where protagonism most markedly departs from extant theories of character, particularly those of narratologists such as Dorrit Cohn and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, is in its insistence that a textual shorthand of inner life can be as discursively and narratively significant as the description that amasses through time and text.<sup>15</sup> Barthes

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For representative examples of semantic character, see A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* [1966]. Trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); W. J. Harvey, *Characters and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. Trans. L. Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton University Press, 1978); and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983).

himself, though typically associated with semantic character, provides an illustrative description of how a minute textual feature can provoke such a sense of dynamic identity:

The proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes; referring in fact to a body, it draws the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) tense. In principle, the character who says 'I' has no name...in fact, however, *I* immediately becomes a name, his name. In the story... *I* is no longer a pronoun, but a name, the best of names: to say *I* is inevitably to attribute signifieds to oneself; further, it gives one a biographical duration, it enables one to undergo, in one's imagination, an intelligible 'evolution,' to signify oneself as an object with a destiny, to give a meaning to time. On this level, *I* ... is therefore a character.<sup>16</sup>

While Barthes initially asserts that "character" is merely the thing that occurs when "identical semes traverse the same proper name several times," his description of what it means for "I" to be a character vivifies this "semic configuration," suggesting a surprisingly dynamic literary representation of consciousness. The self-referential work of "attributing signifieds to oneself" and the ideas of "biographical duration" and giving "meaning to time" – not to mention the sense of animated agency that pervades Barthes's explanation – all combine to give a picture of something that seems notably similar to Eliot's "center of self."

What is missing from such a notion of character (and why, perhaps, Barthes' theory of character is not often taken up by referential theorists) is a sense of individuality. Biographical duration and the potential for evolution appear more like the prerequisites or typology of realistic character than its substance, incomplete on their own but obligatory nonetheless. Discussions of characterization in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel often focus on the necessity of both general and specific qualities, highlighting how traditional novelistic protagonists encompass both what Catherine Gallagher refers to as

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<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, 67-8.

“type...fed on life” and what Ian Watt calls “realistic particularity.”<sup>17</sup> This negotiation between the specific and the general, between the familiar and the particular, is foundational to any understanding of realism, but it is acutely at issue in realist characterization.<sup>18</sup> As Gallagher astutely points out, “Fictional characters may *refer* to people in the world by conforming to type, but they only resemble people in their *nonconformity*.”<sup>19</sup> Dorothea, then, in Gallagher’s reading, gains referential power along with increasing particularity; as Dorothea becomes more and more “herself,” the “type” she embodies comes to supersede the “type” of the modern-day Saint Theresa that had previously categorized her. Here, type is both a starting place and an endpoint for realist character, establishing a context for individual traits that will then, in turn, provide a further means of classification. Even Watt, who famously asserts that the novel “works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration,” finds that characters’ particular individuality is as much a function of a class of appellations – proper names – as it is “the presentation of their background.”<sup>20</sup> With protagonism, I take up and extend

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<sup>17</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 17; Catherine Gallagher, “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” *Representations* 90.1 (2005): 61-74.

<sup>18</sup> See Deirdre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) for an alternative argument. Lynch argues that “character” in the early-to-mid eighteenth-century did not entail interior depth and was in fact attached as much to things as to people. Only later in the century, when “appreciation” of aesthetic objects was valorized alongside function and ownership, did a version of “deep” character emerge.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 66. See also Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Here Gallagher argues that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female author’s construction of their literary personas helped to create the “fictionality” of realist character by pointing to specific, realistic traits that had no precise real-world referent.

<sup>20</sup> Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 17-8; 30.

these readings of type as intrinsic to realist character, using my concept to describe how individuality itself can become a recognizable classification instead of simply an ineffable sum of traits. Indications of Watt's "particularity" can function independently of "exhaustive presentation"; we need not know an individual in order to recognize her as such.

In its rethinking of individuality and literary particularity, protagonism not only offers a new way of viewing character, but also proposes a variation on novelistic representations of individuality. While the novel and conceptions of the modern subject have long been united, critical takes on the genre's production of individuality have focused largely on a process of extended differentiation based in Hegelian dialectic. In these arguments, the individual is almost always synonymous with a single privileged protagonist who comes fully into view only through sustained descriptive and thematic development. Nancy Armstrong's articulation of the novel's engagement with subjectivity is representative of such claims: "Novelists had to figure out the rhetorical means of generating dissatisfaction with the available social possibilities before they could create a human subject with the restlessness to grow – over time and in successive stages – both more complete as an individual and more worthy in social terms."<sup>21</sup> Here, as in other literary accounts, bourgeois individuation requires an ultimate reconciliation or reinscription of the individual within the social, a stabilizing synthesis that controls differentiation in socially productive ways. Yet protagonism's means of concisely depicting a unique interiority suggests an alternative, one that emphasizes how individuality signifies itself to others. Protagonism represents subjectivity as directed

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 4.

outward, towards social recognition rather than hidden interiority. In place of a form of characterization in which a reader is granted confidential access to an otherwise obscure mind (a form of characterization, in other words, based upon descriptions of what consciousness contains – thoughts, feelings, a sense of one’s own identity), protagonism offers a version of the individual that is readily available to social perception. In these terms, what it means to recognize an individual is to see evidence of a “center of self,” even if the content of that self remains hidden from view. Such a version of individuality has no need of social differentiation. Instead, its mutually defining engagement with the social is the prerequisite of its existence.

This take on literary individuality complicates views of character as a means of cohering, codifying, and perpetuating bourgeois identity. As Hélène Cixous states, “So long as we do not put aside ‘character’ and everything it implies in terms of illusion and complicity with classical reasoning and the appropriating economy that such reasoning supports, we will remain locked up in the treadmill of reproduction.”<sup>22</sup> Protagonism, even as it reflects concern about the recognition and social availability of individuality, does not fit neatly into critiques of fiction’s complicity in the myth of bourgeois identity.

Rather, in its emphasis on a largely unseen interiority, it encompasses aspects of the very instability that Cixous and her fellow poststructuralists valorize.

Neither does protagonism conform to the version of Victorian subjectivity proposed in many recent critical readings of the era’s liberal philosophy. Here, in the face of what Mary Poovey and others have described as intractable differences of class, race,

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<sup>22</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Character of ‘Character,’” *New Literary History*, 5.2 (1974): 383-402. See also Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984), particularly his discussion of *Middlemarch*, pp. 63-661; and Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*.

and culture, Victorian discourses of identity generate standardized (and often denigrating and exclusionary) forms of personhood to which subjects must conform.<sup>23</sup> But by examining how characterization represents nuances of perspective and inherently private aspects of self, we see how literary character can both amplify and neutralize tensions between conformity and identity. If, as Elaine Hadley has lately claimed, the liberal subject is formed through “standardized and therefore replicable practices of cognitive individuation,” protagonism suggests a version of the individual that is participatory in such standardized cognition but not wholly shaped by it.<sup>24</sup>

### III. BUT WHY “WHY ALWAYS DOROTHEA?”

My theory of protagonism mediates between many of the contradictions we associate with the Victorian realist novel, negotiating between the particular and the general, the individual and the type, the part and the whole. Indeed, its version of characterization reminds us just how adept novelistic prose is at holding together such tensions. Even in the most innocuous depictions of character, protagonism reveals evidence of minute negotiations and adjustments between single and shared perspectives and external and internal views. If Bakhtin’s heteroglot novel suggests a cacophonous

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<sup>23</sup> See Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995) 4-19, 55-72; Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1987) and Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002); David Glover, *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1999); and Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010) 65.

multiplicity of depersonalized registers, voices, and “languages” (in the broadest sense of the term), protagonism portrays a similar diversity of perspectives while maintaining their embodiment in specific characters, and their exemplification of conscious selves.<sup>25</sup>

In this, the realist novel appears intrinsically suited to the moral task Victorian authors often assign it; its ability to encompass and unify many “deep” consciousnesses ideally gives the reader a both broad and intimate view of human life that otherwise seems impossible to achieve. We might think of this view as similar to the “realization” that Judith Butler says occurs when we reach the endpoint of our self-knowledge:

When we come up against the limits of any epistemological horizon and realize that the question is not simply whether I can or will *know* you, or whether I can be *known*, we are compelled to realize as well that “you” qualify in the scheme of the human within which I operate, and that no “I” can begin to tell its story without asking: “Who are you?” “Who speaks to me?” “To whom do I speak when I speak to you?” If this establishes the priority of rhetoric to ethics, that might be just as well.<sup>26</sup>

Butler’s elaborate decentering of self and its implied ethical priority is mirrored in protagonism’s play of individual and type. Its characterization entreats us to entertain multiple perspectives while also distinguishing the essential unifying likeness between them, pointing towards one of those “epistemological horizons” that takes us beyond questions of knowledge to a point of sheer recognition.

Often, though, that horizon remains at a distance. As adept as realist narration may be at rendering multiple points of consciousness, the Victorian novel regularly implies that readers’ attentiveness to characters is unruly and in need of guidance.

*Barchester Tower*’s Mr. Slope “must not be brought before the public at the tail of a

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<sup>25</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 134.



chapter”; *Oliver Twist*’s protagonist has to literally fall out of consciousness for other characters to come into view; and of course, *Middlemarch* is compelled to ask “why always” of its heroine.<sup>27</sup> All these overt means of pulling narrative attention towards one character and away from others recall protagonism’s interest in multiple conscious centers. Yet these intrusions frame such interest as a narrative *problem*, rather than an object for which the realist novel seems designed.

Rather than assuming that such moments express a habitual novelistic inequality of character, I suggest that we view them as newly attentive to the novel’s long-held ability to maintain many discrete consciousnesses within the confines of a single narrative. While *Middlemarch*’s “But why always Dorothea?” is typically read as a failure of narrative understanding, since it is followed by a wholly lackluster description of the terminally unappealing Casaubon, we can also see that question as complicit in the very difficulty it proposes to solve. As I’ve already highlighted, *Middlemarch* is filled with characters – Lydgate, Caleb and Mary Garth, Rosamond, Bulstrode, and Farebrother, among others – whose storylines easily deflect attention away from Dorothea. It is only when the narrator positions Dorothea as a character about whom we should ask “why always” that her centrality appears problematic, in danger of curtailing our ability to identify with other characters. Of course, just by posing this question, the narrator further entrenches Dorothea’s narrative centrality. But the passage’s reframing of characters’ centrality in terms of scaled majorities and minorities also occurs in the content of Casaubon’s compensating description. In the course of the three pages that

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<sup>27</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 24; Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

comprise the narrator's defense of his character, we are given nothing less than an exhaustive portrayal of his consciousness:

He had not much foretaste of happiness in his previous life. To know intense joy without a strong bodily frame, one must have an enthusiastic soul. Mr. Casaubon had never had a strong bodily frame, and his soul was sensitive without being enthusiastic: it was too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight; it went on fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying.<sup>28</sup>

While we should be suspicious of any attempt to win sympathy for a character by describing his very soul as a sort of swamp-hatched larva, the most damning aspect of Casaubon's description is its totality. Casaubon is not just the kind of character, but also, the narrative implies, the kind of "person" who needs only three pages of description to be fully revealed to us. Dorothea, on the other hand, merits hundreds. If, prior to Casaubon's defense, we could imagine the narrator's many focalizations of perspective as indications of many potential protagonists, subsequent to it, each depiction of interior thought implies finitude. What we can see is, by implication, all there is.

The ambivalence *Middlemarch* displays over both these versions of character, one that is ignited by thought exceeds narrative signifiers, and the other that is circumscribed by them, indicates two different approaches to representing characters' inner life. Eliot is committed to what she calls "psychological character," or "conceptions of life" and "emotions," positioning them as a necessary part of realism's social purpose. The more we see people "as they are," the more we can extend a meaningful and moral sympathy

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<sup>28</sup> *Middlemarch*, 262.

towards them.<sup>29</sup> As we see in *Middlemarch*, however, seeing people “as they are” can mean very different things for characterization. “But why always Dorothea” marks the existence of a growing distinction between characters’ consciousness and their “psychology.” As the realist novel becomes increasingly invested in representing the *content* of individuals’ interiority, it downplays the inherent likenesses between them. In other words, *Middlemarch* encompasses a transition from many “equivalent centers of self” to simply the existence of selves. “But why always Dorothea” suggests that the novel registers both what is lost and what is gained by this increasing emphasis on psychological content. In its ironic bid for readerly sympathy, the question demonstrates that sometimes the very fact of another’s consciousness, of a character’s protagonism, should be reason enough to attend to him. Sometimes the details, even when desired, just get in the way.

My four chapters anticipate *Middlemarch*’s ambivalence over consciousness and psychology, partiality and social sympathy, while also demonstrating the many ways that realistic character and readerly identification can exist without psychological description. Chapter One presents Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as an archetypal example of protagonism in which characters’ ability to perceive the consciousness of others reflects back onto the narrative status of their own perspectives and bids for readerly sympathy. Taking off from *Frankenstein*’s nested first-person narrators, Chapter Two considers Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* as an exemplification of protagonism’s strong, if counterintuitive, presence in novels with autodiegetic narrators. My third and fourth chapters attend to how protagonism’s multi-perspective promise of inclusive readerly

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<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*. Ed. A. S. Byatt (New York: Penguin, 1990) 110-11.

sympathy often falls short, even as a narrative desire to encompass many points of view seems increasingly present. While Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* holds protagonism in tension with distractingly hyper-individualized characterizations, Dickens's *Bleak House* considers both the boundedness and the permeability of individual perspective. Here, the city becomes a means of exploring what it means for individuality to be both a form of particularity and a shared experience.

Throughout these chapters, Eliot regularly serves as my interlocutor. For as surely as *Middlemarch*'s "But why always Dorothea?" demonstrates an increasing novelistic interest in psychological content, it also brings into view the form of characterization that preceded it. Protagonism shows us how characters' consciousness and individuality can exist apart from particularized detail, but it also demonstrates how the deep interiority often associated with realist character is itself a kind of representational compromise. There are forms of understanding that exceed and defy what is found in the text. As always, Eliot says it best:

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Middlemarch*, 198.

## Chapter One

### *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Protagonist*

Character, in short, is also a piece of a person; it has the factitious coherence of all obsessions.

Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*

#### I. DEFINING A PROTAGONIST

It's no secret that when we think of *Frankenstein* what comes to mind isn't the title character, but his creature.<sup>1</sup> Pop culture conflates "Frankenstein" with a square-headed creature and major critical interpretations of Mary Shelley's novel describe the creature – not Victor – as the tale's dramatic crux and conscience: the creature is the bearer of linguistic consequence; the narrator who most appreciates "scientific spirit;" and the nonconformist figure with whom Shelley herself is "compelled" to identify.<sup>2</sup> While still deeming Victor Frankenstein the protagonist, varied readings all locate the creature's significance largely in his incredible self-education and erudite rhetorical skill,

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I refer to the 1818 edition of Shelley's novel. While the earlier text's emphasis on individual agency over fated outcomes thematically reflects my theory of characterization's interest in individuation and point of view, my argument applies to both versions of the novel. The 1831 edition maintains most of the focalization traits that I identify in the 1818 edition, although its emphasis on fate over causality is perhaps a retrospective attempt to win more sympathy for Victor.

<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, Peter Brooks, "'Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts': Language, Nature, and Monstrosity," *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 206; Marilyn Butler, "Introduction," *Frankenstein, The 1818 Text* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), xxxvi-xxxvii; and Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 337.

features present in his articulate autobiography, the innermost of the novel's three first-person narratives. But by maintaining the creature's role as Victor's foil, critics underestimate the unique qualities of that unfortunate figure's presentation. In fact, most of the rhetorical and thematic traits typically associated with the creature are also found, in varying degrees, in the narrative frames of the novel's other two first-person narrators, Victor and the Arctic explorer Walton. However, the creature is truly exceptional in one regard: that of his ability to represent the consciousness of other characters, and in turn, assert his own incomparably sympathetic character.<sup>3</sup>

The confusion attending *Frankenstein's* protagonist role is not merely incidental to the novel's major thematic interests – identity and sympathy – nor is such confusion confined only to the doubled or antithetical characters of Victor and the creature. Instead, Shelley's *Frankenstein* shifts the idea of “the protagonist” from a static role largely belonging to a single character in a novel into a transferrable designation whose meaning the novel itself engages. In doing so, *Frankenstein* presents an archetypal example of the approach to character I call protagonism. *Frankenstein* not only deliberately complicates the very designation of a protagonist, it also illustrates how the kind of deep consciousness we associate with an amply described hero or heroine can be ignited by precise, small-scale narrative techniques. In a unification of both semiotic and mimetic senses of literary character, the novel serves as an example of protagonism by associating formal characterization techniques with a sense of privileged knowledge about a

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<sup>3</sup> Though as Bernard Duyfhuizen notes, the 1818 edition of the novel doesn't introduce readers to the title characters until after the fourth chapter, an effect that displaces Victor even before he speaks. See Duyfhuizen, “Periphrastic Naming in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*,” *Studies in the Novel* 27 (1995) 477-492.

character's perspective and interiority.<sup>4</sup> Once more, *Frankenstein's* formal whole implicitly encourages its audience to evaluate each of its three narrators upon *their* practice of protagonism. The creature stands out because his narrative frame best demonstrates protagonism's inclusive sympathetic identification in characterizations that may lack descriptive volume, but are nonetheless rich in personality, specificity, and interiority.

Unlike later chapters, which will treat varying permutations of protagonism, I argue that *Frankenstein* considers the nature of protagonism itself. Here, the question of what makes a protagonist and the question of how someone elicits sympathy are two sides of the same coin. In its narrative frames, its formal characterizations, and in the body of its monstrous main character, *Frankenstein* suggests that being a protagonist requires a character to at once be delineated as "individual" *and* to facilitate the recognition of such individuality in other characters. Such an appearance, is, as we will see, the product of a formal differentiation between the perspectives of various characters. It is also the foundation of the novel's application of Adam Smith's theory of imaginative sympathy. But this perspectival differentiation also implies that any character

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<sup>4</sup>John Frow and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan provide two good discussions of both the advantages and limitations of these two categories. As Frow notes, character "is both ontologically and methodologically ambivalent; and any attempt to resolve this ambivalence by thinking character either as merely the analogue of a person or as merely a textual function avoids coming to terms with the full complexity of the problem," or, as he later put it, it seems hard to find a middle ground between "humanist plentitude and structuralist reduction." Frow himself suggests not a synthesis, but a tentative reading of character as a "textual effect," a claim in line with my own. Rimmon-Kenan puts the problem even more succinctly as a matter of "people or words," and suggests a kind of compromise in character as, in the same vein as Frow's suggestion, a textual effect that the reader then develops through a series of implications and assumptions. See John Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character," *Poetics Today* 7 (1986) 227-250, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 1983) 31-4;

who is *too* central, who, in effect, obscures our “deep” or psychologically specific understanding of other characters, is himself not completely successful as a protagonist.

*Frankenstein's* theory of protagonism, then, carries an undeniably moral weight, a proposition that might initially seem at odds with the traditional literary definition of “protagonist.” A protagonist has long been defined merely in terms of textual prominence, and not by the possession of particular traits, actions, or virtues (as if to underline this fact, the OED’s first two usage examples mention Dryden’s “debauched” protagonists and the Devil’s central role in Spanish plays).<sup>5</sup> What we see with particular clarity in *Frankenstein*, however, is that in a novel comprised of three major narrators, multiple epistolary interpolations, and a frame structure that would seem to obscure any claim to narrative authority, textual prominence *cannot* be the primary indicator of the protagonist role. Instead, *Frankenstein* is exceptional in that it exploits and eventually undermines an implied readerly tendency to do precisely what the OED’s definition of “protagonist” suggests: to unwittingly identify with the character who speaks the most, or with the character who simply appears with the greatest frequency. In doing so, the novel considers how our sense of a character’s “depth” or interiority is produced without a mere majority of textual space (a dubious qualifier at best), and why that sense of interiority begets our readerly interest in and identification with a character.

While *Frankenstein* suggests the possibility of multiple potential protagonists – indeed, the frame narrative structure itself promises as much – the novel’s protagonism is in the end a cautionary statement against too-ready readerly identification, and, more pressingly, too reflexive feelings of identification and sympathy. We would do well to

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<sup>5</sup> "protagonist, *n*," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed, 1989, *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 20 Jan. 2010 <<http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/cgi/entry/50190630>>.



remember that for readers encountering Shelley's *Frankenstein* for the first time, the creature's erudite speech and compelling narration comes as a startling disruption to our immersion within the conventional voices of Walton and Victor. But the creature's narrative doesn't only serve to foreground his own protagonist status. Rather, we might take the creature's disruptive speech as the novel's paradigmatic expression of protagonistism's moral onus: as the text upends our conditioned identification with one character, it teaches us to engage in a mode of reading that encompasses multiple interiorities and identifications.<sup>6</sup>

In Shelley's novel, focalization, a nuanced alternative to point of view that illustrates shifts in narrative attention towards characters and brings multiple perspectives successively or simultaneously into view, is protagonistism's primary formal apparatus. Through its lens, *Frankenstein* distinguishes between characters' varying amounts of interior richness and narrators' differing capacities for identification and descriptive insight. Focalization provides a way to address distinctions between narrative voice and narrative perspective in a variety of formal literary aspects, from free indirect discourse, such as the way *Emma*'s narrator paraphrases the heroine's viewpoint; to interpolation, such as The Man of the Hill's self-contained autobiography in *Tom Jones*; to the tensions between objective and subjective representations of character in first-person narration, as

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<sup>6</sup> Protagonism runs counter to the argument proposed by Dorrit Cohn that the typical narrator of early realism "jealously guards his prerogative as the sole thinking agent within his novel," suggesting "an inverse proportion between authorial and figural minds," thus, "those writers who first insisted on the removal of vociferous narrators from fiction – notably Flaubert and Henry James – were also the creators of fictional minds with previously unparalleled depth and complexity" (Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978], 24-6).

in Nelly Dean's portrayal of Cathy and Heathcliff.<sup>7</sup> While the example of *Frankenstein* may imply that the focalization of first-person narration is particularly well suited to protagonism, protagonism can also thrive in third-person narratives. Indeed, the very traits that show protagonism in the creature's characterizations may also function to illustrate characters' focalized depth within a third-person narrative.<sup>8</sup> Free indirect discourse, focalization, and narrative attentiveness to point of view are all techniques employed by omniscient narrators to signal characters' relative significance without recourse to large amounts of discursive and descriptive space, eponymous characters, or extended narrative development.<sup>9</sup> In *Frankenstein*, however, it is first-person narrators who employ such tools, and their signaling of characters' significance has a boomerang effect: the focalizing narrator able to see and sketch the protagonism of others allows readers to see the protagonism in him.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, free indirect discourse can serve to emphasize a single protagonist, as in Jane Austen's novels, where the technique is frequently associated with the moral education of a novel's heroine. However, the narrative slipperiness of free indirect discourse and first-person narration also speaks to the heterogeneity of most third-person narration. Dickens in particular often includes passages of interpolated first-person narration in novels with otherwise assertive third-person narrators, for example, *Little Dorrit*'s inclusion of Miss Wade's chapter, "The History of a Self-Tormenter." Such passages might function to incorporate the protagonistic ethical significance of characters that otherwise appear to be beyond a narrator's or a reader's capacity for identification. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Stephen Wall and Helen Small (New York: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> As Genette points out, "Use of 'first person,' ... does not at all imply that the narrative is focalized through the hero ... to the contrary, the 'autobiographical' type of narrator ... is – by the very fact of his oneness with the hero – more 'naturally' authorized to speak in his own name than is the narrator of a 'third-person' narrative." Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 198.

<sup>9</sup> In George Levine's formulation, free indirect discourse is a kind of perfect compromise between first-person narration and omniscience, negotiating between the "limits and unreliability" of first-person narration and "full omniscience." George Levine, "Literary Realism Reconsidered: 'The world in its length and breadth,'" *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 18-9.

As my reading of the novel's characterizations will demonstrate, *Frankenstein's* protagonism works primarily through distinctions between "internal" and "external" focalization, Gérard Genette's terms for the subjective (internal) or objective (external) presentation of a narrative viewpoint.<sup>10</sup> Genette applies his forms of focalization broadly, using them to typify the narrative strategies of entire novels, but I refine their application to emphasize nuances of narrative perspective in small- as well as larger-scale narrative contexts. A character who is internally focalized is one whose perspective or thought-process we can not only share, but also occupy, either through first-person narration that elides the temporal distance between speaker and subject, or through a third-person perspective capable of incorporating that character's point of view into its own. For example, when the creature narrates the history of Felix De Lacey, one of the characters in his narrative frame, he describes the young man's thoughts as though privy to their inception: "The news reached Felix, and roused him from his dream of pleasure. *His blind and aged father, and his gentle sister lay in a noisome dungeon, while he enjoyed the free air ... this idea was torture to him*" (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> Here, the creature's narration borders on free indirect discourse, assuming an intimate and yet nearly omniscient narrative stance that allows him to articulate the precise deliberations of this seemingly inconsequential character. The adjectives "blind and aged" and "gentle" appear not as the creature's descriptors, but as those of Felix, springing to mind at the

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<sup>10</sup> See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 185-198. Genette differentiates between nonfocalized narratives, fixed and variable internally focalized narratives, and externally focalized narratives. For Genette, the terms are adaptable and often overlapping, a malleability that helps to flesh out variations that "first-person" and "point of view" can obscure.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, ed. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd., 2003), 150. All references hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

very moment he learns of his family's imprisonment and capturing the poignancy of his guilt and concern. Distinctive in *Frankenstein* and notable among the first-person narrations of nineteenth-century fiction in general, the creature's frame doesn't merely include Felix's first-person testimony; its internal focalization of Felix's character deliberately assumes the intimate and yet differentiated narrative stance more characteristic of an omniscient narrator than an autodiegetic one. Such a stance certainly invokes the narrative authority associated with omniscience, but more importantly for *Frankenstein*, it also models the self-reflexive richness of perspective that marks the creature and his narration as distinct among the novel's three first-person narrators.

Thus, rather than judging *Frankenstein's* three narrators by their reliability or descriptive facility, the novel instead directs us to consider them in terms of their narrative's formal management of characterization, and the ways in which that management reflects upon their own discursive significance and psychological complexity. Walton, Victor, and the creature differ in how they incorporate other characters' perspectives into their respective narratives: the characters they depict may, for instance, be "focalizers" and not merely objects of the narrator's own focalization. As described by Genette, focalization provides a more descriptive alternative to point of view, because it encompasses narrative situations in which the narrator and the focalizer – the narrative figure whose perspective mediates the objects or situation at hand – may be distinct from one another.<sup>12</sup> Focalization calls attention to the implied distance between narrator and focalizer, since it differentiates between their individual

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<sup>12</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 185-198

perspectives.<sup>13</sup> Yet, focalization also promotes a kind of equivalence, as narrator and reader implicitly align their own perspectives (if only temporarily) with that of the focalizer. For example, when the creature tells us that, ““Felix had been present at the trial; his horror and indignation were uncontrollable, when he heard the decision of the court. He made, at that moment, a solemn vow to deliver [his father]”” (148), we “hear” the creature’s narrating voice, but it is Felix’s perspective from which we “see.” At the same time, however, the creature and the reader are united in their momentary inhabitation of Felix’s point of view. Though the creature never includes a direct report of Felix’s speech, focalization preserves the distinctions between their viewpoints while still marking their sympathetic alignment.

The full extent of the difference between internally and externally focalized characterizations emerges when we compare the creature’s narration, illustrated in his treatment of Felix’s biography, to that of another of the novel’s narrators. The Arctic explorer Walton, whose letters to his sister encompass the novel’s first narrative frame, is the first and least notable of *Frankenstein’s* first-person speakers, even though the scale and idiosyncrasy of his pursuit – a route through the North Pole – foreshadows a significance that his narrative frame never delivers. However, by contrasting his characterizations with those of the creature, the reasons for the relative consequence of each narrator become apparent. Walton quickly lets us know that he is a man attuned to the lure of a good story. Indeed, he compares himself to Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, the epitome of entrancing storytellers. On his ship, though, Walton finds people, people everywhere, but no one who merits much attention. While in the context of

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<sup>13</sup> See Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 72-4. For a discussion of levels of focalization see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 161-3.

*Frankenstein*'s whole Walton doesn't so much resemble the Mariner as the wedding guest, absorbed by an anomalous wanderer's tale, the Ancient Mariner comparison is, in some ways, apt.<sup>14</sup> Walton may be far from an entrancing storyteller, but his narration shares a strange self-isolation with the Mariner's tale. Yet, whereas the Mariner's isolation is thematic, making his narrative accosting of the wedding guest a desperate gesture of personal connection, Walton's isolation is formal: though surrounded by potential companions (including his apostrophized sister) his narrative maintains a myopic focus, presenting characters only from his own external, detached point of view, a formal stance that leaves those characters strangely unspecific and his own character pointedly underdeveloped.

Walton does describe other characters, but these descriptions never depart from his own focalized perspective. He writes of his loneliness and ardent desire for a friend even as he heaps praise on his exceptional crew, men "unallied to the dross of human nature." One of these exceptional beings is his English lieutenant, whom he hyperbolically describes as "a man of wondrous courage and enterprise" possessing "the noblest endowments of humanity" (53-4). The noblest endowments, however, neither friend nor vivid character make. The effortlessness with which Walton literally and figuratively assimilates the Englishman into his own story retrospectively functions as the strongest evidence of his perception of this semi-character's unworthiness.<sup>15</sup> The master of the ship at least merits the telling of his own extraordinary history:

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<sup>14</sup> See Brooks, "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts," 219, and Michelle Levy, "Discovery and the Domestic Affections in Coleridge and Shelley," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 44 (2004): 693-713.

<sup>15</sup> Richard J. Dunn reads Walton's stories as reflections of the novel's representation of failures of community. See Dunn, "Narrative Distance in *Frankenstein*," *Studies in the Novel* 6 (1974): 409.

[He] is a person of an excellent disposition, and is remarkable in the ship for his gentleness, and the mildness of his discipline. He is, indeed, of so amiable a nature, that he will not hunt (a favourite, and almost the only amusement here), because he cannot endure to spill blood. He is, moreover, heroically generous. Some years ago he loved a Russian lady; ... the father of the girl consented to the match. He saw his mistress once before the destined ceremony; but she was bathed in tears, and, throwing herself at his feet, entreated him to spare her, confessing ... that she loved another ... My generous friend reassured the suppliant, and ... instantly abandoned his pursuit.

Walton's portrayal is complementary, but he concludes with a qualification: "'What a noble fellow!' you will exclaim. He is so; but then he has passed all his life on board a vessel, and has scarcely an idea beyond the rope and the shroud" (54). This "noble fellow" is thus consigned, like the lieutenant, to being merely one among a crowd of indistinguishable sailors. The few critical readings of Walton's narration suggest that these biographies might thematically illustrate the moral value of personal connections, but such explanations strain these sketches beyond their diminutive scope and trivialize their formal incongruity.<sup>16</sup> Examined in the formal terms of their respective characterizations, however, the lieutenant and the shipmaster offer a revelatory view of Walton. For all their marked traits, both men are only externally focalized; even in the dramatic shipmaster's story, we get just a report of actions and observable qualities, counteracting their initial anomalous significance.

The differences between the psychologically complex Walton (we get pages of his history, desires, and fears) and the characters he renders shallow through his external focalization are not merely another iteration of round vs. flat, or Woloch's inequities of

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<sup>16</sup> Sara Guyer, for example, in "Testimony and Trope in *Frankenstein*," (*Studies in Romanticism* 45 [2006]: 106-8), reads Walton's letters as "anticipatory." For Beth Newman, Walton's shipmaster biography provides an illustration of the "promising" that appears throughout the novel. Newman, "Narratives of Seduction and Seduction of Narrative: The Frame Structure of *Frankenstein*," *ELH* 53 (1986): 153.

character space. For Woloch, such seemingly minor characters are mere sketches, briefly drawn, like Elizabeth Bennet's many sisters, only to throw her glowing centrality into relief.<sup>17</sup> But the shipmate and the lieutenant aren't competing with Walton for the narrative's attention, and, for some of the briefest of the novel's characters, they exhibit some surprisingly meaty specificity, particularly in the case of the shipmaster. Habituated distinctions between round and flat, major and minor, conceal or absorb other distinctions that speak to the very particular significance of protagonists. Within the logic of *Frankenstein's* character structure, these seemingly incidental characters' concision comes to seem like more of an effect of their secondariness than its direct cause. The shipmate and the lieutenant read less as round or flat than they do as amassed "semes," Roland Barthes's term for the traits or situations that form "unit[s] of the signifier," or character. For Barthes, it is not psychological detail but names themselves that transform semic sums into characters, providing a sense of a "precious remainder" that signifies something more than an amalgamation of traits.<sup>18</sup> But while the creature appears "summed" and then some without a name (so much so that we can't seem to help but give him his creator's appellation), the namelessness of Walton's characters, like their brevity, testifies to their always-already subordinate status in the narration. Neither flatness, nor summation, nor proper names determine Walton's reciprocally defining relationship to his characters. His own depth and detail can't compensate for his weak identification with characters. He may, in this opening narrative frame, be textually

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<sup>17</sup> *The One vs. the Many*, 50-7; E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harcourt, Inc.: New York, 1956), 70-8.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974), 17, 190.



central, but, as *Frankenstein*'s characterizations already demonstrate, centrality itself doesn't make a protagonist.

As Walton's externally focalized characterizations underscore, to be a protagonist in *Frankenstein* requires a narrator both to delineate self-consciously his own complex interiority and to recognize such interiority in other characters.<sup>19</sup> As the next section will consider, *Frankenstein* assumes and disrupts a readerly tendency to identify with the character who speaks the most, or who simply appears with the greatest frequency. In doing so, the novel foregrounds an equally strong but less recognized tendency of nineteenth-century novels: here, the impulse to identify with characters negotiates between selection, differentiation, and a moral desire for inclusive and far-reaching sympathy.

## II. BEYOND "WHY ALWAYS DOROTHEA?"

Admittedly, identification with novelistic characters often seems involuntary. We feel as though we must strive for critical distance – identification is the easy part. Or, in a view typified by Wayne Booth and perpetuated by a host of critical practices, identification is the too easy part, for “only immature readers ever really identify with any character.” If identification is a sign of immature reading, one might be forgiven for thinking that nineteenth-century novelists themselves encourage such immaturity. With the free indirect discourse of Jane Austen, the strong, editorializing omniscience of

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<sup>19</sup> This argument is in line with Andrew Miller's suggestion that the nineteenth-century novel emphasizes “the display of deliberation” and “the disclosure of thinking itself” (92-3). By highlighting the presence of the *form* of consciousness, protagonistism considers one of the ways that this disclosure might function within the novel. See Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), 92-119.

George Eliot, or the totalizing psychological perspective of Henry James, the reader must actively resist identification's allure, in Booth's now foundational view, in order to have access to a novel's "artistic experience."<sup>20</sup> Yet, if nineteenth-century British novelists make identification easy, they still worry over its moral function, encouraging readers' sympathy for many disparate and often socially problematic characters even as their titles and plots may privilege a single winning hero. In this context protagonism illuminates a trend in the nineteenth-century British novel that is so common as to defy comment: as often as a central figure like David Copperfield or Jane Eyre exerts an inescapable organizing perspective on a novel's whole, characters with none of their textual predominance, narrative authority, or eponymous significance can momentarily shift readerly attention in their favor – consider *Great Expectation*'s Joe, *Villette*'s Miss Marchmont, *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Collins, or *Middlemarch*'s Bulstrode – all characters who at some point display a self-awareness and complexity rich enough to rival that of a Pip or a Lucy Snowe.

In Eliot's paradigmatic statement of the novel's social purpose, she proposes what we might think of as a hard version of identification, one in which the novel challenges us to look past stock figures and habituated types and "amplif[y] experience and exten[d] our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."<sup>21</sup> The ethical impulse of this statement underlies her narrator's "why always Dorothea" question, roughly twenty years later in *Middlemarch*. Identification's allure, in other words, goes

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<sup>20</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 248.

<sup>21</sup> Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Westminster Review*, July 1856, rpt. in *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 110. James Eli Adams notes Eliot's belief that Dickens failed at representing "psychological character" even as he succeeded in realistic "external traits," thus asserting her investment in the representation of psychic depth in characters (Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 189).

hand-in-hand with the moral burdens nineteenth-century fiction claims for itself: how can the novel's power to encourage fellow feeling, to experience the subjectivity of another person, be directed towards multiple characters, multiple other "people"? Does the identificatory appeal of a Dorothea or an Esther generate a model for or an impediment to "extending our contact with our fellow-men"?

In its employment of narrative frames, its portrayal of interior perspectives, and in the literal and figurative form of its monstrous main character, *Frankenstein's* characterizations imply that before Eliot's "why always" the British novel was already considering ways in which characterization might balance the intimate allure of readerly identification with a capacious and inclusive view of its chosen objects. *Frankenstein's* elaborate frame narrative and exemplary antihero are admittedly an extreme version of the de-centered forms of readerly identification that mark protagonism. But *Frankenstein's* very extremity can help us see how aspects of narration that are now often taken for granted, such as point of view, can gesture towards the deep sense of interiority we typically associate with titular heroes. While protagonism can result in multiple and even competing or contradictory protagonists, such as Collins's multiple narrators in *The Woman in White* (as my third chapter will explore) or the engaging criminal characters in *Oliver Twist*, *Frankenstein* instead generates a comparative protagonism by juxtaposing Walton, Victor, and the creature.

To a reader approaching Shelley's *Frankenstein* without the information and assumptions promulgated by decades of cultural commentary, the creature's sophisticated speech would likely seem startling – akin to, if not rivaling, that of the more conventional narrating characters of Victor and Walton. Indeed, the novel's three narrative frames are

as notable for their rhetorical similarities and for their structural differences. But difference and similarity need not be opposed: like the overlapping of perspectives in the creature's internal focalization, *Frankenstein's* narrative frames refract protagonism's impulse towards a form of identification that appreciates perspectival similarities while still maintaining an awareness of each viewpoint's individual qualities. With a layered structure regularly likened to "a Chinese box," *Frankenstein's* narrative frames have for past critics provided a ready allegory for psychoanalytic explanations of Victor's violent pursuit of nature's secrets, or evidence of a "core" of truth strategically concealed within obfuscating layers.<sup>22</sup> Yet, for all this structural complexity, the novel's three major frames display a startlingly consistent narrative style, markedly formal and declamatory. Walton, Victor, and the creature all ostensibly speak directly to a specific, personalized audience: Walton to his sister, Victor to Walton, and the creature to Victor. But the tone of every frame is one of general public address, employing rhetorically sophisticated figurative language: "... he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures" (Walton, 61); and expressing emotional reactions with theatrical, vocative exclamations: "Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance" (Victor, 86).

While critics have emphasize how the framed, word-for-word retellings contained in each frame might obscure any specific stylistic markers of voice, these arguments assume that the frame narration conceit – each character exactly recalls and repeats the

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Beth Newman, "Narratives of Seduction," 144. Newman reads the frames in terms of a narrative expression of implicit desire. Following Joyce Zonana's reading of Safie's letters as the novel's "feminist core" critics have looked to the creature's narrative as the site of an explanatory textual key. See Joyce Zonana, "'They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale': Safie's Letters as the Feminist Core of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 21 (1991): 170-184.

words of another – actually breaks down, and that, in effect, the novel’s overall narrative voice is a kind of abstract amalgam of all three narrators.<sup>23</sup> In this sense the novel’s frame structure could be considered a blow to the very idea of any character’s discrete narrating persona, as the voices of Walton, Victor, and the creature seemingly inform, overlap, and even engulf one another. But the frame narrations’ tonal similarities are most notable for their very inefficacy. The three narrations may sound similar, but we still have the sense that each narrator’s personal report successfully represents a separate person, distinct from any other character in the novel – indeed, how else would the creature’s speech feel so initially surprising. In other words, despite the narrators’ shared stylistic traits, the text still manages to guide its readers towards an understanding of each narrative as the story of an individualized character. Each first-person frame still feels remarkably discrete and absorbing; the third-hand report of the creature’s first-person story, contained in Walton’s manuscript as reported by Victor, feels simply like the creature’s first-person story, unmediated by either Victor or Walton or both at once. While engrossed in the creature’s narration, it takes effort to remind oneself of all those layers supposedly obscuring his distinct autobiography. The frames don’t, in practice, distance us; they diminish neither our sense of the creature’s particularity, nor our experience of his narration as anything but his own speech.

While in one sense *Frankenstein*’s frames echo the simultaneous affinity and perspectival differentiation implied by internal focalization, the frames also highlight the

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<sup>23</sup> Beth Newman notes that the similarity between the voices of the creature and Victor is more evident than their differences (“Narratives of Seduction,” 146). For George Levine, the unfailingly public, oratorical nature of each of the narratives is one of the novel’s major flaws. (Levine, “The Ambiguous Heritage of *Frankenstein*,” *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel*, eds. George Levine and U. P. Knoepflmacher [Berkeley: California Univ. Press, 1979], 3-30). See also James R. Kincaid, “‘Words Cannot Express’: *Frankenstein*’s Tripping on the Tongue,” *Novel 24* (1990): 26-47.

unique nature of internal focalization's way of depicting identification among characters. Shelley's novel contains multiple instances in which a narrator includes the verbatim speech of another character in his own narrative frame – indeed, the content of virtually all of Victor's and the creature's narration is ostensibly recorded within Walton's diary. But these first-person narrative overlaps are importantly distinct from internal focalization. Instead of implying a blending of voices or perspectives, they demarcate one consciousness from another, dissolving the supposed retellings into an evanescent fictional conceit. Thus, *Frankenstein's* frames and methods of focalization perform the work of perspectival differentiation in distinct ways. If the novel's first-person frames and interpolations accentuate our perception of each narrator's separate identity, internal focalization considers how such separation may be preserved within the novel's rigorous version of identification. As we saw in the creature's presentation of Felix, internal focalization within a given narrative develops sympathy and a sense of rich specificity that transcriptions of first-person reports alone cannot achieve.

The overall structure of the novel's narrative frames performs an identificatory work more similar to that of external focalization than internal focalization. External focalization, like that which Walton's frame demonstrates, can foreground a character's point of view, but it does so by diminishing the sense of likeness between the focalizer and the character being focalized, in much the same way as the frames preserve a strong sense of each narrator's distinct and homogeneous personality. For instance, when Victor's cousin Elizabeth writes to him about the history of a favorite family servant, Justine Moritz, she describes the girl from an externally focalized standpoint that preserves the distinction between their perspectives: "You could see by her eyes that she

almost adored her protectress. Although her disposition was gay, and in many respects inconsiderate, yet she paid the greatest attention to every gesture of my aunt” (93). Unlike the creature’s presentation of Felix’s thoughts, Elizabeth’s characterization of Justine externally focalizes the servant’s character, marking her as an object of interest while still upholding a characterization hierarchy that will remain in place until Justine herself speaks. Justine’s function in Elizabeth’s letter is one of a foreshadowed importance; the servant will soon be accused of and unjustly executed for the murder of Victor’s young brother, William – the creature’s first act of revenge upon his creator. In Elizabeth’s narration, Justine’s significance to the novel seems to be purely instrumental. But Justine’s internally focalized perspective within her own first-person testimony, appearing after her initial introduction in Elizabeth’s letter, gives a new aspect to her character – one that marks her as more than just a passive component of the plot or a symbol of the innocent suffering wrought by Victor’s excessive ambition: “I did confess, but I confessed a lie. I confessed that I might obtain absolution; but now that falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins . . . Dear lady I had none to support me; all looked on me as a wretch doomed to ignominy and perdition. What could I do?” (113). Justine’s speech succinctly demonstrates both the effects of others’ perceptions of her on her behavior, and the involved sequence of her thoughts and reactions to those perceptions. Elizabeth’s external focalization obscures such socially sensitive interiority, in much the same way that the narrative frames diminish the likeness – rhetorical and otherwise – of Walton, Victor, and the creature.

Justine’s brief but pointed characterization in Elizabeth’s letter, like Walton’s presentation of the shipmaster and the lieutenant, is one of many such portraits contained

in the novel's frames – portraits, that, while often striking for their apparent lack of relevance to the plot as a whole, nonetheless indicate the various narrators' focalization prowess (or the lack thereof). While Justine's courtroom testimony and first-personal plea makes her unique among these many concise figures, she epitomizes the way in which the novel's three narrators continually reference characters typified by seemingly incidental yet excessive biographical detail. While the most famous of these interpolated sketches is doubtless the creature's story of Safie and Felix, two members of the impoverished yet genteel family he studies and loves from afar, that story's very memorability has tended to obscure the presence of the multiple other similar sketches contained in each frame narration. It is only when we place the Safie and Felix story in the context of the other interpolated biographies that appear within Victor's and Walton's narrative frames that its particular significance becomes fully apparent. Read alongside one another, these portraits demonstrate that the novel's thematic fascination with literal forms and forming is reflected in the very narrative forms that characterization itself takes.<sup>24</sup>

If the portraits presented in Walton's frame exemplify the novel's weakest form of focalization and the creature's presentation of Felix stands as its most constructive, Victor's frame points to how the withholding of internal focalization can itself influence identification – particularly in the case of the creature. Like Walton, Victor also presents his own interpolated story at the beginning of his frame, though unlike Walton's brief tale, Victor's is ostensibly an extension of his own autobiography. But this interpolation gives us so many details that it feels excessively explicatory, a digression from the real

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<sup>24</sup> Authorship in *Frankenstein* has been read as more a matter of estrangement than communication that attempts to identify with others. See, for example, Paul Sherwin, "Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe," *PMLA* 96 (1981): 883-903.



substance of Victor's frame. Victor admits as much, as he pointedly justifies his digression into the Frankenstein patriarch's courtship: "As the circumstances of his marriage illustrate his character, I cannot refrain from relating them" (63). Victor's preface becomes all the more perplexing once we actually get the interpolated account, as the story tells us virtually nothing about his father, while giving us ample detail about his mother, Caroline. In brief, Victor's father, Frankenstein, had a friend, Beaufort, who, upon losing his fortune, became depressed and ill. Consequently, though Beaufort's daughter, Caroline, "attended him with the greatest tenderness ... she saw with despair that their little fund was rapidly decreasing, and that there was no other prospect of support. But Caroline Beaufort possessed a mind of an uncommon mold; and her courage rose to support her in her adversity" (64). In retrospect, the story's purpose is clearly the introduction of Caroline – the woman who will become Frankenstein's wife and Victor's mother, and who exercises considerable influence upon the narrator's life. But her significance is only apparent in contrast to the characterizations of Frankenstein and Beaufort. Unlike the two men, about whom we only get iterative reports of second-hand character traits – "my father loved Beaufort" (63); "[Beaufort's] grief only became more deep and rankling" (64) – we see, however briefly, from Caroline's internally focused perspective on her coming penury.

Despite Victor's stated interest in depicting his father, the story's focus on his mother makes considerable narrative sense. It is, after all, Caroline Frankenstein who marks Victor's childhood companion and fiancée Elizabeth Lavenza with extraordinary qualities – "I have often heard my mother say, that she was at that time the most beautiful child she had ever seen, and shewed signs even then of a gentle and affectionate

disposition” (65) – and who seals the spiritual union of Victor and Elizabeth on her deathbed. In contrast, Victor’s father is most notable for what he does *not* do, namely direct his son’s intellectual tastes towards modern science and away from the “entirely exploded” theories of Cornelius Agrippa (68).

Thus, Victor’s initial story of his father, a story almost entirely coincident with the commencement of his own narrative frame, structurally anticipates the plot-level character hierarchy that will emerge in his narrative’s whole course: Victor’s nearly anonymous father, lacking any particular name, cedes the stage to Beaufort, who seems entirely peripheral until he introduces the properly focalized, properly named Caroline Beaufort. Significantly, however, Caroline’s internal focalization precedes her naming – even before the narrative marks her as “uncommon” and a bearer of that “precious remainder,” the text has inscribed her distinctiveness.

Thus, Victor’s story underscores two aspects of the novel’s pattern of characterization and identification within first-person narration. The first is the use of internal focalization to suggest a distinction between deeply focalized characters (Victor’s mother) and peripheral or incidental ones (respectively, Beaufort and Victor’s father) – a sorting that occurs independently of any character’s development in the plot and nearly coincident to their initial introduction in the text. The second aspect is the varying degrees to which the narrator’s depictions of characters construe them as subordinate to or independent from his own perspective. Like Walton’s lieutenant (“*my* lieutenant”) and shipmaster (“*my* friend”), the story of Victor’s father instantiates such possessive and possessed constructions as defining character traits (63, *my* emphases). By contrast, Victor’s depiction of Caroline’s perspective both overlaps with and is

differentiated from his own. The coincidence of her full proper name, her focalization, and her possessive narrative agency (“She saw with despair ... Caroline Beaufort possessed a mind of an uncommon mold”) is at least suggestive of the kind of psychological depth that Victor’s own narration exhibits, even if we see only an incomplete portrait of that uncommonly molded mind.

If Walton and Victor share a strong narrative agency that gives them control over characterization, they wield such agency to different degrees of success. The similarity between Walton’s descriptions of the lieutenant and the shipmaster – a similarity that exists despite the shipmaster’s involved back-story – can now be understood not only as a reciprocal justification of Walton’s centrality, but also as a kind of weak minor character equivalency. Both figures are externally focalized, unnamed, and equally subordinate to the perspective of the narrating Walton. Though Walton notes that the men themselves are of different professional ranks, even referring to them by their titles, these characters’ formal presentations bear out Walton’s implicit sense of superiority over them both. In contrast, Victor’s characterizations, while also emphasizing subordinate stature, avoid the pitfall of utter unreflective equivalency. The story of his parents establishes a network of relationships and connections among secondary characters, while Walton’s descriptions of the lieutenant and the shipmaster are allied and connected only through him – not each other. Even Walton’s interpolated story of the shipmaster’s failed romance ascribes only action – never emotion or motivation – to its characters, further accentuating our sense of his characterizations’ bland sameness.

Comparing Victor and Walton as narrators, we can now see how Walton’s method of characterization, typifying and equating those around him, is in fact anathema

to the very “friendship” he ostensibly seeks – a relationship in which his own egocentric perspective would be subordinated to another’s. Walton, does, of course find a potential “friend” in Victor, but even Victor’s sudden appearance in the narrative, so closely foreshadowed by Walton’s stated desire for a companion, has the effect of making *him* appear to be as much a product of Walton’s narrating perspective as any of his other less appealing companions. In Walton’s insipidly hyperbolic descriptions, Victor looks like just another “noble fellow”:

He excites at once my admiration and my pity to an astonishing degree. How can I see *so* noble a creature destroyed by misery without feeling the most poignant grief? He is *so* gentle, yet *so* wise; his mind is *so* cultivated; and when he speaks, although his words are culled with the choicest art, yet they flow with rapidity and unparalleled eloquence [*italics mine*]. (60)

Walton’s repetitive, emphatic “so” speaks to the limit of both his understanding and linguistic prowess – here, Victor isn’t different from the shipmaster, just better. Walton even refers to him with the same adjectives – noble and gentle – only now prefaced with that ardent yet empty “so.”

The meaningful difference that *is* evident in Walton’s characterization of Victor is the latter’s verbal prowess, and it is here that Walton’s narrative centrality within his own frame ends. From Walton’s perspective, Victor’s skilled speech is yet another marker of equivalence – to *him*. The very description in which Walton recounts Victor’s articulateness is a feeble pastiche of eloquence, with its monotonous diction and roundabout, rhetorical testament to “poignant grief.” Victor’s own interpolated voice thus shows us the very inadequacies of Walton’s narration: as Walton includes Victor’s

verbatim dialogue in his letters, he diminishes his own heretofore-inescapable perspective. Thus even before Victor had commenced *his* story, *his* narrative frame, the novel itself has implicitly accomplished what the narrating Walton was unable to achieve: a comparative evaluation and differentiation of two individualized and interiorly “deep” characters.

We’ve already seen such “deep” differentiation in Victor’s depiction of Caroline. The momentary vividness of her formally differentiated perspective sets her apart from her father, her future husband, and, most importantly, the narrating Victor. Once more, such differentiation also implies identification. As a narrator, Victor’s agency creates Caroline’s internal focalization; as a character, his implicit knowledge of her perspective suggests an intimacy and sympathy with her as similarly “individual.” In comparison, Walton’s immediate embrace of Victor as his better-than-equal “friend” appears superficial – yet another instance of leveling equivalence. Victor’s interpolated characterizations accomplish the very multifocalized “deep” difference and resultant identification that Walton and his characterizations lacked.

This comparison between Walton and Victor demonstrates how a hierarchy among the novel’s narrators emerges, a hierarchy based on their ability to represent and identify with the individuals they depict. In their authoritative tones and quest-like occupations Victor and Walton appear as the central and textually predominant protagonists of their own narrative frames. But, in its presentation of multiple potential protagonists and their varied characterizations, *Frankenstein* implies that there is more to a protagonist than mere centrality and textual prominence. Indeed, the novel’s mode of distinguishing some “central” characters from others suggests that protagonistism in

*Frankenstein* is less a matter of textual frequency or extensive narration than of a way of wielding characterization.

However, characterization of a very particular kind: instead of ample description of personal traits and qualities, Walton and Victor use external and internal focalization to simultaneously introduce characters and depict their interiority. Formal suggestions of characters' depth are asserted before or coincident to explications of their traits or evidence of their involvement in plot – we see what they are before we witness what they do. The idea of characters indelibly marked as what they are or will be, independent of any actual action, suggests a potential or latent psychological depth that is signaled, if left implicit, by *Frankenstein's* focalization methods. Such character potential recalls Tzvetan Todorov's illustration of character apart from either the "psychological coherence" habitually associated with "major" characters or the superficial distinctiveness attached to "minor" characters.<sup>25</sup> For Todorov, characters are "narrative-men:"

A character is a potential story that is the story of his life. Every new character signifies a new plot ... The appearance of a new character invariably involves the interruption of a preceding story, so that a new story, the one which explains the 'now I am here' of a new character, may be told to us.<sup>26</sup>

Todorov sees his model as essentially pre-novelistic, and thus by definition distanced from anything like a Jamesian sense of interiority. Yet, it's telling that even here, the language of individual depth creeps in. Characters' discrete "stories" are not mere

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<sup>25</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, Trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

background but their “lives,” and their very presence in a text can never be merely incidental – it is always an “I am here” that requires not mere justification but extensive explanation of an entire personal history.

Of course, unlike Todorov’s central example of *Arabian Nights*, with its telescoping stories upon stories, not all of *Frankenstein*’s characters get a chance at first-person narration. Yet, the “narrative” that Todorov sees in the initial “I am here” does exist, albeit in unspoken fashion, in Shelley’s novel. *Frankenstein*’s formal method of character differentiation signifies the potential for multiple deeply imagined lives, a signification that implies a consciousness of the limits of novelistic characterization even as it imaginatively circumvents them. This dual signification echoes the very paradox of the novel’s frame structure with which I began: while each speaking “I,” in its declamatory fashion, denotes a “deep” self, each frame in which an “I” speaks reminds us that our narrators are subject to the same perspectival delimitations as the characters they describe. As differentiated and similar as *Frankenstein*’s onion-like frames may alternately appear, their presence is best read as a discourse-level testament to the novel’s paradox of characterization: the gesture of individual depth contained within and enabled by formal limits.

Thus, as the narrative formally differentiates among multiple characters’ focalized perspectives, it implies multiple potential sites of overlapping identifications – between reader and narrator, between reader and focalized and focalizing characters, and between the narrators themselves. Ultimately, though, *Frankenstein* suggests that identification is not enough. As we will see in the creature’s frame, focalization at its most self-reflexive results not merely in the perception of multiple individualized perspectives, but in the

possibility of sympathy. Thus, while on one hand Shelley's novel instantiates the possibility of protagonism in its method of formal characterization, it also implies that this recognition of multiple perspectives is itself only a first step towards sympathy.

### III. FELLOW-FEELING

Sympathy and identification are closely related concepts, so closely related, in fact, that critics such as Audrey Jaffe have equated them. In Jaffe's reading of the "semi-omniscient" narrating persona in Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, sympathy is represented by a narrator who is distanced from and implicated in the scene he reports, a duality that recalls the relationship between narratorial self-representation and identification that we have seen in *Frankenstein*.<sup>27</sup> In Shelley's novel however, the difference in perspectives that focalization illustrates is not the same as sympathy, but instead serves as its prerequisite. For example, Victor's perception of Caroline as an individual – a character who possesses that "precious remainder" – feels notably incomplete, even if our momentary insight into her internally focalized standpoint aligns us with her perspective. Although sympathy's denial may be one of the novel's central tropes, *Frankenstein's* characterizations nonetheless suggest how one might cultivate (or neglect) a sympathy-conducive perspective. While sympathy itself may be elusive, the novel takes seriously its desirability, its difficult practice, and indeed, its very meaning.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Audrey Jaffe, "Boz and the Business of Narration," *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley: California UP, 1991) 39-41.

<sup>28</sup> The problem of sympathy in *Frankenstein* has a substantial critical history, though not as substantial as one might expect in relationship to Adam Smith. For David Marshall, Shelley's novel represents the "denial of sympathy" through its critique of Rousseauian sympathy's "theatrical" or specular investments. More recently (and optimistically) Jeanne M. Britton has convincingly read the novel as offering a kind of meta-level "compensatory sympathy" through



The creature – horrific, murderous, and yet verbally endearing – can be read as a deliberate challenge to any notion of casual or even instinctive sympathy. As Peter Brooks puts it, *Frankenstein's* creature exemplifies Freud's *unheimlich*, and as such, his speech can only mark his difference, not overcome it.<sup>29</sup> But I would suggest that the novel's apparent critique of sympathy is so strong precisely because of the creature's outsize capacity to obtain it from the reader (for himself, and as we will see, for others too). Next to Milton's Satan, *Frankenstein's* creature is outwardly one of the most profoundly sympathetic unsympathetic characters one could imagine, thoroughly eliciting from the reader the reaction he rarely gets from anyone in the novel. In my comparison of Walton and Victor, we have seen how that their relative protagonism is a product of their respective approaches to characterization, and the same will hold true for the creature. My reading of the creature as a protagonist addresses him not as a figure of failed sympathy or as a particularly sympathetic narrator but instead as the character who best understands sympathy's demands, and who best portrays its enabling structures in his representations of himself and of other characters.

So what *is* sympathy in *Frankenstein*, and what does it demand? Like many of Shelley's contemporaries and critics, I look to Adam Smith's hugely influential *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as the source of the novel's sympathy theory, but unlike prior interpreters, I suggest that we look beyond, or rather, before, Smith's famous assertion

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the very narratives that are the result of sympathy's failure. See David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 178-227; Jeanne M. Britton, "Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" *Studies in Romanticism* 48 (2009): 3-22. See also James C. Hatch, "Disruptive affects: Shame, Disgust, and Sympathy in *Frankenstein*," *European Romantic Review* 19.1 (2008) 33-49; and Richard J. Dunn, "Narrative Distance in *Frankenstein*," 408- 417.

<sup>29</sup>Brooks, 217-8.

that sympathy is the product of “imagination.” For Smith, as well as for Shelley’s creature, sympathy is one thing we should never take for granted:

Even our sympathy with the grief or joy of another, before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect. General lamentations, which express nothing but the anguish of the sufferer, create rather curiosity to inquire into his situation, along with some disposition to sympathize with him, than any actual sympathy that is very sensible. The first question which we ask is, What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both for the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable.<sup>30</sup>

Middling “fellow-feeling” is not sympathy, nor is curiosity, nor is a mere “disposition to sympathize.” What is most notable in this description of what occurs when we perceive emotional demonstrations in another person is the apparently instinctive caution with which we sympathize. What Smith says only a paragraph earlier about feelings of anger could just as easily apply here: “Nature, it seems, teaches us to be more averse to enter into this passion.”<sup>31</sup>

But if Smith sees us as naturally hesitant to engage in such fellowship, the separation between “you” and “me” that such hesitation implies also features in sympathy’s very creation. For before we can, in Smith’s well-known view, imaginatively “enter as it were into [a suffering person’s] body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations,” we must first recognize that we can never have an “immediate experience of what other men feel.”<sup>32</sup> Even the very description of Smith’s extreme version of “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes”

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 14-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

is replete with qualifiers – “as it were;” “in some measure;” “some idea.” One can only ever *almost* imaginatively accomplish Smith’s metaphor, but it’s the “almost” that, I would argue, is the most important part of the process. This “almost” is another version of Barthes’s “precious remainder,” implying the unique individuality of both the person who sympathizes and the person who suffers. For Smith, it is only when we recognize our ineluctable difference from the person we observe that we can we recognize the very need for sympathy.

Smith’s sympathy requires not only an appreciation of our ineluctable difference from others, but also consciousness of our own inescapable sense-boundedness, our own “difference.” If *Frankenstein* invokes Smith’s emphasis on dissimilitude in its characterization’s differentiations, the novel expands what I take as his implied suggestion that sympathy requires a fair degree of self-awareness to work properly. How can you imagine what others feel if you’re not fully cognizant of your own sensations? Our senses themselves, Smith declares, “will never inform us of what [another] suffers.” Yet, “it is the *impressions* of our own senses only, not those of [the sufferer], which our imaginations copy”<sup>33</sup> (italics mine). The very act of “copying” our “impressions” of our own senses suggests a weirdly objective distance from them; here “impressions” at first seems to imply the impressions of the external world that our senses deliver to us, yet upon finishing the sentence, we find that “impressions” could also denote our understanding of our senses themselves. The term’s dual applicability emphasizes a kind of distanced sense account – our sense of our sense. Once more, this very sense replication is accomplished with an awareness of our senses’ very inadequacy: no matter how much information sight, sound, taste, touch and smell bring us, they can never allow

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 11-2.

us to exactly perceive another's sense perceptions, and so we must imaginatively replicate the sufferer's situation and our own concomitant sense reaction. There is no danger, in Smith's version of sympathy, of us ever being overcome with what George Eliot would eventually call "the roar on the other side of silence" or indeed of even facing its existence. Here, our ears are always-already wadded with the requisite cotton. For Smith, sympathy requires not merely imagination, but the prior recognition of both our difference from one another and the inexorable subjectivity of our own perception.

If Victor's narration is capable of suggesting the former of these two requirements, it is the latter of the two that the creature's frame cultivates, even as his character provides the most extreme challenge to the notion of difference as tool for sympathetic engagement. For someone with a body cobbled together from corpse bits and a resulting overall appearance so horrific it incites violence, "difference" is no small problem. Yet if we look to Victor's description of the creature to see of what this terrible physical difference consists, we get uncertain answers.<sup>34</sup> The first information we get about the creature's appearance is his size. Victor finds that "the minuteness of the parts" of his creation's body hinders the speed of his work, so he resolves, "contrary to [his] first intention," to make the being huge – "about eight feet in height, and proportionally large" (81). But the full description of the creature that we get upon his first awakening makes no mention of his grotesquely inflated stature:

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<sup>34</sup> Denise Gigante in "Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*" (*ELH* 67 [2000] 565-587) reads the creature's appearance as itself indicative of representational "cracks and fissures" as his individual features are "sutured together with other unsightly features." What Gigante reads as "cracks" I read as lack – Shelley's description never "pulls together" the creature's appearance – each feature is ghastly, and yet disconnected. Indeed, Gigante's reading of the creature's body seems more indicative of the Boris Karloff version, his scars readily visible, than the novel's yellow-skinned giant.

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (85)

The order in which Victor presents the creature's physical traits – size followed by physical detail – is repeated throughout his narrative frame, first when he travels home after his young brother Williams' murder, and then again when he faces his creature in the Alps.<sup>35</sup> In both scenes, the creature's approach is first signaled by his awful height:

A flash of lightening illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature..." (103)

And later:

He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature ... as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man" (125).

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<sup>35</sup> In "Face, Figure, Physiognomics: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Moving Image" (*Novel* 33.3 [2000] 353-376), Scott J. Juengel read the novel's "unwavering preoccupation with the spectacle of the assembled anatomy" as privileging "visual moments" which "function like close-ups or portraits, forcing the reader to confront, acknowledge, and linger over an imagined face." I would suggest, however, that while the idea of a close-up suggests that the reader is encouraged to linger over aesthetic details, *Frankenstein* might instead be thought of as encouraging a more distanced "visual" perspective, one that can encompass, rather than obscure, an overall form. Indeed, the novel's descriptions of the creature efface detail far more than reveal it. See also Alan Rausch, "The Monstrous Body of Knowledge in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Studies in Romanticism* 34.2 (1995) 227-253 for a reading of the creature as the physical manifestation of the scientific knowledge that engendered his own creation, and as such is "transgressive" nor "morally repugnant." While I believe that Rausch perhaps underplays the very strangeness of the creature's body, his reading nonetheless demonstrates how we might begin to think about the creature's form apart from aesthetic judgment.

Size is then followed by a description of the creature's countenance, presenting "deformity, more hideous than belongs to humanity"(103); and, "unearthly ugliness render[ing] it almost too horrible for human eyes" (125).

Before the creature even speaks, his literal, fleshly delimitation appears to usurp any kind of "content" – physical and otherwise. While the specifics of the creature's size recur again and again, appearing not only in Victor's frame but also in the narrations of both Walton and the creature, the other bodily aspects of the creature's appearance, rendered at first in so much horrific particularity, are condensed after their initial mention to merely "ugliness" or "deformity."<sup>36</sup> Even details that we *do* get leave us with a picture of a body that is not so much monstrous as human in spite of its weirdness. What we "see" most distinctly are sickly colors – yellow, white, and black – mapped on strangely veined and sinewy frame. Awful, to be sure, but a far cry from "deformity, more hideous than belongs to humanity." It is only when we add size to this portrait that the monstrousness – the more-than-humanness – becomes fully apparent. Size converts into a sort of shorthand for the other-than-human connotation of the creature's ugliness, signaling the extremity of his deformity that we don't fully "see" in the text. Even Victor's initial description of his creation anticipates this significance, as it is his own intemperate desire to reach his goal that leads him to abandon the "minute detail" of the process, and thus the normal stature of his creature's body. The creature's true monstrousness is the direct result of Victor's outsize ambition.

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<sup>36</sup> See Gigante, 570, for a reading of "the ugly" as that which cannot be contained, like the muscles beneath the creature's skin, and like monstrousness and monstrosity within the novel as a whole.

Thus, the creature's body metaphorically exemplifies both the fullest expression and the perversion of Smith's sympathy prerequisite: his difference is inscribed so vividly that it actively resists, not merely requires, overcoming by imaginative imitation.<sup>37</sup> Correspondingly, the creature's marked physical differentiation, independent of his narration, provides an ironic counterpoint to the very method of internally focalized characterization that distinguishes Victor's narration. Victor's skill at focalization, which differentiates characters' perspectives through formal, surface-level textual signifiers, is mockingly exploded in both his creation and his loathing of his creature's figure. The creature embodies a "difference" with which Victor seeks, unsuccessfully, to deny any identification. His first direct confrontation with the creature plays on just this idea of form's now problematic content. Convinced that he faces his brother's killer, Victor decries the creature's presence:

“Cursed (although I curse myself) be the hands that formed you! You have made me wretched beyond expression ... Begone! relieve me from the sight of your detested form.”

‘Thus I relieve thee, my creator,’ he said, and he placed his hated hands before my eyes ... ‘thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me.’” (127)

The creature's "detested form" leads Victor to distance his own "form" from its actions – a disassociation that his parenthetically observed "I curse myself" ironically underlines.

But, as the creature's mocking "relief" from sight reminds him, form and content are not

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<sup>37</sup> This claim is in direct opposition to that suggested by James C. Hatch in "Disruptive Affects." Hatch reads the creature's body as a physical manifestation of the "shame" and "disgust" that makes Adam Smith's theory of sympathy possible. As I suggest, however, the very fact that we rarely ever "see" the creature all that clearly is itself a testimony to the importance of "form" as a signifier of difference, and thus, Smithian sympathy. See Hatch, 34.

so easily separated. Victor's disassociation of his own "form" highlights his blindness to *his* need for "differentiation" – the self-awareness of one's own subjectivity that sympathy requires.

Once more, Victor's early characterizations of the creature implicitly assume that his ghastly creation's form is his sum, signifying nothing but its own monstrousness – he looks inhuman, so he is inhuman. But the creature's speech confounds this straightforward reading of bodily form. As Victor himself notes, "His words had a strange effect on me. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him ... my feelings were altered to horror and hatred" (171). While it may appear that Victor's horror exists *despite* the creature's articulate story – an indication of the "linguistic failure" often perceived in the novel – we can in fact interpret Victor's horror at this point as a result of too-successful speech. Despite the initial incongruity between the "forms" of the creature's body and speech, the reader experiences them as inseparable from one another; their correspondence generates our understanding of the creature's character. Similarly, though Victor himself can't reconcile his first-hand experience of the creature's body with the creature's affecting speech, Victor's narration renders body and speech in the same textual form. The once insurmountable gap between the creature's visual and linguistic signification is thus, on one textual level, diminished. Victor's horror registers the problem of reconciling the narrative dissonance of body and speech with their textual unity. Indeed, the formal structure of Victor's own prior characterizations anticipates as much: there, formal techniques signal psychological depth, a content that both suggests form and transcends it.



The creature's speech defies us – and Victor – *not* to look to his form as a source of ultimately constructive differentiation. It is this recognition of difference that enables the novel's process of identification, and, ultimately, its take on sympathy. The creature is capable of translating his own ostensibly excessive difference into something legible within a Smithian version of sympathy.<sup>38</sup> In his sensory account-taking of the boundaries of both his immediate physical situation and his own perceptive capacity, the creature's story give us our first example of a narrator's recognition of his own subjectivity's limits, a re-characterization of self that transforms his inscrutable form into something legible.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the narrations of Walton and Victor, the creature's narration immediately signals an awareness of the inevitable "frame" – here, the very subjectivity – of his experience:

It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original aera of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses ... I walked, and, I believe, descended; but I presently found a great alteration in my sensations. Before, dark and opaque bodies had surrounded me, impervious to my touch or sight; but I now found that I could wander at liberty, with no obstacles which I could not either surmount or avoid. (128-9)

Here, the limits of the creature's sense experience are also the limits of his own physicality; his "being" emerges alongside the development of his bodily perceptions.

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<sup>38</sup> See Brooks, Newman, and Poovey for an account of the conceptual ties between the "monstrous" and the "unsignifiable." Here, *Frankenstein* is a record of perpetual and perpetuated misunderstand, as opaque "monstrosity" circulates through text, authorship, and reading. For Brooks in "Godlike Science," the reader herself is implicated in this process of (mis)signification (220), while Newman reads the frames themselves as concealing "the monstrous" from the view of certain characters as well as the reader (159). In "My Hideous Progeny," Poovey's reading of individual desire as essentially egotistical, and thus in need of control, also resonates at multiple levels of narrative (334).

<sup>39</sup> See Michael Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors, and the Collapse of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 108, for an account of apostrophe in the novel as a form of self-coherence. Whereas Macovski is interested in the novel's multi-vocality as a source of defined identity, I am arguing that it's actually the act of "framing" through characterization that provides a template for self-delimitation.

The creature, then, enacts the very process of sensory self-consciousness that Smith's imaginative sympathy implicitly requires. Compare the creature's sensory record to Smith's description of our sympathy-inducing judgment of others:

Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them.<sup>40</sup>

Viewed in the context of Smith's *Theory*, the first sentences of the creature's story read as a direct invocation of dual sympathy prerequisites – sensory self-awareness and recognized subjective difference. Victor has found the creature's appearance to be *beyond* perception – literally exceeding the limits of his narrative capacity. Victor even notes that upon first apprehending the creature on the icy slope, he can “scarcely observe” him in the midst of his own overpowering rage (125). The creature's account of his senses serves to familiarize his very difference, and thus inscribes him with the potential for identification. We may only be able to judge others' senses by our own, but the creature's account of differentiating between his own sight, touch, sound, and smell establishes a kind of sensory roadmap, allowing for the potential of sensory similarity between himself, his creator, and the implied reader. Whereas Victor and Walton's voices convey an always-already established sense of self that makes their character-narrator personas appear more fixed than in-construction, and more self-assured than self-reflective, the creature's opening sentences signal an acutely self-aware construction of his own physical existence.

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, 23.

Moreover, this sensory portrait is also attentive to the creature's construction of his role as a narrator: the subject of his narrative is, from the first, neither the familial history, nor the existential meditation, nor the description of action found in Walton's and Victor's frames. This narrator introduces us to his interiority by describing the process of learning how to observe – how, in other words, to *narrate* – first, his own body and feelings, and later, through his extended secret scrutiny of the De Lacey's. Watching solely through a “small and almost imperceptible chink ... which the eye could just penetrate” (134), the creature perceives and reports the nuances of the family's emotions, finding (even without yet understanding their language) that although “Nothing could exceed the love and respect which the young cottagers exhibited” towards their father, they nonetheless “were not entirely happy” (136). Once more, the creature tracks the changes in his own feelings as he continues to observe them: “when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys” (138).

In both his first sense-report and his later semi-omniscient spectator stance, the creature-as-narrator gives us a self-portrait that looks strikingly similar to what Percy Lubbock refers to as a “mind in action,” a picture minutely sensitively to every feeling and turn of his own thought. It is this kind of portrait that Lubbock particularly associates with Henry James novels and their nearly invisible third-person narrators: here, characters' interiority is exhaustively catalogued by a nearly imperceptible narrator who details thoughts of which his characters themselves are often only half cognizant.<sup>41</sup> But it

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. Here, the narrator appears actually conscious of overstepping the powers of realistic imagination, as in, for example, his introduction of Adam Verver. After pages and pages of psychological significance and detail, ostensibly contained in a single minute scene, the narrator gives us the following: “So much mute communication was doubtless, all this time, marvelous, and we may confess to having perhaps

is also the kind of portrait provided, according to Lubbock, by *Clarissa*'s epistolary first-person narrators. For Lubbock, Clarissa and Lovelace accomplish what most later first-person narrators do not: "a searching and elaborate portrait" of themselves generated through their correspondence. Other non-epistolary first-person narrators can succeed, but only when we have no need of knowing "how [their] mind[s] work." Dickens' David Copperfield is, for Lubbock, one such example because there is no narrative need to see *how* he thinks – he can take his own consciousness for granted and illustrate a series of engaging vignettes that largely involve other people. But any character for whom the point of his story is "a portrait of his own mind" is doomed to failure.<sup>42</sup> Lubbock implies that the roles of character and narrator become incompatible, each cancelling out the literary conceit of the other that makes for their mutual believability. Clarissa works as her own narrator, for, given the near-impossible epistolary form her narration takes, she can subject her own thoughts and personality to the kind of hyper-detailed scrutiny of which most first-person narrators are incapable. In *Clarissa*, the portraits we get of "minds in action" are the direct result of narrators who combine stylistic prowess with an (almost) unguarded tendency towards self-disclosure across a huge amount of text.

In contrast, the creature's record of his mind's actions is a succinct, consciously constructed account that feels as intended for a general audience as for a specific listener or reader; it is a tale he has long contemplated sharing (127). Yet, as palpable as his self-consciousness is, it is no less attuned to a portrait of mental action than *Clarissa*'s obsessive letter-writers. He too succeeds as a first-person narrator because, like Clarissa,

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read into the scene, prematurely, a critical character that took longer to develop." See James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Oxford World Classics, 2009) 114.

<sup>42</sup> Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: Viking Press, 1957) 84-91.

his self-evaluative narrative largely replicates observation and thought as they occur. Despite his temporal distance from the events he narrates, the very skill with which he transports his audience to the precise sensations of those earlier moments speaks to his remarkable prowess as – and his self-conscious inhabitation of – the roles of both narrator and character.

Evident in the creature's narration is the deliberate portrayal of "mental action" as a means of inscribing himself within the novel's system of characterization and within its discourse of sympathy. Denied comprehensible identity in Victor's frame, his narrative consciously replicates differentiation's effects through its enactment of his own sensory and psychological account-taking. By making his character coincident with his self-narration, he in effect rewrites his own otherwise inscrutable creation and body, a process of making-legible that speaks to his narrative authority and to his practice of sympathy. As his narrative demonstrates, the creature's self-differentiation best exemplifies Smith's sensory sympathy requirements. And as we will see, his characterization of others extends this enactment of sympathy to the very form and structure of his own narrative frame.

#### IV. THE PROOF OF PROTAGONISM

In addition to narrating his early memories of existence, the creature's frame is devoted largely to the story of the De Laceys, the adult brother and sister, Felix and Agatha, their father, and eventually, Felix's lover Safie. Indeed, it is through the introduction of Safie's character that the creature explains the family's dramatic history (they are French aristocrats in unjust political exile) and Felix and Safie's fraught

romance (her Muslim father opposes the Christian Safie's choice of husband on religious grounds). Once more, the creature gives to Victor copies of Safie's letters to Felix as "proof" of his own biography. Though the letters themselves are never seen in his frame, the creature's summary of their contents provides a narrative explanation for family's humble existence and genteel manner (not to mention some pointed parallels between their own harsh treatment and that which the creature suffers). Much has been made of the creature's appropriation of Safie's female narrative voice (the only one – if only implied and never present – in the novel) and the role of the letters as the novel's innermost frame. While critics have usually read the letters as a dubious proof at best, more intended to suggest the elusiveness of truth than to provide it,<sup>43</sup> I would argue that the letters themselves *do* serve as a kind of proof – not of the truth of the creature's tale, but of his prowess as a sympathy-inducing figure and his status as the novel's best protagonist. The letters speak to nothing so much as the creature's capacity to incorporate them into his own narrative voice while at the same time maintaining – indeed, facilitating – their testament to the deep particularity of their author.

On one hand, *Frankenstein* has already anticipated the creature's telling of Safie's story with the inclusion of its prior interpolated stories and letters. Like the shipmaster's failed romance or the biography of Caroline Beaufort, the Safie-and-Felix story is one

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Newman's "Narratives of Seduction;" Jeanne M. Britton's discussion of Safie's letters as a marker of sympathetic lack transformed into sympathetic plentitude through their transformation in first-person narration in "Novelistic Sympathy," 4-5; Jules Law's reading of the letters as an example of "anticipation" and its deferral in their promised but never seen content (Law, "Being There: Gothic Violence and Virtuality *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Strange Days*" *ELH* 73 [2006] 975-997); and John Bryant's description of the letters as a misleading ploy in the novel's "confidence game" in "Melville Essays the Romance: Comedy and Being in *Frankenstein*, 'The Big Bear of Arkansas,' and *Moby-Dick*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61 (2006) 277-310.

among several examples of “retelling,” of the appropriation of a potential – albeit unheard – narrative voice. What is different in the creature’s story is its own structure as a modified or potential frame narrative – the creature’s history frames the De Lacey family story, which in turn contains the content of Safie’s letters. In this, the Safie-and-Felix story might indeed be considered the innermost of the novel’s several frames. But whereas Walton and Victor relinquish their own narrative authority in their ostensibly verbatim retellings of, respectively, Victor’s and the creature’s narrations, the creature himself skillfully paraphrases and condenses Safie’s history, while at the same time preserving a sense of the letter’s own first-person portraits of “mental action.”<sup>44</sup> Repeatedly, the creature includes not just deeds and events, but evidence of narrative voice, psychological detail, and indeed, authorial skill all Safie’s own:

‘Safie related, that her mother was a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks; recommended by her beauty, she had won the heart of the father of Safie, who married her. The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother, who, born in freedom spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced ... the lady died; but her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and the being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue.’ (149)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> While I read the word-for-word-ness of the ostensible reports of other characters’ stories contained in the frames of Walton and Victor as a sign of narrative limitations, Bernard Duyfhuizen suggests in “Periphrastic Naming in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” that all the narrators potentially manipulate the others stories, because each “has a stake in the linguistic matrix of representation” (488). While true, the narrative frames give us no evidence of actual manipulation. What is more striking, perhaps, is how invested each frame seems to be in the truthful, verbatim report of the narrative it includes.

<sup>45</sup> While the frames of Walton and Victor appear without quotation marks, both the 1818 and the 1831 texts maintain quotes around the whole of the creature’s narration. I read the quotes as a signal to the reader of the apparent word-for-word veracity of the creature’s tale; even though Victor is relating the story, it is the creature who is “speaking.” Like the creature’s own bodily frame, the quotes function to both delimit and elucidate.

In addition to providing us with the internally focalized perspective indicative of the novel's other rich characterizations, the creature's report of Safie's narration preserves the frame-like structure of her own story. Her narrative is as dependent on the details of her mother's biography as the creature's is on the De Lacey's. Once more, the creature's voice so seamlessly incorporates Safie's history that it is difficult to tell precisely where her "frame" ends and his begins again. Aside from a paragraph break, the content of Safie's letters and the content of the creature's report feel indistinguishable: he picks up with the family history directly where her story leaves off, yet she still remains the most interiorly vivid character of this interpolated tale, the character with whom the creature – and, by extension, his audience – "see" most readily. Given the stated aim of the creature's tale – to win his creator's sympathy and convince him to create a female companion – it may seem odd that a good portion of this all-important tale is devoted to the story of Safie and the De Lacey's. But his summary of Safie's letters ensures that his own centrality, his own role as protagonist and narrator, is shaped by his attentiveness to the immanent centrality of other characters. The creature's protagonism is defined by both his ability to win identification and sympathy for others and his own sympathetic legibility.

Indeed, the greatest "proof" that the creature is the novel's most protagonistic of possible protagonists lies in the fact that his voice is neither diminished nor bolstered by his inclusion of others' narratives; rather, such inclusion speaks to the fulfillment of Smith's requirements for sympathy. The overlapping narrations of Safie and the creature maintain markers of their respective subjectivity while also suggesting the very equivalence of sensory and mental sensation that generates sympathy. Their voices are at



once separate and similar: a narrative intersection that testifies to the creature's practice of sympathy and to the potential for an implied reader's sympathy for him. Structurally, then, the creature's frame narration most closely mirrors neither Victor's nor Walton's stories, but the novel's formal structure as a whole. As the creature effectively appropriates the novel's frame construction in his own narration, he models the decentering of perspective and comparative stance that the frames themselves imply.

Once, more, the creature's own frame-narrative form encourages us to read a deliberate contrast between *Frankenstein's* frames and its interpolated and epistolary content. Critical examinations of interpolated tales and epistolary form have emphasized their implicit complications of realism and omniscient narrative authority. The inclusion of letters, such as those of Richardson's *Clarissa* or Shelley's Walton, can imply a selective unseen hand while at the same time deliberately interrogating the source and purpose of narrative authority. Similarly, the interpolated tales of an author like Fielding or Sterne often illustrate the multiple discourses and voices inherent in even the most continuous of narratives.<sup>46</sup> In *Frankenstein*, however, the tensions implied by the presence of these narrative techniques are not simply those of authority and dialogism, but rather those that exist between authority and an impulse towards narrative

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<sup>46</sup> Leah Price discusses how *Clarissa* "credits its coherence to an inscribed editor" while at the same time "raising urgent ethical questions about its characters' impulse to appropriate others' writing," Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 8. As Jeanne M. Britton notes, *Frankenstein* itself can be read as a kind of encapsulated history of the eighteenth-century transition away from epistolary novel, for, as Price notes, letters' abridgement and inclusion in anthologies (like the Creature's summary of Safie's letters) function as a middle-ground between the epistolary novel and the later single-narrator novels of the nineteenth century. Michael Rosenblum and Jeffery Williams consider authority and the interpolated tale in, respectively, "The Sermon, the King of Bohemia, and the Art of Interpolation in *Tristram Shandy*" *Studies in Philology* 75.4 (1978) 472-491; and "The Narrative Circle: The Interpolated Tales in *Joseph Andrews*," *Studies in the Novel* 30.4 (1998): 473-488.

appropriation. For example, Walton fulfills both the role of the rapt Coleridgean listener and that of the storyteller. His presence not only enables the telling of Victor's story (and, by extension, the creature's), but also translates it into a fixed, written record with a durability far outlasting its first spoken form. Similarly, Victor's apparently verbatim retelling of the creature's story implies not just a fictional conceit or Victor's canny assumption of the creature's voice, but the preternaturally lasting imprint of the Creature's narration *on him*. Is Victor appropriating the creature's voice or is the creature appropriating his narrative role? These alternatives' significance lies in the fact that they look surprisingly indistinguishable from one other.

In contrast, the creature's "framing" of Safie's voice, while at first glance forming a more one-sided appropriation, is, within the novel's context, a kind of archetype with which can compare the other frames and stories. In this innermost frame, we do see, as in the other examples from the frames of Victor and Walton, appropriation and a relinquishment of narrative authority, as the creature literally takes the content of Safie's letters and integrates it into his own narrative frame. But here one author's appropriation and relinquishment of narrative authority counterbalances those of the other, as the creature's perspective overlaps and maintains Safie's own narrative structure. Indeed, the very kind of comparative model of reading that the novel's frames implicitly encourage is here enacted in the very forms telling and retelling take.

On one hand, then, the frame narrations of Victor and Walton invoke the first-person interpolated tales of later eighteenth-century novels, like the story of the Man of the Hill in Fielding's *Tom Jones*. They provide thematic illustrations and counterpoints, and, at the level of discourse, they reflect on the nature of authorship and the respective

roles of author and audience. But when the frames are read in the context of the interpolated stories peppered throughout their narrations Walton's "report" of Victor's story and Victor's "report" of the creature feel almost like interpolated tales run amok.<sup>47</sup> They are stories intended to produce instructive formal and thematic contrasts that instead overwhelm the narrative voices they were meant to complement. While the frame narrations are demarcated in much the same way that earlier interpolated stories often are – structurally, they begin at the commencement of a new chapter and often conclude by transitioning into dialogue that then returns the narration back to the prior narrator – they never feel merely distracting or digressive in the way that these earlier stories often strike us.<sup>48</sup> Rather, they stake their claim on not only authority, but also attention, asking their audience to abandon one guiding narrative hand for another. It is only with the inclusion of the creature's frame that such relinquishments of narrative authority suggest not competing opportunities for narrative absorption, but an incitement to comparison – to the possibility of maintaining multiple points of identification. In this, *Frankenstein's* protagonism is more promised than enacted. Yet that promise is nonetheless significant, suggestive of an approach to novel-reading that forestalls rapt absorption in a single hero and engages the possibility of identifying with many characters.

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<sup>47</sup> In their condensed form and neatly rounded plots, these stories more closely resemble the eighteenth-century novel's interpolated tales than *Frankenstein's* admittedly expansive and loosely concluded frames.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Fielding's interpolated tales present the clearest parallels, as in the Man of the Hill story from *Tom Jones* or "The History of Leonora, or, the Unfortunate Jilt," from *Joseph Andrews*. Dickens himself invokes this form in his deliberately anachronistic inclusion in *Little Dorrit* of Miss Wade's autobiography in "The History of a Self-Tormentor," which forms its own chapter (albeit a rather awkward one). Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Judith Hawley (London: Penguin, 1999).

I have described *Frankenstein*'s protagonism as a form of characterization that emerges through the novel's implicitly comparative frame structure, and that is defined through the varied application of formal narrative traits, particularly focalization. Such protagonism is representative of the compact yet eloquent ways of rendering mimetic complexity, but it also instantiates a form of identification that requires deferral and detachment alongside sympathetic understanding; indeed, *Frankenstein*'s protagonism is apparent only once the reader herself can reflect on the narrative differences between Walton, Victor, and the creature. In *Frankenstein*, then, protagonism isn't simply about the potential for multiple characters to assume a protagonist role, or even just the redefinition of characterization in the absence of a scaled taxonomy. While Shelley's novel develops these possibilities, its primary contribution to the idea of the protagonist is its capacity to quite literally make strange our process of readerly identification with novelistic characters, and in doing so, make room for a new kind of protagonist model. As it presents three narrators with equivalent voices and markedly distinct narratorial capacities, the novel uses its narrators to model forms of narrative identification through focalizing techniques. At the same time, however, this performance of narrative identification reflects back on the narrators themselves, forming the very criteria of the reader's identification – or the lack thereof – with them.

*Frankenstein* orients this "making strange" towards a rigorous view of readerly identification as a condition – and not merely an effect – of what it means to be a protagonist. The novel instantiates such deep and yet shifting identification not only in its structures of characterization, but in the very form of comparative reading it elicits. The creature's protagonism – and his sympathetic appeal – are neither a reflexive

reaction to an authoritative narrating “I,” nor a habituated response to the appearance of textual centrality, nor simply a result of compassionate pity. Instead, his protagonist status is only retrospectively inscribed in the novel, a phenomenon that itself obscures the protagonistic potential of Walton and Victor in inevitably familiarized rereadings of the novel. This final reorientation of perspective is the reward of the novel’s privileging of readerly distance. Perhaps the novel’s best image of both sympathy’s imaginative challenge and failure is its last: that of the creature – not, as he imagines his own conclusion, with his body burning upon a pyre – but gradually drifting out of our view, “lost in darkness and distance.”



I want to conclude, however, with a brief resurrection of physical form, for it is this aspect of character that Shelley most pointedly revisits in her significantly revised 1831 edition of the novel. In either version of *Frankenstein*, corporeal form becomes an increasingly tenuous, and indeed, almost superfluous aspect of character: Victor’s death is almost perfectly coincident with the end of his narrative frame, as if the very record of his words in Walton’s notebook have made further physical existence unnecessary. While, on one hand, this bodily breakdown could be read as an ironic commentary on the misleading nature of the creature’s body, the physical dissolution of Victor and the creature also speaks to the very paradox of Smith’s sympathy: the body is both the means and the barrier to sympathetic feeling. Reified as a kind of container for the individual, one’s physical person is conducive to sympathy only in so far as the very traits that register its specificity don’t obscure the potentially shared – and thus sympathy-enabling – nature of its sensations. Thus, while *Frankenstein* is undeniably invested in a belief in

individuality (as, of course, is Smith) it is also attentive to the problem of what we might think of as excessive individuality, evidenced so glaringly in the creature's too-particular corporeality.

The creature's version of excessive individuality itself implies a critique of traditional protagonists who are themselves defined largely by their generally exceptional physical and moral attributes. We need look no farther than *Frankenstein's* 1831 text to find a version of such a character. In what is perhaps Shelley's most significant change to her first version of the novel, Elizabeth Lavenza goes from being Victor's beloved cousin to a foundling with noble roots raised by Italian peasants and rescued by Victor's mother.<sup>49</sup> Discovered by Caroline on a charitable visit to this impoverished family, Elizabeth appears like the heroine of a fairy tale amid the rabble of everyday life:

Among these [children] there was one which attracted my mother far above all the rest. She appeared of a different stock. The four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants; this child was thin, and very fair. Her hair was the brightest living gold, and, despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head. Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness, that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features. (322; 1831)

Elizabeth's introduction showcases another kind of differentiation altogether. The very placement of her as the one "celestially" fair child amid four other "dark-eyed" and "hardy" youth singles her out on the basis of a physical distinction that, by implication, also stands for moral superiority. Her extraordinariness is so marked as to appear hyperbolic, with blond hair forming an almost literal "crown of distinction," and her

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<sup>49</sup> While the creature's narrative is itself relatively untouched by Shelley's 1831 revisions, the early portion of Victor's frame gets a major overhaul. While many of the revisions ultimately result in a more logical, stylistically sophisticated narrative (Shelley herself claimed that her emendations were purely "those of style," leaving the "core" of her tale untouched) many also radically changed the novel's scientific and political resonances. See *Frankenstein*, Ed. D. L. MacDonald and Kathleen Sheref, "Appendix G: Introduction [1831]," 358-9.

appearance amounting to a presence as a distinct, angelic “species.” Even the inclusion of precise numbers – she is the “fifth” child, one among four others – recalls the numerical specificity of a Grimm’s Fairy Tale and the privilege and virtue allotted to just one of several similarly positioned characters. In this combination of fairytale favoritism and narrative emphasis, Elizabeth does indeed appear as a kind of protagonist in her own right, though as a would-be heroine, she is devoid of the depth or psychological specificity implied by internal focalization; her physical traits are themselves a Barthesian “sum” – her character in an angelic nutshell.

Elizabeth’s physical presence is in many ways as striking – and even more attentively detailed – than the creature’s. Yet, her inclusion calls into question the very notion of differentiation as a means to identification, and ultimately sympathy. Like the creature’s body, her extreme physical difference seems to place her beyond the reach of identification; even the designation of her as a “distinct species,” “heaven-sent” and “celestial” (rather than fiendish and horrific) pointedly echoes the very more-than-humanness of the creature’s own creation. Unlike the creature, however, Elizabeth is exceptional in ways that feel familiar – her appearance is cobbled together not from corpses but rather from fragments of any number of fair, lovely, literary heroines.

Should we read the 1831 Elizabeth as a cop-out? As a scaling back of the earlier version’s stridently untraditional character system?<sup>50</sup> Her very “distinct species”

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<sup>50</sup> As critics from Mary Poovey to Marilyn Butler have argued, the 1831 edition can read as a concession to critics who accused Shelley of a lack of respectability, or as a tempering of the expression of Victor’s deliberate, science-based agency in his act of creation. Butler contends that the post-publication reception of the 1818 edition was marred by alleged association with “radical” materialist scientists like William Lawrence, and that Shelley’s subsequent “cuts and rewritings were acts of damage-limitation rather than a reassertion of authority” (“Introduction,” xlvii-li). In “My Hideous Progeny,” Poovey reads the 1831 edition as “apologetic,” and Shelley’s 1831 introduction as recasting herself “as the victim of forces beyond her control.” Though

similarity to the creature seems to caution us against a too ready dismissal of this marked textual amendment.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, like the creature, Elizabeth's physical extraordinariness ultimately amounts to nothing – on its own, it signifies only a lack – a fact made all the more horrifically apparent in the aftermath of her murder at the creatures' hands. In Victor's words, "I rushed towards her, and embraced her with ardour; but the deadly languor and coldness of the limbs told me, that what I now held in my arms had ceased to be the Elizabeth whom I had loved and cherished. The murderous mark of the fiends' grasp was on her neck" (218). While Elizabeth's death scene is unchanged between the 1818 and the 1831 editions, it is only with the addition of her physical "fairy-tale" description in the later text that that irony of her corpse becomes apparent. Elizabeth's "angelic" body, with its blond "crown of distinction" still exists, but its dead presence testifies all the more fully to its ultimate inadequacy – this form is not "Elizabeth." Even the "mark" of the creature on her skin is a kind of rewriting of her very form's signification. The mark becomes her most eloquent trait, reinscribing her body with the

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Poovey clearly prefers the 1818 edition, calling it "as bold and original a work as the novelist ever conceived," she nonetheless engages with the "contradictions" presented by both texts as a "case study" in "feminine" adaptations of Romanticism (332-333). In a different vein, Anne K. Mellor has argued that the 1831 edition replaces an "organic" conception of nature with a mechanistic one, privileging pessimistic fate over free will, and thus obscuring Shelley's original moral ideology ("Choosing a Text of *Frankenstein*," *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt [New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990] 36-7).

<sup>51</sup> In perhaps the most convincing recent argument in favor of the 1831 text, James O'Rourke makes a strong case for the later novel as the one that, in both its famous introduction and its textual body, most fully presents the canny Mary Shelley's construction of her own authorial persona, and her knowing management of her own controversial biography. See O'Rourke, "The 1831 Introduction and Revisions to *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley Dictates Her Legacy," *SiR* 38 (1999): 365-85.



very evidence of its misleading “sum” of character.<sup>52</sup> In the context of its critique of excessive individuality, the 1831 *Frankenstein* demonstrates that extreme physical difference – even at its best – makes an inadequate substitution for “deep” character and its attendant protagonism potential.

By reminding us of this other (and, implicitly, lesser) protagonism, Shelley’s amendments display a self-consciousness about her own character system and its implications for sympathy, a self-consciousness that her 1831 introduction underlines. Describing that infamous (and likely somewhat apocryphal) ghost story contest, she notes that “[Percy] Shelley [was] more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery ... than to invent the machinery of a story” (355; 1831). “Embodiment” and “machinery,” here juxtaposed to one another, are, just paragraphs later, echoed and united in her own first thoughts about her monstrous subject: “perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth” (357; 1831). Mary Shelley’s comparison of her own novelistic writing to Percy Shelley’s poetry sounds at first (rather sardonically) self-deprecating – she’s just a diligent craftswoman; her husband is the artist, best capable of capturing thought and emotion. Yet, when we actually get a description of what her mechanical craft produces, we find that, for the novelist, it is only through the arduous process of mechanically

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth’s death on her wedding night is, as Victor tells us, the creature’s payback for Victor’s destruction of the in-progress form of his female companion. Read in terms of this implied critique of form and character, however, Elizabeth’s death and the “death” of the creature’s mate both echo Victor’s habit of misreading “formal” significance; seeing only “malice and treachery” in the creature’s face, he leaps to the assumption that the creature on which he toils would exhibit the same (fabricated) traits, thus giving him an ostensibly moral justification for what is, as he himself admits, an act of anger and “passion” (191). On reflection, he feels “as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (194).

“manufacturing” a story’s textual embodiment that a medium for “vital warmth” – for a sense of vivified individuality – comes to exist.

For Shelley, the “machinery of a story” and the “manufacture” of character are strikingly coincident – in *Frankenstein*, there is, quite literally, no story without the voices of its characters. Unlike the “embodiment” of “ideas and sentiments” in “brilliant imagery,” their success – and the success of the secondary characters they illustrate – is not based on the compression of abstract thoughts and feelings into a more comprehensible, concrete form. Instead, their embodiment initiates a sense of character that exceeds form, a gesture towards that “precious remainder” suggested by the tangible, mechanistic functions of narrative.

However, just as Smith’s theory of sympathy entreats us to be mindful of our own sensory subjectivity, so too does Shelley’s novel register the potential for too much remainder, too much individuality. If the 1831 Elizabeth gives us one version of that “too much,” the very promise of “deep” interiority carries its own threat of excess.

*Frankenstein* teeters on the edge of becoming the novel of its title character; that other kind of protagonist still presses against the comparative, multifarious protagonism for which the novel strives. Victor’s interiority does, after all, comprise the bulk of the narrative, curtailed only by the frame structure itself. That the creature is, in the end, our most sympathetic, our most “vitally warm,” protagonist is an effect of his embrace of boundedness, of mechanistic embodiment. Even when he rewrites himself, he rewrites himself within limits – those of sense and subjectivity.

## Chapter Two

### “All the unnumbered points”: *Villette*'s Prismatic Protagonism

I have not the faculty of telling an individual's disposition at first sight. Before I can venture to pronounce on a character, I must see it first under various lights, and from various points of view. All I can say therefore is, both Mr and Mrs W seem to me good sort of people.

Letter from Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 3 March 1841<sup>1</sup>

#### I. MINOR HEROINES

When Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* appeared in 1853 Victorian critics lauded the return of the strong narrating voice that had propelled *Jane Eyre* and vanished from *Shirley*. But rather than turning this praise towards the character of Lucy Snowe, the novel's first-person narrator, reviewers were far more interested in Lucy's vivid depictions of secondary characters. As one *Edinburgh Review* critic declared, Brontë's heroine compensated for her own rather boring story by sketching even the most incidental individuals “with a bold and free pencil.” Similarly, in the *Westminster Review*, George Henry Lewes wondered over the inclusion of so much biographical detail about relatively insignificant characters – yet still admired them for being “painted” with “wonderful imagination.”<sup>2</sup> Victorian critics repeatedly attributed *Villette*'s appeal to the

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, vol 1829-1847, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 246.

<sup>2</sup>“*Villette*. By the Author of *Jane Eyre*,” *Edinburgh Review*, April 1853, 380; George Henry Lewes, “*Ruth and Villette*,” *Westminster Review*, April, 1853, 485. See also “*Villette*,” *New*

brilliance of Lucy's characterizations – not to the novel's portrayal of the narrating protagonist herself, who garnered more puzzlement, skepticism, and outright hostility than kind regard.

Contemporary criticism has more than recuperated Brontë's heroine, tending to read *Villette* in ways that focus almost exclusively on Lucy's character. Whether these arguments deal with issues of spectatorship, surveillance, gender, or narrative, Lucy's consciousness is always at their center.<sup>3</sup> Yet, by emphasizing Lucy's undeniable complexity, we have largely lost a sense of what Victorian reviewers rightly noted to be the novel's interest in idiosyncratic ancillary characterizations. By refocusing our gaze on *Villette*'s portrayal of characters other than Lucy, I reorient our understanding of a novel that has often been read as an extreme example of all-consuming autodiegesis, and I suggest a way of thinking about Lucy's perplexing first-person reserve that doesn't require readers to treat her narration as an incitement to divulge an otherwise hidden interior truth. Rather than reading *Villette*'s strategies of characterization from the standpoint of what they reveal about Lucy, I propose that their specific enactment of protagonism – their ability to present the concise yet psychologically rich representations of a host of variably present characters – can help us see how *Villette* privileges the

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*Quarterly Review*, April 1853, 237; "Book Review," *Literary Gazette*, February 5, 1853, 123; and "Villette, By Currer Bell" *Spectator*, February 12, 1853, 155. A common thread throughout these reviews is the novel's lack of plot and excess of character.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Jacobus's essay on *Villette*, "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in *Villette*," is the *locus classicus* for this line of critique. See Jacobus (ed.), *Women Writing and Writing about Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) pp. 42-60. For additional examples see Janice Carlisle, "The Face in the Mirror: *Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography," *ELH* 46 (1979): 262-289; Mark M. Hennelly, "The 'Surveillance of Désirée': Freud, Foucault, and *Villette*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26 (1998) 421-440; Jessica Brent, "Haunting Pictures, Missing Letters: Visual Displacement and Narrative Elision in *Villette*," *Novel* 37 (2004) 86-111; Emily W. Heady, "'Must I Render an Account?': Genre and Self-Narration in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36 (2006) 341-364.

maintenance of multiple perspectives on one's own character and a form of identity that resists summation. I describe the novel's protagonism as *prismatic*, then, revealing less a sense of characters' depth than the multiplicity of their external personae.

*Villette* is as invested in an interiority that resists narrative representation and development as one that is readily visible on the page; here, any single view of character is incomplete. As a narrator, Lucy Snowe herself is an example and an arbiter of a protagonism whose primary distinguishing feature is, paradoxically, the withholding or deferral of identification and understanding. Like the protagonism introduced in Chapter One, a version of focalization here again reveals the protagonism of characters who are anything but traditional protagonists. Such characters often appear briefly, are confined to the novel's periphery, and seem unlikeable or narcissistically resistant to identification, but they are far from incidental. In *Frankenstein*, we saw how focalization can point readers towards a means of differentiating between the novel's framing narrators, distinguishing the monster's capacity to internally focalize both himself and the characters in his frame, and thus signifying his own protagonism. However, *Villette*'s focalization suggests the hazards of a too-ready assumption of another's perspective. The novel uses focalization not to imply interiority but instead to mark the potential for multiple perspectives on a single character. If *Frankenstein*'s creature employs focalization to self-reflexively indicate the rich complexity of his interior life, *Villette*'s focalization is more interested in how the technique synthesizes multiple perspectives on an individual while registering awareness that any single view of character is incomplete. Likewise, while *Frankenstein* makes the perception of characters' interiority into a moral

problem, *Villette* is skeptical about both the meaning of such perception and the ability to attain it.

The novel's illustration of such prismatic protagonism and its rejection of interior depth as a prerequisite of rich characterization is most apparent in its depiction of its alternative heroes and heroines: characters who are clearly minor in the traditional terms of novelistic characterization, but whom the novel nonetheless presents as compelling figures in their own right. Often presented in terms of unrestrained or outsized personality, they could be read in terms of Woloch's definition of "eccentric" minor characters; that is, characters who appear briefly in marginal roles, yet who still, because of their very vividness, remain memorable – often more so than the heroes themselves.<sup>4</sup> But *Villette*'s "eccentric" characters are not mere distractions. Rather, the narrative pointedly draws the reader's attention to them, even as they are relegated to brief sections of the novel. Lucy's manner of focalizing these other "heroines" and "heroes" (designations given by her narration) demonstrates a protagonism generated by affect rather than substance, by the externalization of identity rather than by access to interiority.

It's not a coincidence, then, that Lucy and *Villette* are, pointedly, more interested in heroines than heroes. My argument about prismatic protagonism and Lucy's productively self-effacing narration runs directly counter to those readings of the novel that see its preoccupation with surveillance in terms of either a submission to or a circumvention of masculine forms of social control. If anything, my take on the role of Lucy's gender in her narration is similar to that of Amanda Anderson's assertion that the novel investigates what might constitute a distinctly female form of agential detachment,

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<sup>4</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 125-33.

one that is neither all-seeing nor marginalized. Indeed, Lucy's narration steps back from both the intense scrutiny and invisibility that, in part, result from her gender, to consider the possibilities inherent to and excluded from each kind of social legibility, incorporating them into her distanced, evaluative narrative voice.<sup>5</sup>

Consider Lucy's portrayal of two very different secondary "protagonists": the actress Vashti, a character based on the legendary French actress Rachel, and Ginevra Fanshawe, none other than the selfish coquette to whom Lucy plays opposite in the school vaudeville. Although the self-absorbed Ginevra and the renowned Vashti might initially appear to have few shared traits, Lucy's narration links them through their mutual display of externalized emotional experience. Of Vashti, Lucy declares:

To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions ... Pain, for her, has no result in good; tears water no harvest of wisdom: on sickness, on death itself, she looks with the eye of a rebel. (287)

And of an imagined version of Ginevra:

[She] seemed to me the happiest. She was on the route of beautiful scenery...

Ginevra had a kind of spirit ... empowered to give constant strength and comfort,

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<sup>5</sup> This argument recalls Sharon Marcus's reading of Brontë's productive use of self-abstraction in *Jane Eyre* as a means to circumvent problematic aspects of female embodiment. See Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 46-8; and Marcus, "The Profession of the Author: Abstraction, Advertising, and *Jane Eyre*," *PMLA* 110 (1995) 206-219. See also Ivan Kreilkamp, "Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*," *Novel* 32 (1999): 331-354; and John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 38-39.

to gladden daylight and embalm darkness ... By True Love was Ginevra followed: never could she be alone ... Ginevra gradually became for me a sort of heroine” (175).

Vashti’s embodiment of hurt and Ginevra’s gladdening spirit, manifested outside herself in a kind of personified presence of “Love,” suggests that their respective characters are defined by this very process of physical, external projection. If *Villette*’s prismatic protagonism is marked by an externalized multifacetedness, characters like Vashti and Ginevra seem to explode this criterion, as their sum total of identity and experience can only be publicly, openly, and bodily manifested. Indeed, in Vashti’s case, pain and sorrow only exist affectively *on* the body. There is neither “wisdom” nor deepening of psychological experience to be gained— just the bodily signifiers themselves. Similarly, the propitious atmosphere that seems to be both generated by and protective of Ginevra alchemizes all her experience into a kind of metaphorical environment of “beautiful scenery” – there is no difference between what she is and what surrounds her. Fittingly, then, Lucy’s focalization of these two characters is at once internal and external – one can’t entirely tell where her voice or point of view leaves off and theirs begins, particularly in the case of Vashti.

While Vashti’s and Ginevra’s “performances” are at the opposite ends of the spectrum of emotional experience, they nonetheless share a kind of expressive manifestation of experience that projects itself outward, directly affecting the physical and emotional state of the observing narrator. Though Lucy’s observation of the famous actress and her imagined vision of an idealized Ginevra might seem to be markedly distinct kinds of encounters with very different characters, in fact the two passages



describing the women display striking similarities. In both situations, Lucy's experience of the "heroines" is physically affecting, if not overwhelming. The disquieting Vashti appears to literally set the theater on fire, while Lucy's vision of Ginevra-as heroine, occurring while she is left virtually alone at the school, forced to care for a "cretin" while the students and teachers vacation with their families, directly precedes Lucy's most abject mental anguish and loss of consciousness. The narrator's reactions to these characters are, then, understandably ambivalent. Of Vashti's performance Lucy declares, in pointedly indented and emphasized lines:

It was a marvelous sight: a mighty revelation.

It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral. (286)

And her reaction to Ginevra is similarly discordant. No sooner does Lucy declare that the girl has become for her "a sort of heroine," than she renounces the idea as delusional: "my mind has suffered somewhat too much; a malady is growing upon it" (175-6). Even Lucy's affective reactions to the two women renounce the possibility of a single character interpretation.

Though Lucy is awake to the potential for multiple facets of character to coexist within a single aspect – indeed, to paradoxically *define* character – this perspective is not universal in the novel.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to Lucy's readings of Ginevra and Vashti, her initial love interest, Graham Bretton, who accompanies Lucy to Vashti's play and who is a fervent admirer of Ginevra, easily pigeonholes both "heroines." His perception of Vashti

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<sup>6</sup> For readings that suggest this form of performance in the novel, Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Peter Owen Ltd., 1985) 117-8; Brownstein, Rachel. "Representing the Self: Arnold and Brontë on Rachel," *Browning Institute Studies* 13 (1985): 1-24.; John Stokes, "Rachel's 'Terrible Beauty': An Actress Among the Novelists" *ELH* 51 (1984): 771-793.

doesn't even allow her the unsettling power that Lucy notes: "he judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment" (289). And Graham can see Ginevra's character only as an extension of her physical attractiveness. As he says to Lucy, "She is so lovely, one cannot but be loving toward her" (166). The difference between Graham's and Lucy's modes of character perception goes beyond the former's misreading of surfaces or gender myopia; it suggests that this understanding of character is as much a product of perspective as it is of projection. Graham's inability to distinguish the same facets that Lucy identifies suggests that perceiving protagonistism – even in its extreme forms – requires a kind of readerly conditioning.

If the examples of Vashti and Ginevra illustrate how *Villette's* prismatic protagonistism is a function of both externalized characterization and the cultivation of a multifaceted perception, a third protagonist example, the King of Labassecour, extends these qualities to the idea of the public figure. In an inverse of the kind of totalizing externalization of identity evident in Vashti and Ginevra, two versions of the monarch's public self compete and almost cancel one another out – his appearance as a king, and his appearance as a man. Lucy's introduction of his character, viewed from within a crowded theater, stresses this discordance:

By whomever majesty is beheld the for first time, there will always be experienced a vague surprise bordering on disappointment, that the same does not appear seated, en permanence, on a throne, bonneted with a crown, and furnished as to the hand, with a scepter. Looking out for a king ... and seeing only a middle-aged soldier ... I felt half cheated, half pleased. (237-8)

As Lucy suggests, the monarch's significance is a function of one's ability to maintain an idealized – and wholly imaginary – perception of him. Indeed, in the context of the scene in which the king appears, he does form a center of attention, drawing not only the narrator's gaze but also that of the whole audience. But while Lucy implies that others can see only an image that complements or disappoints their preexisting idea of a king, she is able to discern another aspect of his character:

There was no face in all the assembly which resembled his. I had never read, never been told anything of his nature or his habits; and at first the strong hieroglyphics graven as with iron stilet on his brow, round his eyes, beside his mouth, puzzled and baffled instinct. Ere long, however, if I did not know, as least I felt, the meaning of those characters written without hand. There sat a silent sufferer – a nervous, melancholy man. (238)

Here, in one of the novel's several phrenological descriptions, character is made quite literally external.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, however, Lucy describes the knowledge that his features give as more *felt* than scientifically known, more sensation than sense; his features are not signifiers but "hieroglyphics" that "baffle instinct."<sup>8</sup> As with Vashti and Ginevra, the

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<sup>7</sup> My description of this version of character echoes Nicholas Dames's reading of phrenology in *Villette*, which seeks to trouble assumptions that "depth" holds "truth" while surfaces are misleading – an assumption that often governs the very practice of close reading itself. However, where Dames suggests that the novel resists readers' attempts to look for interiority, I am suggesting that the novel posits what we might think of as surface-level signifiers of interiority – a surface-level gesture towards a complex, mimetic rendering of an individual. Dames, "Amnesiac Bodies: Phrenology, Physiognomy, and Memory in Charlotte Brontë," *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 76-124.

<sup>8</sup> Though it regularly invokes phrenology, *Villette* seems skeptical about the technique's promise to fully unify "soul" and body," making all aspects of character entirely legible to knowledgeable observers. Indeed, the novel seems more interested in the potential discordances between physical and other external aspects of character, such as dress or social projections. The world that Franz Joseph Gall, an early proponent of phrenology, imagines, in which interiority is always

king's externalized persona is physically affective: "if I did not know, at least I *felt*" (italics mine). If Lucy is initially disappointed by the unassuming figure that the king cuts (and indeed, if she sets her readers up to be disappointed by his typical "middle-aged soldier" appearance as well) this disappointment is quickly undercut by the combination of inscrutability and legibility that his face presents.

The monarch's protagonism is at once similar and distinct from the kind of deliberate and all-consuming externalization we saw in Vashti and Ginevra's characters. The "nervous" and "melancholy" character that Lucy reads complicates the man's necessary, if unintentional, self-presentation as a "King," refracting the kinds of "visibility" – both descriptive and formal – that initially draw the reader's and the narrator's attention towards him. One kind of involuntary public characteristic both hides and reveals the other external aspect of his persona – at least to Lucy: "Full mournful and significant was that spectacle! Not the less so because, both for the aristocracy and the honest bourgeoisie of Labassecour, its peculiarity seemed to be wholly invisible: I could not discover that one soul present was either struck or touched" (239). The information that becomes entirely evident to Lucy is shared only with her readers; the text of the King's face remains indecipherable to the other members of his audience.

Of course, while Lucy's unique ability to "read" the king can be read as defensive self-importance, her perceptive gaze also formally illustrates the novel's privileging of

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observable, in fact seems like Lucy's worst nightmare: "Sooner or later there will be established an unbroken harmony between the internal man and his external products, between things and their expressions ... In a word, the philosophical physician and the phrenologist, instead of sounding his course amid the straits of speculation, will march confidently along the route of observation..." Franz Joseph Gall, *On the Functions of the Brain* (1822-5), trans. Winslow Lewis, 6 vols. (Boston: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon, 1835), ii. 42-4. *Quoted in Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830-1890*, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 26-7.

external focalization as a means of understanding character. Though *Villette* is skeptical about our ability to understand another's interiority, Lucy's demonstration of external focalization is nonetheless capable of achieving an accurate – if intrinsically partial – sense of another's identity. In the case of the Labassecour monarch, two external views of character must be held together – that which public opinion projects and shapes, and that which exists independent of such preexisting perceptions. External focalization is, in *Villette*, indicative of a version of characterization in which realist accuracy is enabled by both perspectival distance and the selective external signifiers of individual identity. Indeed, the novel as a whole works as a kind of primer for this mode of character perception – it provides a lesson in unlearning habituated modes of identification – like those that are emblematic of the Labassecour spectators. Thus, the novel's protagonism emerges out of *Villette*'s externalized, physically affective presentation of character and the novel's gradual conditioning of its readers' perception of these qualities. Yet if Lucy is uniquely able to present such protagonism, even while disguising aspects of her own character, what kind of a protagonist is she?

## II. "ENTERING INTO ITS EMPTINESSS"

Lucy's narration deliberately makes strange the ways readers are typically drawn to protagonists. For a narrator who downplays her own status as a principal character (*Villette* is, after all, an autobiography, albeit an atypical one), Lucy, as we have seen, is preoccupied with heroes and heroines.<sup>9</sup> While one might read these various figures as

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<sup>9</sup> The Brontë juvenilia reflects a similar fascination, particularly with the figure of the Byronic hero and the idea of the heroic archetype. See, for example Margaret Howard Blom, *Charlotte Brontë*, Twayne's English Authors Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), and Robert Keefe, *Charlotte Brontë's World of Death* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

exemplifications of Lucy's often palpable irony, they formally function to critique readers' familiar attitudes towards protagonistic identification. In this, *Villette* exemplifies a distinction between protagonists and protagonism. Lucy is incontrovertibly a protagonist in that her perspective mediates nearly all of the narrative, and her experiences are the novel's focus. But these facts don't preclude the existence of protagonism – indeed, they work alongside the novel's attempts to center (and decenter) seemingly secondary characters, suggesting those characters' protagonistic potential even while illustrating Lucy's discomfort with the protagonist role. *Villette* considers the readers' role in constructing protagonists, and in doing so, contrasts its protagonist's shorthand for interiority with the protagonist's traditional embodiment of particularity, centrality, and general readerly appeal. Whether considering the foppish lead of an amateur theatrical or the disposition of a long-time companion, Lucy's narration is attuned to intersections between the way characters are represented and what their audiences expect of them. In *Villette*, what is externalized and made legible signifies identity not by revelation or description so much as by maintenance of different contradictory perspectives. The audience or reader, then, is as implicated in this form of characterization as the narrator herself.

*Villette's* paradigmatic example of this audience-engaged characterization is a scene in which Lucy, forced into acting in a school play, subverts her antiheroic male role as a “butterfly, a talker, and a traitor” courting a “fair coquette.” Saddled with the unlikable part by the play's director, M. Paul, Lucy finds herself incapable of *not* investing it with leading-man potential, though she plays opposite a character called the “Ours,” or “Bear:” “a good and gallant ... diamond in the rough.” This “Bear” is

calculated to win not only the lady's hand but also the sympathy of the audience (148). Both the "Ours" and the traitor roles are as "flat" as they get – they certainly meet Forster's criterion of being capable of summary in a single sentence.<sup>10</sup> However, Lucy perceives them neither in terms of their flatness nor their likability, but rather through the way in which their stock presentations are echoed in equally stock reactions from their audiences; the very name of the play's hero, the "Ours," feels, in the English Lucy's hands, more like a dictatorial command to the audience's sympathy than it does the French word for "bear."

Indeed, Lucy's knowledge that her role is designed as a foil to a more appealing hero spurs her to enrich the part by embracing the character's faults: "Entering into its emptiness, frivolity, and falsehood, with a spirit inspired by scorn and impatience, I took my revenge on this 'fat,' by making him as fatuitous as I possibly could" (149). The idea of "entering into" a "fat" character's "emptiness" seems, at first glance, paradoxical; how can one "enter in" to a lack or one-dimensionality? "Fat" here seems to ironize the very notion of a "round" character while at the same time underscoring the paradoxically insubstantial substance of this figure or foil. Indeed, Lucy does not enter into this emptiness to fill it or to round it out with emotional depth or sympathetic emotional insight. Rather, she embraces the character by intensifying its relatively superficial traits; she pushes its emptiness, frivolity, and falsehood to the point that the character exceeds its own flatness and conformity to the function of a stock antiheroic foil.

In Lucy's testing of the limits of her character's representation, *Villette* suggests that the representation of flatness or minoriness and the audience's perception of it are mutually constructive – they work together to forestall the potential for other perceptions,

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<sup>10</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 67-8.

other character possibilities. Though it lacks personal affinity, Lucy's relationship to her character is nonetheless a kind of identification; the very choice of the phrase "enter in" suggests the sympathetic reorientation of perspective indicative of *Frankenstein's* protagonistism. But here, this perspectival inhabitation doesn't result in a deep internal focalization of another character – indeed, there is no interior to focalize. Still, the description of the process by which Lucy comes to understand this "fat" at once echoes and alters the suggestion of psychological insight gained through internal focalization. What is focalized isn't a heretofore-unseen personal profundity, but the stock appearance of the character itself – a kind of internal focalization of externalized, superficial traits; what is focalized, in other words, is a manner of characterization. Focalization thus appears to be more about the focalizer than the focalized object. Such a limited character as the "fat" becomes, for Lucy, a challenge: given its superficiality how can she find some means of relating to it? The answer is not to imagine depth, but to embrace appearance – to find a multifacetedness of character based solely on the surface-level information at hand.

If, as Genette suggests, the central question that focalization answers is "who sees?" *Villette's* description of Lucy's acting modifies the onus of focalization to *how* one sees – on what basis can one focalize another individual, if all that is available are inevitably superficial perceptions?<sup>11</sup> The response that Lucy's adaptation of the "fat" proposes is to find dimensionality and variation both in appearance and in interpretations of appearance. Correspondingly, her acting of the part embraces outward show even as it resists character uniformity; the very costume she chooses for herself maintains a multifaceted legibility: "Retaining my woman's garb without the slightest retrenchment, I

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<sup>11</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 186.



merely assumed in addition a little vest, a collar, and cravat, and a paletôt of small dimensions, the whole being the costume of a brother of one of the pupils” (154). Not only does Lucy’s dress encode her as both masculine and feminine, it also overlaps first person, second person, and fictional identities, as her own dress is combined with the everyday clothes of a young man and the costume of a dramatic role. Each aspect of her attire remains independently legible while at the same time modifying the other elements. Similarly, Lucy’s performance echoes this *bricolage* of identity. She blends her adverse reaction to her role with the letter of her lines and with her awareness that the girl in the female lead, the spoiled and beautiful Ginevra, is “acting towards” her real-life suitor, Graham Bretton, Lucy’s own initial object of romantic interest. Lucy describes these additions to her traitorous part as “gilding,” a term which conveys a sense of layering and enhancement as well as concealment. But, like Lucy’s cobbled-together costume, it’s less that the original aspect of the part is disguised than that it continues to exist and inform Lucy’s multiple additions: her reaction to the heroine and the girl’s real-life love interest; her inclination to add what she refers to as “heart” and “interest” to an artificial role; and her careful adherence to the original script. Such emphases make available the possibility for a whole host of interpretations and responses to the character while maintaining its initial fatuousness.

Lucy’s adaptation of the “talker-traitor” role need not be read, as it often is, as an incitement to “look beyond” appearance. Rather, it can be taken as a reminder to attend to formal and descriptive facets of surface-level identity, and in doing so, entertain a form of readerly identification that can exist independent of access to psychological amplitude. Indeed, we might think of the inclusion of dramatic performance in *Villette* as an

indication of the novel's interest in an unstable notion of character. In drama, an actor's "take" on a character is a sort of addition, an x-factor that changes with each performance and that is open to a role's potential possibilities. The novel's rendering of this addition, this x-factor, indicates the text's own ability to signal not merely a finite content of characterization, but rather a prismatic variability that can be metonymically implied, though not made extant, within the conventions of realist narrative.

It is one thing, though, to get Lucy's first-person perspective on this multi-dimensionality, to "see" her narratively central character enact this form of internalized external focalization. It is another thing altogether to share Lucy's perspective as a reader of these faceted surfaces, as we see when Lucy explicitly asks her audience to maintain multiple interpretations of character, most pointedly in the case of Graham Bretton:

The reader is requested to note a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of [him] – the public and private – the out-door and the in-door view. In the first, the public, he is shown oblivious of self; as modest in the display of his energies, as earnest in their exercise. In the second, the fireside picture, there is expressed consciousness of what he has and what he is; pleasure in homage, some recklessness in exciting, some vanity in receiving the same.

Both portraits are correct. (221)

Upon first glance, "public" and "private," "out-door" and "in-door" seem to reference a typical outside-inside binary of character – Graham shows one flattering version of himself to others, while, in reality, harboring vain and self-satisfied thoughts within himself – thoughts to which the observant Lucy has become privy. In fact, however, both "portraits" of Graham are equally apparent, equally on the surface; their contexts and

audiences simply differ. Each version of the man may be perceived externally, but not necessarily coterminously. Though Lucy first suggests that these two sides of Graham may appear to the reader to be contradictory or self-negating (the private, selfish Graham cancels out the public, altruistic Graham), the passage's closing statement shows us the error of such an assumption. Neither the public nor the private Graham is more or less true than the other; both must be held together in the reader's mind to achieve an accurate sense of his character. Lucy's description of these two aspects of Graham feels notably distanced. Graham's perspective is not focalized, nor does Lucy succumb to the impulse to focalize her own character's then-besotted view of her hero; indeed, she makes a point to guard against such a portrayal: "But stop – I must not, from the faithful narrator, degenerate into the partial eulogist. Well, full well, do I know that Dr John was not perfect, any more than I am perfect" (220). In keeping both Graham and her younger self at arm's length, Lucy encourages a kind of double-vision of each character that close readerly intimacy with a single perspective, a single internally focalized view, might forestall.

Indeed, this duality of character is further emphasized by Lucy's intentional secrecy about the fact that Graham, whom she knows from childhood, and the physician Dr John, whom she meets in Vilette and who attends to the girls at Mme. Beck's pensionnate, are one and the same character. While Lucy will eventually reveal their shared identity as Dr John Graham Bretton, and while this strange hesitation regarding his identity is often explained as one of Lucy's own attempts to gain power through surveillance – "I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination" (196) – it is, in

fact, foreshadowed through Lucy's initial presentation of his Janus-faced personality. Here, then, the temporal distance between the young Graham and the older Dr John becomes yet another way for character to maintain an external complexity of identity without a need for psychologized "depth."

While novels typically encourage readers to elide differences in characters over time – indeed, as Ian Watt suggests, the novel's capacity to represent characters as maintaining identity across time is one of their early innovations and a hallmark of realist characters – Lucy's concealment pushes such continuity to its limit. Rather than displaying power over Graham through surveillance (and power over the reader's acquisition of knowledge as well) the Graham/Dr John divide temporally disrupts his character. Such a disruption echoes the one to which Lucy subjects her own character early in the novel, when she elides the time between her childhood visits to her godmother (the mother of Graham), and the reappearance of her young adult self who, after a gap of nearly a decade, finds herself adrift after an unnamed family disaster. The narrating Lucy marks this elision with irony: "I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass ... Picture me, then idle, basking, plump, and happy" (39). While the narrator's tone feels disdainful of reader's desire for knowledge, this concealment, like that of Dr John's identity, ruptures the character continuity that (as Lucy seems to assume) novel readers take for granted. Lucy doesn't merely jump over those eight years, thus allowing us to understand her childhood and adult selves as linked through linear progression; she asks us to conceive of another version of her entirely, a move that breaks girl from woman and asks us to abandon neither. What appears, in both Graham's and Lucy's

characters, to be narrative concealment or suppression can also be read as quite the opposite: as a challenge to the reader not to let one version of character usurp another through narrative progression, and to allow this multifacetedness of character to function as a way of distinguishing the novel's protagonistism.

Yet, these double or multiple versions of character are not maintained with perfect consistency throughout the novel. Paradoxically, the narrating Lucy provides one of the only extended passages of internalized focalization in the entire novel at a point of emotional isolation, during Graham's absorption in his engagement to Paulina De Bassompierre. The focalization occurs when Lucy describes the conversations of the affianced couple:

... and when in her response, sounded a welcome harmony of sympathies, something pleasant to his soul, he talked on, more and better perhaps than he had ever talked before on such subjects. She listened with delight, and answered with animation. In each successive answer, Graham heard a music waxing finer and finer to his sense; in each he found a suggestive, persuasive, magic accent that opened a scarce known treasure-house within, showed him unsuspected power in his own mind, and what was better, latent goodness in his heart. Each liked the way in which the other talked; the voice, the diction, the expression pleased; each keenly relished the flavour of the other's wit; they met each other's meaning with strange quickness, their thoughts often matched like carefully chosen pearls. (468-9)

While Paulina remains primarily externally, if considerably focalized (the novel's habitual approach to its sympathetic characters) the passage's pointed portrayal of Graham's reactions from his own viewpoint is unmatched in *Villette*. While Lucy has before claimed to know Graham's mind, such passages are inevitably qualified in some way, as when the two discuss his ultimately misguided affection for Ginevra: "He examined my face, anxious, *doubtless*, to see ... any kindly expression there"; "Dr John had a fine set of nerves, and he at once felt by instinct, what no more coarsely constituted

mind would have detected; namely, that I was a little amused at him. *The colour rose to his cheek*" (137-8, italics mine). With her insertion of the speculative "doubtless" and her emphasis on the change in the man's complexion, the narrating Lucy always hesitates to portray her knowledge of Graham's character as anything more than might be conjectured from dispassionate observation. Why then this shift, albeit a brief one, to an internally focalized mode of characterization? The answer lies in its very tonal and formal difference from Lucy's usual narrative voice. Her internal focalization of Graham occurs within a passage that describes not his own character, but rather the mirrored mode of perception with which the couple sees each other – a kind of perfect interpersonal understanding of which the novel, on the whole, is pointedly skeptical.

By assuming an internally focalized narrative voice, Lucy underscores the extent to which she distances and disdains this mode of interpersonal exchange and understanding. Internal focalization's all-consuming perspective makes everything apart from its focalizer secondary, much like the all-consuming nature of the couple's affection for one another; as Lucy rather cynically remarks, "There is, in lovers, a certain infatuation of egotism" (471). Here, such focalization risks an uncritical privileging of interiority over external markers of facetedness, and changeability. A perfect overlap of perspectives not only results in a one-dimensional apprehension of character but also threatens to erase the reader's capacity to see protagonistic potential in more than one character, more than one point of interest. This is not to say that Lucy does not understand the appeal of such identification. On the contrary, the fact that the narrator assumes Graham's blissful, ideally sympathetic perspective in the process of her formal critique is itself evidence that she comprehends and even identifies with its allure. After

all, *Villette*'s implicit argument for a mode of protagonism that distinguishes itself from the readerly likability and intimacy associated with novelistic protagonists is nowhere more at stake than in the prickly, fickle textual manifestation of its narrator.

### III: "A VIEW OF CHARACTER I COULD RESPECT"

That such a deliberately disinterested version of protagonism should emerge in a novel with a first-person narrator is not coincidental. While first-person narrative might intuitively seem like an ideal vehicle for the focalization of a major character – how better to know a person than to have her tell us her thoughts and feelings directly? – in fact, first-person narration complicates issues of focalization far more frequently than it simplifies them. For all the unmediated directness that first-person narration implies, there are as many instances in which it misleads the reader about a character's relative textual importance (as in the case of *Frankenstein*'s Walton), raises issues of bias and unreliability (as with Lockwood and Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*), or obscures as much as it reveals about a character (consider *Bleak House*'s Esther Summerson, the narrators of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, or *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert). As Wayne Booth famously notes, the obfuscation present in first-person narration usually works in conjunction with implicit authorial meaning to reveal more about a narrating character than her own words explicitly say. However, this ironic mode of characterization emphasizes the very distance between reader and character which focalization ostensibly seeks to circumvent.<sup>12</sup> Focalization does more than tell us *about* a character – a

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne Booth gives the example of *Huckleberry Finn*, in which "the narrator claims to be naturally wicked while the author silently praises his virtues behind his back" (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 159). In this case, however, the fact that the narrator is a child predisposes the reader to

descriptive form of characterization that implies objective knowledge – it also aligns the perspectives of reader and character, providing a kind of understanding that is less about content than about the nature of subjectivity. What is typically focalized in the kind of first-person narration characteristic of *Villette* and other autobiographically-styled novels is not the narrator, but the narrator's character. The opening of *Jane Eyre* provides an archetypal example of this distinction, as the narrator inhabits the viewpoint of her childhood self, willfully isolated and enshrined in a window seat. We see and feel with the young Jane directly from the narrative's start. But here, as in *Villette*, the identity of the narrator, is, while clearly in one sense the same as the younger character, never fully on view to the reader. Indeed, autodiegetic narration both enables and deflects the focalization of a narrating character, privileging insight into one while typically obscuring or deferring insight into the other, even as it often provides an unambiguous signal to the reader of just whose story this will be, and with whom he should identify.

With *Villette*'s focalization and implications for first-person narration in mind, we can now consider the puzzling example of Miss Marchmont, a figure whom critics like George Henry Lewes singled out for her combination of memorability and irrelevance within the story as a whole, and whose significance remains largely unexplained.<sup>13</sup> Miss Marchmont's character merits a single short chapter of *Villette*, but the majority of it is narrated in her voice – the longest section of text divorced from Lucy's point of view.

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make certain assumptions about his world view – a kind of naïveté that signals to the reader to look for implicit meaning and hidden truths.

<sup>13</sup> Critical readings of *Villette* tend to ignore Miss Marchmont, and those that do mention her chapter tend to emphasize the similarities between her story and the final tragedy of Lucy's relationship with M. Paul. Many echo Judith Williams's use of the Miss Marchmont chapter in viewing that character's speech as an expression of Lucy's hesitation to name M. Paul's death: "Lucy's whole narrative embodies a similar kind of ordeal, an attempt to name and to utter: like Miss Marchmont, Lucy is trying to look at her loss." Williams, *Perception and Expression in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 80-1.



Once more, her influence on Lucy appears subtly strong and enduring: Lucy reports, almost as an aside, that she kept a “small plaited lock” of the woman’s hair, and at the novel’s end, receives one hundred pounds from a cousin of Miss Marchmont, who wanted, but was unable, to write Lucy into her will. Though such details are weighted with significance, Lucy mentions them off-handedly. But the very fact that she mentions them at all suggests that Miss Marchmont should be considered anything but irrelevant to the novel. The story the elderly invalid tells of her fiancé’s tragic death thirty years earlier, in her arms and on the cusp of their marriage, is at once specific, detailed, and prolonged enough to engage the reader on its own merits, and yet it also vaguely foreshadows *Villette*’s closure with the implied death of Lucy’s own fiancé away at sea. While Lucy and Miss Marchmont certainly share biographical similarities, the elderly character’s significance lies in the way she comes to embody multiple contradictory character conventions; not only does she briefly usurp the role of the first-person narrating Lucy, she also complicates assumptions of difference between major and minor characters in *Villette*.

If Miss Marchmont’s plot prefigures *Villette*’s conclusion, the novel’s formal treatment of her character anticipates Lucy’s self-presentation of her own narrating self. Though Miss Marchmont’s narration is brief, her attitude towards her past and her manner of narrating her autobiography encapsulate the features that distinguish Lucy Snowe’s own protagonism. Indeed, the invalid’s first-person story epitomizes *Villette*’s take on focalization, character, and interiority, as it exemplifies how autodiegetic narration doesn’t equate to the revelation of an internally focalized perspective of a narrator; on the contrary, it invites the focalization of other characters while it distances

the character of the narrator herself.<sup>14</sup> More than third-person narration, first-person narration echoes *Villette*'s external, multifaceted take on characterization, as it distinguishes between two related yet narratively and temporally distinct versions of a character – the character within the story, and the character who narrates. Both Miss Marchmont and Lucy Snow are defined by such duality.

Lucy first introduces Miss Marchmont as a kind of literal character study; indeed, the term “character” appears repeatedly in reference to the elderly woman. Lucy notes that Miss Marchmont had long been known to have the “character of being very eccentric” (40), although, “Closer acquaintance, while it developed both faults and eccentricities, opened, at the same time, a view of character I could respect” (41). Once more, Lucy takes pleasure in having “the originality of her character to study.” In her initial guise of a cranky, solitary, ill eccentric, Miss Marchmont seems like a minor figure out of Dickens – highly specific and glowingly vivid, yet typified by a few endlessly emphasized traits. And Lucy’s narration feels even more distanced than usual, focused less on describing Miss Marchmont than on recounting her own reaction to her. But the tenor of the Miss Marchmont passage quickly shifts from eccentric specificity to perplexing, tragic complexity. And the temporality of Lucy’s narration switches as well, from an iterative report of her time with the invalid to a focus on a single strange, stormy night. The introduction of Miss Marchmont’s story stalls the forward momentum of

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<sup>14</sup> Gerard Genette suggests this distance in the context of his discussion of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. Indeed the very similarities between the character Marcel, the novel’s narrator, and Proust demonstrate that the first person narration only complicates our ability to achieve an accurate view of the narrator: “Use of ‘first person,’ or better yet, oneness of person of the narrator and hero [or observer], does not at all imply that the narrative is focalized through the hero. Very much to the contrary, the ‘autobiographical’ type of narrator ... is – by the very fact of his oneness with the hero – more ‘naturally’ authorized to speak in his own name than is the narrator of a ‘third-person’ narrative” (*Narrative Discourse*, 198).

Lucy's tale, replacing narrative impetus with a preserved past moment from the elderly invalid's personal history: "I love memory tonight ... she is bringing back to my heart, in warm and beautiful life, realities – not mere empty ideas – but what once were realities, and that I long have thought decayed'" (43-4). The transition to Miss Marchmont's first-person voice, always delimited by quotation marks, marks a particular kind of analepsis, since the elderly woman's memory restores not merely images or ideas, but the *feeling* of a past moment. This form of past experience becomes translated, in narrative terms, to a present-tense catalogue of sensations:

"Once more I see that moment – I see the snow-twilight stealing through the window over which the curtain was not dropped ... I see and feel the soft firelight warming me, playing on my silk dress, and fitfully showing me my own young figure in the glass ... I wait, with some impatience in my pulse, but no doubt in my breast.'" (45)

While the speaker's "once more" brackets her story with a reminder of her current present in which she is ill and attended by Lucy, her description of the way she "see[s] that moment" transitions from a suggestion of a temporally distanced sight ("seeing" that younger, different version of herself) to "seeing" through the eyes of that younger self. In other words, as she remembers, she aligns herself with and inhabits that heretofore vanished perspective: "I see and feel the soft firelight." Miss Marchmont does "see" herself, but only as a reflection in a mirror, a detail that serves to at once emphasize the uniformity between the speaker's point of view and that of her younger character and to underscore the actual temporal gap between the old and youthful women. This is a form of internal focalization, but one that is unusual both for its focalized object – a version of

the focalizer herself – and for the way its description preserves vestiges of the distance that is characteristic of external focalization; the view from without is nested in the view within. Even the tense of her story maintains this dual focalization: ““Was it a horse? or what heavy, dragging thing was it, crossing, strangely dark, the lawn. How could I name that thing in the moonlight before me? or how could I utter the feeling which rose in my soul?”” (45). In this strange amalgam of present and past, the narrating Miss Marchmont articulates in the past tense the speculative thoughts of her younger self, a focalizing stance that upholds our awareness of the gap in time while still aligning our perspective with the woman of thirty years ago.

As *Villette*'s narrative is put on hold for Miss Marchmont's story, her voice insistently recenters the novel's narration through what we might think of as her externally focalized self-portrait. Layered onto the eccentric minor character that Lucy presents is Miss Marchmont's dual characterization. The elderly version of herself recalls and revivifies an attractive, wealthy, beloved young Miss Marchmont – a worthy heroine in her own right. Miss Marchmont's story serves on both a descriptive and a formal level to unsettle any too-ready identification with Lucy Snowe as a central character, even as the invalid makes an implicit plea for her audience's focused, engaged attention towards her: ““I have had my feelings, strong and concentrated; and these feelings had their object, which, in its single self, was dear to me, as to the majority of men and woman, are all the unnumbered points on which they dissipate their regard”” (44). Within all of *Villette*, Miss Marchmont may indeed be one of the reader's “unnumbered points” – one of many characters who pass before our eyes and on whom we might temporarily bestow our interest and attention, but, with her “strong and concentrated feelings,” she is still a

“center point,” the foremost object of her lover’s perception and the central first-person narrator, if only temporarily – the nucleus around which this tragic story forms itself.

Miss Marchmont’s significance for *Villette*’s protagonism isn’t found simply in the novel’s inclusion of her interpolated story – it’s also a function of the coterminous versions of her character.<sup>15</sup> The temporalities of these character versions overlap, as the stalled narrative and switch in narrating voice mimics the very resurgence of a preserved and revived past. Within the narrative, Miss Marchmont becomes a young woman again, even as her older self persists within Lucy’s framing voice. Here, then, the protagonistic dimensionality modeled by Lucy’s performance of the traitorous suitor and embodied in the dual heroines of Ginevra and Vashti is enacted within the process of narration itself: Miss Marchmont is at once the oddball secondary figure present in Lucy’s narration – a figure whose sickened body and insistently “eccentric” demeanor establishes one set of audience expectations about her – and also a genuinely sympathetic heroine, whose own voice, story, and perception play on yet another kind of characterization convention. If the novel’s various heroines have presented a dimensionality of content, Miss Marchmont embodies a dimensionality of narrative perspective. Invoking conditioned tropes of majorness and minorness with a “character sketch” and a dramatic passage of interpolated biography, Miss Marchmont resists readings that see her as significant only in relationship to the novel’s conclusion. Indeed, by presenting multiple co-existent versions of her character, *Villette* unsettles attempts to

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<sup>15</sup> In *Villette*, as in *Frankenstein*, the incorporation of interpolated stories suggests a deliberate embrace of an anachronistic form, invoking the many first-person stories distributed throughout the novels of authors such as Fielding and Cervantes. Such interpolation can be seen as an earlier form of protagonism, in which the deliberate inclusion of a distinct narrative within an encompassing text suggests a way of incorporating an alternative or complementary protagonist within a novel largely dominated by one or several central figures.

neatly sum her up, as each aspect doesn't so much contradict another as remind us of its own incompleteness. The anomalousness of Miss Marchmont's story actually contributes to her function within the novel – it's not a mere side effect of an "eccentric character." Rather, her characterization's vivid specificity and pointed challenge to Lucy's portrayal of her as a mere eccentric object of interest temporarily implies a reorientation of *Villette's* characterization altogether: with Miss Marchmont's tragic romance in the foreground, Lucy's own story becomes a mere echo, as her directing, centralized perspective momentarily shifts to the periphery.

And yet, it is still *Lucy's* perspective to which we return; it is still *her* narrative that interrupts itself for Miss Marchmont's tale. Even if *Villette's* characterizations generate a complex set of characterization markers beyond psychological roundness or majority of textual space, there is no way around the fact that it is Lucy Snowe who is the novel's autodiegetic narrator, and it is her life's story that is the novel's primary focus. And so, we must ask: what kind of a protagonist is she? How does she teach the reader to read *her*? We know that Lucy is given to self-effacement; she doesn't even name herself until *Villette's* second chapter. But while Lucy is rarely straightforward when she gives the reader information about herself, her obfuscations typically reveal as much as they conceal; for example, Lucy never directly reveals her love for Graham, but only the most dense of readers would miss the telltale signs. Similarly, when the disaster occurs that leaves Lucy alone and bereft, her narrative only hints at what has happened, but all that is really concealed are the incidental plot prerequisites of any good bildungsroman: illness; family death; financial ruin; an orphaned state. Rarely are any of the specifics of these sad stock events as important as their narrative impetus.

What is truly unavailable to the reader is the Lucy in the gulf between the narrator and her younger self – between Lucy-the-character and the speaking Lucy, who references herself only once, and only parenthetically: “(for I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow)” (51). Here the narrating Lucy paradoxically signifies herself by formally manifesting her own multifacetedness: abstracting her name away from her younger character and reconstituting it as a telescoping series of metaphors – for time, for her cap, for her hair – all things that synecdochally point towards her aged self. If *Villette* has tendered a critique of characters that are only represented and perceived on a single formal and descriptive plane, its narrator’s temporal unavailability is itself an extension of that critique. Instead of offering us either an exhaustive omniscient perspective like that of Eliot or James or the unselfconscious self-revelation of a first-person narrator like Jane Eyre or David Copperfield, Brontë’s Lucy suggests that it’s precisely what we don’t “see” on the page that best represents a “rounded” interiority. Lucy’s own manifestation of the novel’s protagonism emerges through the many contradictory facets of her narrative – a prismatic quality that is enabled, in large part, by the novel’s approach to a first-person narration.

#### IV. SUBJECTIVE OMNISCIENCE

As I’ve suggested, Lucy Snowe’s first person narration and self-characterization not only result in a form of characterization defined by acceptance of their multifarious and contradictory views; they also understand this obstruction as *necessary to* the novel’s enactment of protagonism. *Villette* takes for granted that the reader’s knowledge of

character will be incomplete, and it proposes that this sense of the prismatic – of more than what lies on the surface – is itself the best literary marker of complex realist individuality. This is not to say that *only* Brontë’s narrators are conscious of such incompleteness or even that this protagonism criterion functions solely in *Villette*.<sup>16</sup> Yet what is remarkable is that Brontë treats this multifacetedness as an intrinsic component of characterization, rather than an impediment to it. Moreover, such an approach to character is not merely a symptom of *Villette*’s first-person narration – an expression of autodiegetic subjectivity or of its heroine’s self-absorption. Rather, it is, in fact, one of the ways that *Villette* marks the similarities between first- and third-person narration, bringing into view the very strictures narration places on character, and the role that such strictures usefully play in the literary representation of interiority.

Characterization’s dependence on unknowability *and* explication is not generally assumed, nor is it consistent throughout the nineteenth century. Over twenty years after *Villette*’s publication, the narrator of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* would comment on the limits of our understanding of character through a critique of characterization’s explanatory methods:

Attempts at description are stupid: who can all at once describe a human being? even when he is presented to us we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances. We recognize the alphabet; we are not sure of the language. I am

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<sup>16</sup>The nineteenth-century mystery novel generally exploits incompleteness, employing narrators such as Conan Doyle’s Watson, the multiple narrators and narrative forms of *The Moonstone* and, as my next chapter will consider, *The Woman in White*. But whereas this incompleteness is calculated to forestall a disclosure that will inevitably occur, *Villette*’s is present solely for its own sake. In other words, the mystery novel makes incompleteness or inscrutability a problem, whereas *Villette* treats it as an inevitable and insurmountable fact.



only mentioning the points that Gwendolen saw by the light of a prepared contrast in the first minutes of her meeting with Grandcourt. They were summed up in the words, 'He is not ridiculous.'<sup>17</sup>

The characterization that gives rise to his passage is that of the icily cruel Henleigh Grandcourt, the man whom the unfortunate Gwendolen initially admires and will eventually make the mistake of marrying. The narrator's comment on characterization's inadequacy thus takes on pointedly personal and moral connotations; there are serious and direct consequences that arise from the ostensibly intrinsic "stupidity" of attempts at description; knowing a character is as difficult and lengthy a process as learning an entirely new language – not a casual endeavor. At times, certainly, *Villette*'s protagonism seems to defy *Deronda*'s suggestion that character can only be revealed over the "innumerable impressions" afforded by lengthy spans of time. Indeed, if Eliot here declares her skepticism about the possibility of an accurate first representation of character, Brontë appears to accept the type of information gleaned not only by first impressions, but also by the kinds of summary they typically entail. But at the same time, Eliot's skepticism about first impressions and Brontë's embrace of them underscore a notably similar attitude towards the kinds of knowledge one can have about another individual. Both Grandcourt's introduction and *Villette*'s partial focalization assume that realist character resists efforts to pin it down and contain it within a comprehensible summation.

Where the two novels and authors differ, however, is in the ways they respectively confront this challenge to understanding. While Brontë might agree with Eliot that descriptions of "human beings" are rarely complete, the role of the introductory

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<sup>17</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terrance Cave (New York: Penguin, 1996) 111.

summary is closely tied both to the novel's utilization of first-person narration and its take on protagonism. As we've seen, both Miss Marchmont's and Lucy's first-person narration emphasize the distance between narrator and character, an effect that allows the reader a sense of "rounded" or dimensional knowledge about a character without the need for descriptive depth. Yet, as a narrator, Lucy includes "attempts at description" that appear to quite comfortably pigeonhole and dismiss various incidental characters. In these instances, there is no gesture towards additional depth, only curt superficiality. The most pointed of these character introductions come as Lucy explains the reason for her feelings of isolation as a school brimming with "robust life":

I might have had companions, and I chose solitude. Each of the teachers in turn made me overtures of special intimacy; I tried them all. One I found to be an honest woman, but a narrow thinker, a coarse feeler, and an egotist. The second was a Parisienne, externally refined – at heart, corrupt ... she had a wonderful passion for presents; and, in this point, the third teacher – a person otherwise characterless and insignificant – closely resembled her. (139)

In a novel filled with Lucy's "wonderfully painted" portraits, the descriptions of her fellow teachers stand out all the more starkly for their strangely specific generalizations.

<sup>18</sup> One of the teachers, the "Parisienne," (later named as Mademoiselle Zélie St. Pierre) will appear again, becoming a kind of stock nemesis in Lucy's relationship with M. Paul. Yet, if we are to believe Lucy, all these introductory character sketches are intended only to illustrate the reasons for her willful isolation. However, the descriptions themselves,

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<sup>18</sup>This description appears at the beginning of chapter XIV, "The Fête," which concludes with Lucy's embrace of the "butterfly," "traitor," and "talker" role in the school play. The chapter as a whole thus moves from the deliberate reductive presentation of minor characters to Lucy's attempt to see beyond such reduction in her acting of the fop.

while certainly reductive, also go into strikingly specific and prolonged explanatory detail:

This last-named had also one other distinctive property – that of avarice ... the sight of a piece of gold would bring into her eyes a green glisten, singular to witness. She once, as a mark of high favour, took me upstairs, and opening a secret drawer, showed me a hoard – a mass of coarse, large coin ... She would come and talk to me about them with an infatuated and persevering dotage, strange to behold in a person not yet twenty-five. (139)

Here, and after her initially brief and dismissive description of the Parisienne, Lucy expands on her initially curt character summations with highly specific anecdotes that evidence her damning assessments. Lucy seems to have made some overture of conversation towards the Parisienne, but apparently it was emphatically rebuffed:

A curious kind of reptile it seemed, judging from the glimpse I got ... if it would have come out boldly, perhaps I might philosophically have stood my ground, and coolly surveyed the long thing from forked tongue to scaly tail-tip; but it merely rustled in the leaves of a bad novel; and, on encountering a hasty and ill-advised demonstration of wrath, recoiled and vanished, hissing. She hated me from that day. (139-40)

Neither Lucy's anecdote about the avaricious teacher nor her interaction with the Parisienne hazard internal focalization, or indeed attempt any kind of identification at all. Lucy's tone, aloof and disdainful, sounds more like a connoisseur trying proffered delicacies ("each in turn made me overtures ... I tried them all") than a recent émigré pursuing new friendships. Indeed, the two descriptions reveal more about her character

than about the women she ostensibly portrays. Lucy, it seems, has no readily apparent qualities that would dissuade the other teachers from seeking her company – indeed, she notes that the avaricious teacher regards her with “high favor,” while the Parisienne rejects her only after she puzzlingly exhibits a display of wrath and an apparent loss of her habitual self-control. Lucy presents herself to others – if not to her reader – as a kind of cipher, someone so superficially ordinary that she can seem like a potential companion to a host of markedly different types of people (correspondingly, Paulina de Bassompierre and Ginevra Fanshawe would never befriend one another, yet each calls Lucy her comrade). Like the surprising glimpse Lucy gets of herself in a mirror while attending a concert with Graham and Mrs .Bretton, this peek at the version of Lucy as she is perceived from the viewpoint of others is a fleeting, if revelatory, opportunity:

We suddenly encountered another party approaching from the opposite direction ... I noted them all ... and for a fraction of a moment believed them all strangers, thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance. But the impression was hardly felt ... before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror ... dispelled it. Thus, for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the ‘giftie’ of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret. (234)

Both the version of Lucy revealed in her descriptions of the teachers and the one she sees in the mirror disclose an *unheimlich* vision of our centralized narrator as an unassuming, unspectacular, and marginal stranger – a minor character in her own right.

Lucy’s reductive character sketches take on an added resonance as they exemplify not only an aspect of her character, but also a tension between *Villette*’s investment in a

gestural, necessarily partial form of protagonism and its desire to maintain the possibility of an objective sympathetic understanding of its characters – both Lucy and the people she portrays. If *Villette*'s use of focalization creates a form of protagonism that attempts to negotiate between an attitude of sympathy that is neither deludedly self-interested nor so detached as to be callous, then the strangely oversimplified portraits of the other teachers that Lucy draws suggest a deliberate foreclosure of protagonistic potential – and the very possibility of any form of sympathy. The revelation of an aspect of the narrator's character not readily apparent in her first-person voice appears to come at the expense of the focalized, sympathetically potentialized portrayal of her fellow teachers.

Indeed, this passage could be seen as an ideal example of the circumscribed economy of narrative interest described by Woloch's *The One vs. the Many*. The pull of Lucy's centralized subjectivity narrows the text's descriptive detail – and our readerly interest – in characters who are, in terms of the novel's plot, some of the most minor of all. As in Woloch's description of the minor characters in *Great Expectations*, another novel with a noteworthy first-person narrator, these figures are not so much “competing centers of narrative interest” as they are symbols, “subordinated and thematically instrumentalized in relation to the dominant protagonist.”<sup>19</sup> Woloch's point is that regardless – or perhaps because – of their symbolic resonances, these fragmented minor characters often threaten to engulf the novel's hero, despite the fact that he is the story's narrator. But while Woloch rightly observes that *Great Expectations* – like *Villette* – is often read as an over-determined psychological portrait of its first-person narrator, he answers such readings with what amounts to an unconvincing transfer of narrative

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<sup>19</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 208.

agency: Dickens's novel may have a first-person narrator, but, Woloch suggests, the novel feels as though its narration is omniscient, as Pip's voice doesn't so much portray other minor characters as register what it feels like to be overwhelmed *by* them.<sup>20</sup> Pip's first-person narration is thus absolved of complicity in the novel's portrayal of the secondary figures that surround and shape him. Their relationship to one another remains that of a conflict between center and periphery. In Woloch's view, even control over a narrative's telling doesn't change the pugilistic dynamic between a novel's protagonist and its minor characters.

Yet, as *Villette*'s protagonism demonstrates, the relationship between a first-person narrator and minor characters need not *only* be one of a struggle for center and periphery. The character relationship between Lucy and the teachers in the opening of Chapter XIV is the exception rather than the rule in *Villette*. Rather than side-stepping the agency inherent in first-person narration, we can read Lucy's characterizations of her teacher-peers as a reminder that the very kind of centrality implied by first-person narration typically enables, rather than forestalls, the protagonistic potential of other non-narrating characters, as the character of the narrator is often obscured as much as it is exposed. While Woloch alludes to the mutual definition of the roles of narrator and minor

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<sup>20</sup> To make this point, Woloch references the Russian formalist Yuri Tynianov, who argues for the dynamic, synchronic relationship between the "dominant" and "subordinate" aspects of a text. Woloch's use of Tynianov efficaciously describes his reading of Pip's "minor" centrality, and yet in the context of his character system claim as a whole, it feels both over- and under-determined. On one hand, the whole point of Woloch's character system is its lack of fluidity – one character's centrality may be "under attack," as in *Great Expectations*, but his adherence to the categories of "major" and "minor" implies a lack of dynamic movement, at least at the level of our critical perception of character, if not at the level of the narrative. On the other hand, first-person narrative necessarily places descriptive agency on a narrating protagonist. Even if he is the weakest of central characters, he nonetheless controls our perceptions of other characters and himself. Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 197. See also Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, ed. and trans. Michael Sosa & Brent Harvey (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981) 33.

character, his continual depiction of their interaction as typified by struggle pre-determines a sole victor in the battle for centrality. That he side-steps the issue of first-person narration speaks to its potential to challenge the notion of centrality as both contested and finite; autodiegetic narration is at once capacious with respect to other focalized characters and perhaps even more self-effacing than that of extradiegetic narration, as it entreats us to think of the narrator as psychologically accessible, and yet obscures the distance between narrator and character. As we have seen in *Villette*'s Miss Marchmont chapter, first-person narration focalizes the character of the narrator even as it obscures our view of the person who narrates. Thus, while the perspective of a first-person narrator may be the predominant one in a novel, we shouldn't necessarily expect that all other non-narrating characters will be forced to the narrative's periphery. On the contrary, first-person narration is no more inclined to privilege one central character over others than a novel with an omniscient narrator – precisely because objectivity is more at issue in first person narration, the deployment of a first-person narrator has a greater representational onus in a novel striving for realism.

The change in Lucy's narration that occurs in her descriptions of the teachers highlights protagonistism's contingencies – the very perspective that focalizes or curtails other characters' interiority may easily recede, thereby diminishing or transforming both its own or others' protagonistism. The very break in Lucy's typically attentive perspective on character (an attentiveness which, as we've seen, felt noteworthy and unusual to her contemporaries) both undermines and facilitates her protagonistic status, as it allows us to perceive a facet of herself that she typically leaves unillustrated. Lucy may famously describe herself as having a "staid manner" that functions as well as "a cloak and hood of

hodden gray,” for, as she notes, “under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity ... deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in the minds of some stamped me as a dreamer and a zealot” (49). This statement has been taken as paradigmatic of Lucy’s reticent narrative self-presentation, and yet, we rarely “*see*” Lucy in such a disguise.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, she seems rarely to require it, or to assume its character-altering qualities. Only in a scene in which her propensity for careful observation momentarily falters do we find a break in her subjectivity that allows us to briefly perceive her as others might. *This* is the kind of unassuming character that the adult Graham Bretton – Dr. John – could allow to pass without scrutiny or notice, despite his youthful familiarity with Lucy.

But if Lucy’s reductive characterizations momentarily circumvent her subjective narration, how do they fit into the novel’s investment in a protagonism that accounts for individuals’ prismatic identities? Lucy’s superficial descriptions of the teachers feel exceptional; coldly reductive assessments of her peers are *not* her narration’s norm. Lucy may not often paint others in rose-tinted hues, but neither does she habitually confine them to stock affects and flat generalizations. Thus, recalling Eliot’s assessment of “stupid” attempts at description, these one-dimensional portrayals call attention to their own strange inadequacy. Lucy herself, after all, has first-hand experience of being coolly dehumanized in the eyes of others, is acutely aware of the reductive summations of *her* character based on a few externalized details:

Much I marveled at the sagacity evinced by waiters and chambermaids in proportioning the accommodation to the guest. How could inn-servants and ship-stewardesses everywhere tell at a glance that I, for instance, was an individual of

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<sup>21</sup> For examples see Steven Millhauser, “*Villette*,” *Grand Street*, 6 (1987): 178; Joseph A. Boone, “Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of ‘Heretic Narrative,’” *Novel* 26 (1992) 28-9;



no social significance and little burdened by cash? They *did* know it, evidently: I saw quite well that they all, in a moment's calculation, estimated me at about the same fractional value. The fact seemed to me curious and pregnant: I would not disguise from myself what it indicated, yet managed to keep up my spirits pretty well under its pressure. (66)

Surely the waiters' and chambermaids' assessment of Lucy indicates something more than her mere poverty – this is a fact our narrator never tries to disguise. Rather, Lucy's surprise and unease seems to be due to the realization that she can be easily classified solely by her poverty. When *she* mentions her impecuniousness it is merely one trait of many, but others can define her by it – easily and unremorsefully. This pregnant fact, like that illustrated by *Middlemarch's* notorious pier glass, reminds us that perception is a matter of perspective, and something over which no one person can have complete control. Lucy's cloak and hood of hoddens grey can only be so useful. It may obscure her tendency towards dreaming and zealotry, but it can't mask her income or her social station. We see in her descriptions of the teachers, then, that Lucy takes this revelation about character perception gained through her own marginalization and puts it to use. Indeed, the chapter that commences with her description of the teachers will end with her appearance in the play, the act by which she transforms a stock character into a multifaceted potential protagonist in its own right, thereby displaying not only her own awareness of the effects and means of generalization or typification, but also the means through which one may circumvent that damning perspective.

Read in this context, Lucy's curt summations of the other Villette instructors become less defensive assessments we should take at face value than an ironic commentary on the relationship between characterization and narration itself. Not only do Lucy's portrayals of the teachers show us something new about *her*, they also illustrate

an awareness of the subjectivity and the boundaries to any perspective – omniscient or otherwise; limits are always present for her or any other narrative voice or focalizing perspective. In the novel’s early chapters, Lucy has striven for a kind of self-effacement, effectually diminishing her character’s presence and thereby establishing herself as a more trustworthy narrator, if one that is given to selective omission. Reading the novel’s several opening chapters, it’s at times easy to forget that Lucy is a character at all. But at Mme. Beck’s pensionnate she is a part of a community that both singles her out and makes her one of many – her perspective is the only one we have available to us, and yet it is still incomplete. Like *Wuthering Heights*’s strange overlapping first-person narrators, Lucy’s perspective at the opening of Chapter XIV, “The Fête,” coincides with a shift in her narration and character. She transitions from a narrator of others’ stories – an outsider and a passive observer – to a participant, one whose narrative focuses on herself and her own point of view.<sup>22</sup> Her character, in other words, becomes as significant as her narrating voice, a change that both emphasizes and conflates the two aspects of her *Villette* persona.

Brontë’s readers tend to attribute the intensity and appeal of her first and final novels to the presence of an autodiegetic narrator and the 1849 *Shirley*’s failure to its absence. By all accounts, *Shirley* is unwieldy: a “condition of England” romance and Luddite history novel in one, lacking any centralized character, despite an eponymous heroine, and told by an often ironic speaker who is nearly as editorial as one of George

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<sup>22</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Ian Jack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 137. Emily Brontë’s novel makes it difficult to locate the source of the novel’s first-person narration. As Lockwood says in a weird switch from Nelly Dean’s voice to his voice channeling Nelly Dean, “I’ll continue in her own words, only a little condensed. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don’t think I could improve her style.”

Eliot's narrators. The Introduction to the Penguin Classics' assessment offers a characteristic take on the novel's general failure: "The lack of an obvious central protagonist reflects the novel's more general rejection of aesthetic unity."<sup>23</sup> Yet rather than viewing *Shirley* as a foil to *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*; Brontë's final two novels have more in common than just the superficial similarities of her two first-person novels. Indeed, *Villette*'s protagonism is a direct offshoot of *Shirley*'s experiment with third-person narration and a diverse, decentralized character system, signaled with an unconventional opening describing a conversation between three unappealing curates – none of whom will play much of a role in the novel at all. Even more unconventional than opening the novel with three minor characters, however, is the narrator's own interruption of her story, not even a full paragraph in. She pauses in her description of the opening scene to caution the reader:

Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning ... It is not positively affirmed that you shall not have a taste of the exciting, perhaps towards the middle and close of the meal, but it is resolved that the first dish set upon the table shall be one that a Catholic ... might eat on Good Friday in Passion Week: it shall be cold lentils and vinegar without oil; it shall be unleavened bread with bitter herbs, and no roast lamb."<sup>24</sup>

By deliberately tamping down reader's expectations for her novel's opening act with her passage of self-interruption and her analogy to religious asceticism, the narrator both models an ironic distance from her story and suggests to readers that they too should survey the novel's initial scenes with a cool, impartial eye. We are asked to give up the very narrative flavor that would give unreflective pleasure; instead, the narrator entreats

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<sup>23</sup> Lucasta Miller, "Introduction." *Shirley*, By Charlotte Brontë (New York: Penguin, 2006) xvi. See also Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power* (London: The MacMillan Press, Ltd, 1975) 45-60.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 39.

us to take the first pages with deliberation and reserve – a distancing that extends to characterization. Similarly, *Shirley*'s narrator warns us against absorption or too-ready affinity with the people in the novel's first chapters. Not only should we not expect "passion" and "stimulus," we should also not look for ideals. When it comes to character, the narrator tells us, *Shirley* will be a level playing field: "Every character in this book will be found to be more or less imperfect, my pen refusing to draw anything in the model line."<sup>25</sup> Taken alongside the introduction's promise of the prosaic and its implicit message of reflective detachment, this statement becomes more than just a declaration against perfection; it suggests that all characters will be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny, the same objective assessment, whether or not they seem central or secondary.

Forestalling the impression that she has privileged access to information about the novel's characters, *Shirley*'s narrator conjures up gaps between her descriptions, the readers' impressions, and the "real" characters themselves. Though she frequently cautions the reader against too-easy narrative absorption, *Shirley*'s extradiegetic speaker can't seem to help but continually undermine her own all-seeing perspective, her own narrative distance. While in certain passages this narrator makes use of the kind of knowledge available only from an omniscient perspective (as when, for example, she jumps forward in time to describe the tragic adulthoods of one family's children), her habitual stance in the novel is one that seems as coolly distanced as Lucy's own typical attitude towards *Villette*'s other characters. Not only does the narrator regularly and ironically interrupt her story, she also questions her own descriptive powers: "I did not find it easy to sketch Mr Yorke's person, but it is more difficult to indicate his mind. If you expect to be treated to a Perfection, reader ... you are mistaken. He has spoken with

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<sup>25</sup>Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. Andrew and Judith Hook (New York: Penguin, 1985) 90.

some sense... but you are not thence to conclude that he always spoke and thought justly and kindly.”<sup>26</sup> *Shirley*’s narrator doesn’t even hazard to “indicate the mind” of another of the novel’s characters, Louis Moore, a poor tutor hopelessly enamored of the wealthy titular heroine. In a scene that makes strange the very act of narrative explication, the narrator records Louis soliloquizing about his beloved. When Louis chastises himself for speaking out loud, the narrator then invites the reader to “stoop over his shoulder fearlessly, and read as he scribbles” as he pours his thoughts into a diary: “Come near, by all means, reader: do not be shy.”<sup>27</sup> In passages like these, *Shirley*’s narrator doesn’t seem so much omniscient as simply unseen or set apart. On one hand, her capacity to show us Louis Moore’s private soliloquy and diary writing implies privileged access to characters’ lives, yet on the other, we still need to read Louis’s diary to get a glimpse of this thoughts and emotions.

Interpolated letters and diaries and narrators who question their own descriptive abilities are, as we’ve seen in the novels of Mary Shelley and George Eliot, far from unusual in nineteenth-century fiction. *Shirley* may employ both narrative traits to a somewhat exceptional degree, but the novel is clearly located in an established realist tradition.<sup>28</sup> However, read in the context of *Villette*’s self-effacing first-person narration, these narrative features don’t so much constitute gaps in omniscience as they exemplify the fact that omniscience is less descriptive of this form of narration than distance and separateness – traits strongly present in both Lucy Snowe’s character and her mode of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,76.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,487

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Ian Watt’s reading of Richardson’s *Pamela* for a discussion of the representational realist possibilities enabled by epistolary form. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 265-7.

narration. Indeed, late in the novel, a hallucinatory passage detailing Lucy's encounter with a midnight carnival presents a climax not of plot, but of narrative experience, as it gathers all the otherwise scattered characters from multiple settings in a single milieu, all visible to Lucy even as she remains unseen. The scene's setup makes explicit what had been implied in Lucy's first-person narration, a stance that desires detachment and objectivity, that leaves aspects of identity hidden, and yet seeks participation and privileged knowledge.

Having been drugged by Mme. Beck to calm her upon M. Paul's ostensible departure from Labassecour, Lucy finds that the opiate has the opposite effect, and she steals out of the school hidden in a large hat and shawl, only to find the entire town surprisingly assembled at some kind of costumed festival. It's an undeniably strange passage – indeed, it has understandably been read as a hallucination or a dream contained solely within Lucy's consciousness, an effect heightened by Lucy's switch to a present-tense voice. But its very strangeness marks Lucy's lack of agency over its contents – it springs from nothing and feels notably divorced both from the tone and the content of the rest of the novel – a foreignness that Lucy herself acknowledges: “On this whole scene was impressed a dream-like character; every shape was wavering, every movement floating, every voice echo-like.” Yet if anything, this dream-like quality enables Lucy's narrative prowess rather than inhibiting it, deepening her disguise while at the same time throwing into relief the objects of her observation. Lucy revels in her anonymity: “It gave me strange pleasure to follow these friends viewlessly ... Safe I passed down the avenues – safe I mixed with the crowd where it was deepest.” But she nonetheless greets the recognition and unobtrusive assistance of a Villette shopkeeper with gratitude (502-3),

and her experience of the carnival is both passive and participatory: “To be still was not in my power, nor quietly to observe. I took a revel of the scene; I drank the elastic night-air” (501). As in the earlier scene in which Lucy’s school play performance stands as a discursive reflection of the novel’s protagonism and focalization, the carnival passage exemplifies *Villette*’s attitude towards narration’s own protagonistic fissures – be it autodiegetic or omniscient.

Like *Shirley*’s third-person narrator, Lucy strives for the combination of participatory understanding and shrouded identity – a desire that ultimately has as its object not self-presentation nor protagonist status, but the transcendence of the effects of her own subjectivity – seeing other people without the filter of her own presence on their actions, and on the information she can glean from them. Ultimately, Lucy gains little new information during her nighttime adventure – she discovers that M. Paul has not left the country, and mistakenly assumes that the girl who is his ward is also his intended wife – yet she celebrates her arrival at a kind of “truth”: “I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate to the real truth; I liked seeking the goddess in her temple, and handling the veil, and daring the dreaded glance” (514). “Truth” here is not just information – the scene brings a kind of revelation, but in the context of the novel’s plot it serves only as a red herring that momentarily disguises the “real” real truth: that M. Paul cares for Lucy and that she is his intended bride. Rather than interpreting Lucy’s fervent insistence on her love of truth and her certainty that she has found it here as just the heated misperception of a drug-addled mind, we can understand her experience of the scene as a kind of truth not in content, but in perception: “I might have paused longer upon what I saw; I might have deliberated where I drew inferences . . . but far from me

such shifts and palliatives, far from me such temporary evasion of the actual” (515-6). Lucy distances herself from her own reaction to the scene before her – indeed, what does it mean to *not* draw inferences here? The phrase implies that the truth Lucy finds is not merely in her “mistaken” assumptions about M. Paul but is tied to her entire experience of anonymity and observation during that strange night. The ability to at once claim and transcend the circumscribed nature of her identity and subjective perception has been impossible to her character but striven for by her narrating voice – yet here is achievable at both narrative levels through Lucy’s semi-disguise and panorama-like spectacle of the carnival itself – as the whole universe of the novel is condensed in a way that allows Lucy an almost all-seeing access to its inhabitants, even at it makes her all the more inscrutable.

The intersections between truth, inference, and multifaceted character will again emerge in *Villette*’s puzzling conclusion. After all but telling us that M. Paul has been killed in a shipwreck, Lucy orders us to: “Pause at once. There is enough said ... leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive ... the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life” (546). This finale can feel as abrupt as a door slammed in our face – imagining a happy life is weak consolation for the promise and then withdrawal of any kind of plot closure. And a final sentence detailing the future lives of a few secondary characters only underscores how very little information Lucy gives us about her own fate. Yet, read in terms of the novel’s prismatic protagonism and the narrator’s own systematic attempts to obscure and decenter her own identity, *Villette*’s “finis” is more a final relinquishment of the illusion of centered narrative agency. Like Lucy’s truth-in-perception that ends her night at the



*Villette* fête, the novel's final paragraphs mock readers' tendencies towards "inference" while at the same time suggesting that, in the end, Lucy is as much who we make her out to be as she is a character fixed in the text. Like the character that appears initially to be her very antithesis – the fop of the school play – Lucy ultimately asks us to comprehend her through the protagonistic gesture towards the consciousness that exists beyond representation.



Two years after *Villette*'s publication, the *Spectator* published a column entitled "'Villette': A Supplementary Chapter." One might think it would imagine Lucy's life after her story's abrupt close – an ending that most of her readers found unsatisfactory. But the article's focus on *Villette*, it turns out, is merely secondary. Its primary concern is the apparent vulnerability of young women who must earn their livings, illustrated by an alleged scheme in which naïve ladies are "inveigled to Wiesbaden" on the promise of a governess job in an aristocratic family. Lucy's character serves only to help us imagine the plight that such a would-be governess might face:<sup>29</sup>

The masterly hand of Currer Bell has made us closely and personally intimate with Lucy Snowe. We sympathize in all her struggles of life; we know the fire under her quiet aspect, the inexperience that brought her close to dangers, the frailty that was in her and made her liable to fall. We know how noble a heart and head she really possessed, and which she would have possessed even if she had been lost ... Nay, there is too much reason to believe that many a Lucy Snowe exists who would fully as much excite our sympathies – a Lucy Snowe not

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<sup>29</sup> The idea of new endings written for the novel is not so farfetched, as multiple sequels appeared after the final installment of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* appeared. Perhaps Lucy didn't win the same passionate interest as Daniel or Gwendolen (or, of course, the same anti-Semitic unease at a hero's Judaism) – a hypothesis that her insistent self-effacement might seem to enforce. For a discussion of *Deronda*'s sequels, see Terrance Cave, "Introduction," *Daniel Deronda*, by George Eliot (New York: Penguin, 1995) xxxii.

travelling to the fictitious town of Villette, but existing in veritable flesh and blood, who *has* been inveigled to Wiesbaden.<sup>30</sup>

So rose-tinted is this version of Lucy that one wonders what version of *Villette* the article's writer actually read. Indeed, the article repurposes one small aspect of Lucy's history – her stoicism and uncertainty as she leaves England, and her frightening introduction to a completely unfamiliar country – and retrospectively transforms these early aspects of her character into her sum total, and inscribing her character with a kind of idealized perfection. Though both the narrator and the character of Lucy Snowe diligently attempt to resist the kind of one-dimensional summation typically associated with the heroes and heroines of novels, this “supplementary chapter” manages to fit her into that role, a neat repackaging that allows her character to conveniently serve as both cautionary tale and exemplar.

Of course, implicit in the article's use of her character is the idea that Lucy's novelistic provenance allows us to know her in ways that would be impossible were she a real person. The traits that the writer lists – “fire;” “frailty,” and “nobility” – don't lie on a readily visible surface, and a “quiet aspect” can belie their presence. Here, they are at once specific to Lucy – indeed, they seem to be taken as her defining attributes – and yet general enough that they might be possessed by a whole host of young women. In a strange twist, our idiosyncratic narrator has become a type; “Lucy Snowe” could be any poor and honorable girl. Yet, as *Villette* has shown us, types are misleading. The fact that the novel represents complex interiority as something that defies totalizing representation doesn't preclude the possibility that others might still draw inferences – might transform the protagonistic gesture into a convenient, if reductive, whole. If a stock character might

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<sup>30</sup> “Villette’ - A Supplementary Chapter.” *Spectator*, June 9, 1855, 594.

be reimagined to reveal multifaceted complexity, then complexity might also be condensed into an easily portable fragment.

And yet, despite its strange repurposing of Lucy's character, the *Spectator* article still emphasizes the character's vivid specificity, albeit in a generalized way: "Lucy Snowe ... is a portrait ... She is a girl of strong feelings ... but without any certain promptitude of mind, and apparently, with an aspect of little mark. There is, however, a resolute purpose in her ... [she] has displayed an energy that somewhat falsifies her quiet and homely aspect." Both "portrait" and type, both inscrutable individual and one of many possible "Lucy Snowes," this belated portrayal of her character serves as a reminder of the paradoxes of the novel's treatment of "heroines." In the *Spectator's* retrospective view, Lucy can be taken as both as an ideal protagonist and as an archetype of protagonism. This "Lucy Snowe" recalls protagonists as average as Waverly and as exemplary as Pamela – and yet the whole purpose of this version of her character it to deflect our attention *away* from her and towards countless other individuals, "multitudes of girls ... cast by the vicissitudes of our highly artificial system into [an] unprotected state," all potential "Lucy Snowes" – all "portraits" themselves, enmeshed in their own "strong feeling[s]" and "resolute purpose[s]." In this, the *Spectator's* reappropriation of Lucy serves as a fitting coda to *Villette*: here is a prismatic protagonism, a projection that obscures one character even as its refractions gesture towards countless other potential heroines.<sup>31</sup>

## Chapter Three

### The One and the Many: Protagonism and *The Woman in White*

Before turning to those moral and mental aspects of the matter which present the greatest difficulties, let the inquirer begin by mastering more elementary problems. Let him, on meeting a fellow-mortal, learn at a glance to distinguish the history of the man, and the trade or profession to which he belongs . . . By a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirtcuffs – by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed. That all united should fail to enlighten the competent inquirer in any case is almost inconceivable.

Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*

#### I. EVERY TRIFLING CHARACTER

We don't often think of sensation fiction as asking much of its readers. Sensation novels are the ones we can't put down, that make us keep reading long past the time we should have turned off the light and gone to sleep. From their inception in the 1860s, sensation novels were wildly popular bestsellers, even as reviewers denounced them as, at best, thoughtless trash, and, at worst, addictive narcotics. Critics of sensation fiction have often imagined those novels' audiences as passive, in the thrall of expert plotting and page-turning suspense. As the critic Henry Mansel famously stated in 1863, such novels were "called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply."<sup>1</sup> But for at least some Victorian readers, the genre was regarded as surprisingly

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Mansel. "Sensation Novels." *Quarterly Review*. 113 (April 1863): 481-514.

taxing. In the words of the Victorian poet and critic Alexander Smith, the sensation novel proved demanding precisely because no detail could be taken for granted:

[E]very trifling incident is charged with an oppressive importance: if a tea-cup is broken, it has meaning, it is a link in a chain ... If a young lady goes into the garden for a moment before dinner, you know that some one is waiting for her behind the laurels ... if two people talk together in a room in a hot summer day, and one raises the window a little, you know that a third is crouching on the gravel below, listening to every word.<sup>2</sup>

For Smith, sensation novels required a heightened attentiveness of their readers. In works in which there were no insignificant details, every facet of the text might be imbued with a greater significance. In one sense, then, the sensation novel, even more than realist fiction, calls for concentration on all descriptive detail, all characters, no matter the size of their role or the prominence of their narration. While for Smith, this emphasis on meaningful detail smacks of strain and artificiality, in another way, it's simply a variation on the narrative procedures used by realist fiction to find meaning and value in the material of everyday life. In this view, the sensation novel is an extreme variation on George Eliot's aim for the realism of a novel such as *Daniel Deronda*, in which she meant for "everything" in the novel to be related to "everything else."<sup>3</sup>

In *The Woman in White*, this solicited hyper-attentiveness extends to characterization, resulting in what we might think of as *hyperprotagonism*, a condition in which all individuated characters aren't simply representative of the presence of many

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<sup>2</sup> Unsigned review [Alexander Smith], "Novels and Novelists of the Day," *North British Review* 38, February 1863, 168-90, 184.

<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, *The Letters of George Eliot (1871-1881)* [EL], ed. Gordon S. Haight 9 vols. (1954-1978), VI, 290.

complex inner lives, but are all equally endowed with an outsize importance, all demanding of full attention and scrutiny. Collins's novel is full of such anticipatory signs fraught with soon-to-be-revealed significance, generating a condition of watchful reading in which not only detail but also the novel's many first-person narrations must be scrutinized for the same pregnant clues and concealed "truths" of the larger plot itself. Here, even the "narration" of an inanimate object – a tombstone – is imbued with a sense of anthropomorphized agency:

*The Narrative of the Tombstone*

Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde, wife of Sir Percival Glyde, Bart.,  
of Blackwater Park, Hampshire, and daughter of the late Philip Fairlie, Esq.,  
of Limmeridge House, in this parish. Born March 27th, 1829; married December  
22nd, 1849; died July 25th, 1850.<sup>4</sup>

Though at first glance nothing more than a factual record, the tombstone's words are framed as a "narrative" and included alongside those of the novel's other characters as though they are a form of deliberate testimony. The information this narrative presents is as simultaneously innocuous and suspicious as any broken teacup or open window, testifying to the incontrovertible details of a death that has never occurred. Far from exceptional among *The Woman in White*'s many narratives, the tombstone indicates that in this novel, even the most minor of characters solicits readers' attention through claims to authoritative and self-aggrandizing "truth."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 414. All pages hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Such conditioned attentiveness runs counter to the trend of forgetting that Nicholas Dames observes in the novel. Indeed, the very fact that characters so often seem to have difficulty

In its emphasis on first-person narration, *The Woman in White* is similar to the other first-person works I have addressed in the prior two chapters, but exceptional in that it presents a deliberate and all-pervasive organizing perspective that structures and informs its first-person narratives. Indeed, *The Woman in White* is shot through with markers of implicit omniscience even as it presents one of the most ostensibly inclusive versions of first-person narration in all of Victorian fiction. Unlike the autodiegetic perspectives we saw in *Frankenstein* and *Villette*, Collins's characters express protagonism *not* because of narrative gestures towards a deep or multifaceted individuality, but instead because they so explicitly showcase and define aspects of their own notably idiosyncratic personalities.

As Andrew Miller suggests, first-person narration “brings commitments to the foreground: it issues not in a description of my inner life but in determination.” In other words, first-person narration doesn't necessarily allow a reader unfettered access to an otherwise obscure consciousness, but it does help us to understand a particular perspective – a way of seeing, understanding, and communicating.<sup>6</sup> In the examples we have seen thus far, the reading experience produced by the protagonism of first-person narration is less intimate than imitative; the close one-to-one alignment of perspective it suggests is directed outward, more towards *how* others see than *what* they see. These versions of protagonism echo the sympathetic aim of Eliot's “Natural History of German Life,” implying that by subjecting our habituated ways of seeing and representing others

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recalling specifics of time, place, and even character make their insistent self-presentation feel all the more urgent. See Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 179-185.

<sup>6</sup>Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, 63-4.

to critical scrutiny, we can achieve a humanizing gaze that is both inclusive and appreciative of individual detail.

In Collins's novel, however, this protagonistic promise feels hollow at best. Although *The Woman in White* presents a host of individualized perspectives (including those of servants and workers) this narrative multiplicity has a divisive effect, privileging the recognition of individuality over interpersonal understanding or sympathy.<sup>7</sup> Characters in *The Woman in White* perform and, especially, narrate *themselves* as if self-consciously establishing their own defining traits and claims upon our readerly interest. Despite Collins's own assertion in his 1861 preface that his characters were wholly secondary to his plot, the novel's form is abundantly concerned with characterization, and once more, concerned in ways that are integral to the novel's manipulation of plot, suspense, and sensation. The novel's characterizations foreground first-person narrations that are both delimiting and defensive: characters appear unremarkable – imprecise and unspecific – *except* when they are “impressing” upon their audiences the “strength” of their characters.<sup>8</sup> In *The Woman in White*, the transitory but idiosyncratic voices of the novel's first-person testimonies perform as if steeling themselves against the threat of omniscient summary, exemplified by the periphrastic narration of the novel's would-be hero Walter Hartright that comes to dominate the book's later half. They do so both by repeatedly stating personal traits in direct, declarative styles, and by presenting obvious

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<sup>7</sup> I will take up this distinction in the next chapter's reading of Dickens's *Bleak House* alongside Engels's comments on urbanization.

<sup>8</sup> Victorian reviewers often noted this similarity as used it as a strike against the novel's “believability.” For examples see unsigned review of *The Woman in White*, *London Review and Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Society*, September 1860, 233; and unsigned review of *The Woman in White*, *Examiner*, 1 September 1860, 549.



differences between explicit and implicit versions of their characters. In doing so, these testimonies move the narrative's emphasis away from Walter's insistent focus on a single "truthful" identity and highlight the intractable problem of perceiving identity.

In this regard, the novel's self-conscious invocation of legal testimony and absolute "truth" is more than merely the conceit of sensation fiction or the figure of Foucauldian surveillance suggested in D. A. Miller's well-known argument. Miller contends that the feelings sensation tropes generate allow novels "to 'say' certain things for which our culture – at least at its popular levels – has yet to develop another language."<sup>9</sup> While justifiably influential, versions of this reading feel ever-present in critical takes on the novel that repeatedly emphasize how implicit social subversiveness undermines the taken-for-granted "truth" of its overt bourgeois values.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as the novel's first-person testimonies suggest, "truth," especially when tied to questions of identity, is *always* up for grabs. If the "real" identity of Laura Glyde, née Fairlie, is the ostensible *raison d'être* for the collection of testimonies to exist at all, each testimony is itself a restatement of this central preoccupation, asserting the coherence, purpose, and unconditional individuality of its speaker. In other words, while "truth" is everywhere, present in all of the novel's discursive levels, truth is nowhere.



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<sup>9</sup> D.A. Miller, "Cage aux folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 148.

<sup>10</sup> For three typical examples see Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theater of the Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1998); Rachel Ablow, "Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity in *The Woman in White*," in *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 95-117; and Ann Gaylin, "The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 43.3 (2001), pp. 303-333.

To say that character has never been regarded as Wilkie Collins's strong suit would be something of an understatement. If Dickens's famously flat characters at least garnered – and continue to garner – affection for their winningly vivid eccentricities, Collins's characters are generally spoken of as though they were clothes hangers – convenient if basic tools upon which to hang the artful drapery of his plots. Collins's Victorian reviewers almost universally regarded characterization as his work's greatest weakness, and Collins himself described character as a secondary attribute – subordinate to and shaped by plot. Indeed, disagreement arose not over the question of whether or he privileged plot over character, but whether it even mattered that he did. For a *Saturday Review* critic this tendency was a fatal flaw: “Men and women he draws, not for the sake of illustrating human nature ... but simply and solely with reference to the part it is necessary they should play in tangling or disentangling his argument.”<sup>11</sup> Other reviewers were more kind, suggesting that such an alleged weakness was nothing more than an exaggerated quibble:

We have a notion that every great artist has done the same thing upon occasion. There are undeveloped and partially developed characters in Shakespeare's plays ... Is a landscape painter to be condemned as incapable of high art because the figures in his picture are not as large as life ... ? To sneer at the best thing of its kind because it is not something else is a convenient mode of detraction.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 25 August 1860. 249-250. Accessed on ProQuest: British Periodicals.

<sup>12</sup> Unsigned review, *Spectator*, 8 September 1860. In *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page, (New York: Routledge, 1974), 92-4.

For the former critic, Collins's cursory characterization distracted from his fiction's other virtues, while for the latter critic, the success of his suspense plots made such condemnation seem utterly beside the point. When critics did find *The Woman in White*'s characterization successful on its own terms, they praised it largely for its connection to the novel's multiple first-person narrative structure – a form that ensured each character would be “very clearly and distinctly, almost visibly drawn,”<sup>13</sup> and which resulted in “the differences of [narrative] style being not only natural but exceedingly well sustained.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, even this praise feels qualified, preoccupied not with the details of the characters themselves but with Collins's writerly skill at differentiating and sustaining multiple different narrators.

Rather than considering what *The Woman in White*'s characters lack, or what they tell us about Collins's authorial ingenuity, I suggest that we read them in protagonist's terms of shorthand consciousness. In this framework the surprising substance of characters' representation and refraction of forms of narrative authority comes to the fore. As the Victorian reviews indicate, dynamic, realistic characterization may not be Collins's talent, but the very ways that his characterization functions, falls flat, and fails call attention to themselves. Much like James's Henrietta Stackpole – the “minor” character meant to be “but the wheels” to Isabel Archer's “coach ” but who ends up winning a distracting amount of attention – Collins's characters pull the reader's gaze towards them even when they're allegedly present just to move the plot along.<sup>15</sup> Like

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<sup>13</sup> Unsigned review, *Guardian*, 29 August 1860. In *Wilkie Collins: a Critical Heritage*, 89-91.

<sup>14</sup> Unsigned review, *Morning Advertiser*, 20 August 1860, In *Wilkie Collins: a Critical Heritage*, 81.

<sup>15</sup> James, Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, 1909. James finds that Henrietta would not stay confined to the purely functional role in which he had intended to place her.

Henrietta, *The Woman in White*'s characters actively resist being read as either functional plot-movers or well-rendered, interiorly rich, round individuals. Instead, Collins's novel generates its own forceful version of protagonistic individuation, albeit one that, in its declamatory individuality and self-conscious emphasis, suggests the limits, rather than the capaciousness, of readerly sympathy and interior insight.<sup>16</sup>

Evidence of characters' outsize self-presentations and pervasively burdened detail is nowhere more apparent than in the most minor of the novel's testimonies. In these passages, the assertive self-definition of characters feels the most labored and insistent. Two of the novel's most obvious examples of this declamatory characterization are the first-person narratives of Hester Pinhorn, Fosco's cook, and Mrs. Michelson, the Blackwater Park housekeeper. Though critics tend to ignore these passages, they epitomize the novel's treatment of character, in which a distinctive narrative style and insistence on unique personal traits prevail over communicating facts and evidence or advancing the plot. Like Frederick Fairlie, the heroine Laura's self-absorbed uncle, Mr. Gilmore, a dutiful solicitor, and even the brave, likable Marian Halcombe, who regularly characterizes herself with starkly contrasted "womanly" and "masculine" traits, Hester and Mrs. Michelson testify first and foremost to their own highly individualized personas.

In Hester's narrative, which comes at one of the most crucial moments in both the novel's story and discourse-level sequence, the cook almost compulsively tells the

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<sup>16</sup> The one notable exception is Fosco's admired character. Though, as we've seen, the novel often deliberately directs the reader towards that admiration. In her famous review of the novel, Margaret Oliphant dismisses most of the novel's characters with the one notable exception of Fosco. Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, May, 1862: 564-584. For other examples of Victorian critics' disdain for Collins's characterization, see unsigned review of *The Woman in White*, "Literary Gazette," Aug. 4, 1860: 57-8; unsigned review of *The Woman in White*, *Saturday Review*, August 25, 1860: 249-50; unsigned review of *The Woman in White*, by E.S. Dallas, *The Times*, October 30, 1860: 6.

audience of her “hard work” and lack of education even as she details crucial information immediately surrounding the event on which the whole of the novel’s plot turns: the switching of the identical Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick. Hester’s narrative opens not with information about this key plot point, but instead with an account of herself:

I am sorry to say I have never learnt to read or write. I have been a hard-working woman all my life, and have kept a good character. I know that it is a sin and wickedness to say the thing which is not; and I will truly beware of doing so ... I humbly beg the gentleman who takes this down to put my language right ... and to make allowances for my being no scholar.

In these four declarative sentences, Hester repeats “my” three times and “I” a full six times, a trend that continues less than a page later, when she echoes her opening words: “...I am sorry to say it’s no use asking me about days of the month, and such-like ... half my time I take no heed of them; being a hard-working woman and no scholar” (408). *All* of Hester’s relatively brief “testimony” sneaks in between assertions about her “hard work” and lack of scholarship. Here, her announcement that she has “kept a good character” takes on a formal import, suggesting not only model behavior, but also the assertive consistency and foregrounded narrative status her self-presentation enacts.

Likewise, Mrs. Michelson, the Blackwater Park housekeeper, wishes her audience to understand that she is a lady “reduced by misfortune to the necessity of accepting a situation,” as with the presentation of her portion of the story: “As the widow of a clergyman ... I have been taught to place the claims of truth above all other considerations ... My endeavor through life is to judge not, that I be not judged” (364-6). While the housekeeper’s self-satisfied invocation of “truth” and “facts” can read merely

as a comic foil to Walter's serious emphasis on those qualities, Mrs. Michelson's self-representation does capture, albeit indirectly, one form of "truth": the one revealed in her emphasis on the letter, rather than the spirit, of her late husband's principles:

It has always been my precept and practice ... to do as I would be done by... On [this account] I will not say that Mrs. Rubelle struck me as being a small, wiry, sly person ... I should not like these things said of me, and therefore it is my duty not to say them of Mrs. Rubelle ... nor will I mention ... that I thought her dress ... unnecessarily refined in trimming and finish. (371)

Perhaps Mrs. Michelson should change her motto from "judge not lest ye be judged" to "the truth will out." Her testimony develops the same assertive self-declaration that we have seen in Hester's narration, but it also makes explicit another aspect of both characters' narrations: an obvious tension between the character that is asserted and the one that the reader perceives. Just as Mrs. Michelson will in no way allow her belief that she is "not" saying something to get in the way of stating it quite clearly, so too her attempt to present herself as a humble, pious widow does not obstruct our perception of her as a conceited, hypocritical busybody.

Such inadvertent disclosure invites the reader to perceive "true" character, not in the direct reported content of stated traits, but instead in the gap between the version of her character she asserts and the obvious – though indirect – "truth" of her personality that the reader can't help but recognize. Similarly, Hester, while repeatedly avowing that she is "no scholar," demonstrates that she is a surprisingly shrewd judge of character and an able and articulate reporter who is attentive to the duplicity of even the adroit Fosco: "He seemed terribly cut up by what had happened ... and went stalking about and

wringing his fat hands more like a play-actor than a gentleman” (409). Together, then, Mrs. Michelson and Hester illustrate a primary effect of the novel’s first-person testimonies: as characters declare themselves through their speech, they pull the narrative’s and, implicitly, the reader’s focus away from the central plot and towards the tension between the truth of observation and the truth of self-disclosure contained in their narration. Such characterization defies the reader – and the editorializing Walter – to place such figures and their narratives in purely instrumental roles, or to place their contributions to the “truth” of the plot above the “truths” of their own identities.

In this context, the artificial quality of characters’ testimony feels less like an aesthetic failure than a deliberate effect of their self-conscious presentation. This self-awareness is stridently apparent in the narrative of “Frederick Fairlie, Esq. of Limmeridge House.” Every statement made by Laura’s effete, narcissistic uncle is hyperbolically self-defining. From his narrative’s opening sentence: “It is the grand misfortune of my life that nobody will let me alone,” to its close: “I wish to mention, in justice to myself, that it was not my fault, and that I am quite exhausted and heartbroken. Need I say more?” (345, 364), Mr. Fairlie leaves no doubt about his obvious disdain for attention. His hyperbole perfectly captures his outsize self-regard and callousness towards others, while at the same time suggesting that he is fully aware and even desirous of being perceived in these terms. Though rarely illustrating the complex psychological detail of fictional characters such as Miss Marchmont or even Safie, the self-conscious artifice of the testimonies of Mr. Fairlie and *The Woman in White*’s other “minor” characters claim a purpose and protagonistic individualism all its own. These characters’ declamatory specificity references the kind of interior depth and complexity we have seen

in other novels' briefly represented characters, even if their self-defining nature feels reductive. In *The Woman in White*, the contrived qualities of characters' speech and self-presentation both call attention to and resist their inherently marginal position within a work's overall structure.

To be sure, the narratives of Hester, Mrs. Michelson, and Mr. Fairlie actively resist and confuse the novel's chronological sequence, contributing to its suspense.<sup>17</sup> But their "testimony" still feels far from a narrative necessity. The artifice of their narrative presence is underscored by the forcefulness of their personalities and perspectives, and the distracting tensions in their narrative personas. The declarative and self-descriptive nature of these first-person testimonies resists any reading of them as merely impersonal or instrumental evidence. Here, then, hyperprotagonism plays into the novel's production of suspense, deferring answers and prolonging uncertainty, but also echoing the novel's central trope of identity's construction. Ironically, as the novel's discourse underscores Hester and Mrs. Michelson's essentially peripheral relation to the plot, their status as independent individuals, defined wholly by their own speech, becomes all the more apparent. The more minor these figures seem in terms of plot, the more major their substance as characters becomes.

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<sup>17</sup> See Walter Kendrick, "The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 32.1 (1977): 18-35, for a discussion of how *The Woman in White* refracts the Victorian tendency to separate "the novel of plot" – the sensation novel – from "the novel of character" – the fictional realism of authors such as George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. Kendrick argues that *The Women in White*, while embracing plot, is still "founded in the realistic faith which it violates ... [the novel demands] that it be read as if it were realistic" (20-2). Kendrick focuses on characterization as a kind of diversion – a means of deferring resolution that the novel cannily disguises as a concern for the truth only testimony can provide. In making this claim, however, he largely ignores the very content of the first-person testimonies that are his article's focus. While Kendrick argues that character is, in Collins, subordinate to plot, he believes this hierarchy exists not because more or less attention is paid to one or the other, but instead because character does the work of plot – generating multiple threads of interest and obscuring and revealing connections simply by virtue of its distracting multiplicity.



In the words of one Victorian reviewer, the “personages” of *The Woman in White* seem to have “characteristics, but not character.” We might say instead that here characteristics *are* character, as the novel equates speech and self-defined traits to subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, *The Woman in White*’s many narrating characters are so rigidly defined by their testimonies, their voices so defiantly asserted, that the novel’s hyperprotagonism continually overwhelms the very potential for interpersonal understanding that our prior examples of protagonism have represented.<sup>19</sup> As we will see in the next section, this hyperprotagonism is inseparable from the semi-omniscient, editorial presence to which I’ve already alluded. In George Eliot’s archetypal realism, a guiding omniscient narrator helps readers cultivate awareness of many characters’ rich consciousnesses in order to sustain that knowledge and insight beyond the reading experience. But *The Woman in White*’s hyperprotagonism registers the fact that our sympathies and our perception may, despite a narrator’s best attempts, be drawn more in one direction than another. In their tightly bounded textual presentation, the novel’s first-person narratives feel both sanctioned and deliberately curtailed by an unseen editor, wary of misplaced sympathies or alternative plots, even as those distractions contribute to the novel’s suspense.

## II. PROBLEMS WITH AUTHORITY

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<sup>18</sup> Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 249.

<sup>19</sup> This quality also sets the narrative apart from the similar structure of the epistolary novel. While, as Victorian critics such as E.S. Dallas in the *Times* pointed out, Collins’s claims for the extreme originality of his testimony structure are exaggerated, bearing a pointed similarity to the self-revealing nature of epistolary novels, the testimonies in Collins’s novel register the fact that they are meant to be made public – they are intended for a broad audience. We don’t get the sense that we are reading any secret, personal revelation. On the contrary, these characters seem to want us to know as much about them as possible.

While it may be true that no single voice dominates *The Woman in White*'s whole, we are still informed by an unidentified editorial voice that, "The story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and intelligible aspect" (5). Whatever else the first-person testimonies may contain – humor, personal detail, emotional experience – they are only linked to the encompassing narrative through their function as evidence, and they are only included at the behest of this yet-unnamed source of narrative authority. As we've seen, *The Woman in White* illustrates the potential unruliness of characterization and protagonism: even characters who are supposed to play only the most functional of roles in the plot have ways of exceeding or troubling those marginalized positions. But these characters' assertiveness is at odds with the novel's framing inclusion of authorial and editorial perspectives. These separate perspectives at times overlap, suggesting an all-knowing or semi-omniscient narrative presence that is palpable while often being difficult to locate in precise terms. Such third-person perspectives play a major part in the novel's overtly protagonistic multi-narrator form, facilitating – even enjoining – the inclusion of many characters' first-person testimonies. Yet in other ways, these third-person perspectives constrict such characterizations, allotting them space while ensuring that they don't intrude elsewhere in the novel or usurp their own largely implicit narrative authority.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Brantlinger argues that a breakdown in narrative authority is one of the hallmarks of the sensation novel form, as the "secular mystery" of plot upends trusted moral truths. Whatever source of absolute narrative authority existed must eventually come to be seen as duplicitous, as the plots secrets are both obscured and revealed. In making this argument, Brantlinger repeats the accepted maxim about the sensation novel's preference for plot over character. As I'll argue, however, through its attention to character and the implicit authority of first-person narration,

The most obvious third-person perspective in *The Woman in White* is the text's anonymous introduction. Here, an unidentified voice announces that "This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure and what a Man's resolution can achieve" – a moral that may suggest we interpret the story as a kind of fable. The declarative nature of the first sentence, set apart in its own paragraph, makes it feel portentous, and yet such a description could be made to fit any number of stories. This framing voice also gives us an ostensible reason for telling the story: it is a tale of crime (and, implicitly, justice) that never made it to a courtroom, and so this narrative must serve as an alternative public record. As such, it invokes its own form of legal testimony:

As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now ... When the writer of these introductory lines (Walter Hartright, by name) happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively as he has spoken before them.

Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness ... to trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their own experience word for word. (5-6)

Here is our first indication that the anonymous speaker is not simply an omniscient narrator, or an extra-textual author, but a homodiegetic character contained within the novel. Apparently, Walter is responsible for these words, yet the circuitous way in which we learn of this authorship – in a third person, parenthetical aside – only confuses our sense of his authorial identity and the identity of the voice that narrates. "These

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overarching narrative authority is, in *The Woman in White*, troubled from the very beginning of the novel. Narrative authority is both continually undermined and sought, though never successfully realized. Brantlinger, "What is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), 1-28.

introductory lines” seems to refer to the words before us, yet it is easy to think it describes the first installment of the main body of the story itself. This confusion comes less from the statement’s grammar – “these” clearly indicates the immediate passage – than from the disorienting sense of multiple sources of narrative authority. On one hand, we have an omniscient tone underscored by a vague opening moral – traits that invoke memories of authoritative third-person narrators found in Thackeray and Dickens.<sup>21</sup> On the other, we have the unexpected revelation that one of the novel’s characters (who we have yet to meet in that capacity) is himself writing this introduction, and, perplexingly, has deliberately assumed an authoritative yet anonymous third-person persona. Even the way the introduction presents its generalized frame suggests this omniscient guise – full of sweeping statements and unselfconscious assumptions about the nature of “Judge” and “Reader,” narrative and truth.

This opening passage implies that narration is synonymous with authority. If one character can assume this commanding editorial role, anyone can. As the introductory voice emphasizes, all narratives will be on equal footing; all speakers will share clarity and certainty about the events they record. The idea that such authority can be so straightforwardly achieved – realized by the very act of testimony itself – makes it seem that any of the novel’s first-person narrators may be imbued with the kind of omniscient conviction that Walter here claims for himself. However, the ease with which Walter’s voice transitions from this omniscient persona to that of his character – “Let Walter

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<sup>21</sup> *The Woman in White* followed directly on the heels of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* when it began publication in *All the Year Round*, and was published in precisely the same place in the journal that had been occupied the prior novel. Readers would certainly have been expecting another novel, and in fact, in a notice following the last installment of *A Tale of Two Cities*, there was only mention of new novel story appearing the following week – with no mention that it would be by Collins rather than “Boz” (*Pickwick*, 670).

Hartright, teacher of drawing, aged twenty-eight years, be heard first” (6) – suggests that omniscience itself is here as much a cultivated persona as any of the novel’s other first-person narratives. And yet, even in the opening passage, this omniscient persona exceeds the perspective and influence of any single narrating voice. “Let Walter... be heard” is a command, but from whom, to whom, and for whom? The omniscient persona that is ostensibly a version of Walter is also apparently the agent who allows him to speak. However, unlike realist novels such as *Middlemarch* or *Little Dorrit*, in which protagonism results from an omniscient narrator’s ability to “see inside” many characters, this omniscience appears to enable protagonism by creating an ostensible equality of presence – each character speaks in passages framed as no more or less important than the others, delivering his or her testimony in equitably allotted chapters.

But the presence of this apparent omniscience and guiding authority isn’t consistent throughout *The Woman in White*. The opening half of the novel is characterized by dramatic tension and mystery, while the later half is more devoted to action, explanation, and gradual revelation. And as this change occurs, the semi-omniscient, multi-perspective editorial authority hinted at in the novel’s introduction becomes increasingly inseparable from Walter’s narrative authority. This transition in tone and narrative control is reflected in the number and length of the first-person testimonies included in each part, with the many voices of the early section adding to the sense of obfuscation and multiple perspectives, and the fewer voices of the latter half diminishing those effects. There are six narrators in the initial “mystery” portion of the novel: Walter (in several chapters that largely set the stage for the novel’s later drama); the scrupulously professional solicitor Mr. Gilmore; Marian (in the form of “extracts”

from her diary); Fosco (in a “postscript” entry to Marian’s diary – an illicit, yet also implicitly editorially-sanctioned form of testimony); Frederick Fairlie; and Mrs. Michelson. All these testimonies are of substantial length, with those of Walter and Marian comprising the longest, most plot-driven portions. The crux of the book – the turning point of both its central mystery and of its plot’s transition from suspense to action – is contained in several short narratives of no more than six pages, the first and longest of which is Hester’s, followed by a paragraph from a doctor, another from “Jane Gould,” who prepares the body of Anne (asserted to be Laura) for the coffin, and finally “the narrative of the tombstone.” This flurry of voices marks the coming transition of plot, style, and tone. From the end of these passages on, the novel’s final section is told *only* by Walter, uninterrupted except by two written documents that he receives: a letter from Anne’s “depraved” but unrepentant mother, Mrs. Catherick, and a written confession the villain Fosco composes in Walter’s presence.

Walter’s sharing of these interpolated documents in the text of his own narrative is crucial: though they are bracketed off from the novel’s main discourse by his imposing framing justifications for including them, and made “public” through his authorization without their author’s explicit consent, their content still threatens to become disruptive. Unlike the other first-person testimonies, the narrative doesn’t solicit them so much as grudgingly make room for them, tolerating their apparently unedited substance while at the same time withholding from them the implicit editorial authorization given to the other first-person testimonies. Ultimately, though, these interpolated documents seem surprisingly unexceptional when considered alongside the novel’s other declamatory and typically self-justifying first-person testimonies. Their importance stems less from their

transgressive content than from the way they reflect Walter's explicit assumption of an authorizing editorial role. By this point in the novel, first-person testimonies are no longer introduced only by a blank space and an impersonal introductory title – "The Story continued by..."; "The Narrative of..." Instead they are framed and explicitly judged by Walter, turning them into evidence of his authority. Walter closes Mrs. Catherick's letter by telling the reader that his first impulse was to destroy it for its "hardened, shameless depravity" (553). His decision to instead keep, share, and disparage it suggests a calculated effort to control her text.

Yet, Walter's assumption of editorial control is never entirely convincing. That he seems not to register the potential sympathetic appeal of Mrs. Catherick and Fosco (though, as we've seen, he can't help but admire the latter's "strength of character"), speaks to the myopic, self-serving nature of his late-novel narration. The all-powerful editorial perspective that we so briefly glimpse in the novel's opening pages, and that Walter eventually tries to assume, isn't aimed at facilitating multiple perspectives or broad, diverse, capacious insight. Instead it seeks expedient evidence of its own authority. Walter's transformation – from one among many narrators, to the editor and facilitator of others' voices – doesn't result in either a more informative narrative or a more profound expression of interpersonal understanding – quite the opposite. As Walter's voice becomes increasingly dominant, concerned only with furthering the plot and excising superfluous detail, the novel's interest in characterization diminishes along with the atmosphere of taut mystery that pervaded its early parts.

Even Walter's evolution from an endearingly confused, susceptible romantic, uncertain of the stability of his own identity, to a fearless master of his own fate, ready to

“face” his future “as a man should,” appears less a transition in character or psychology than an attempt to diminish any form of protagonism as superfluous.<sup>22</sup> The scene in which Walter first encounters the mysterious woman of the novel’s title – in other words, the moment that first generates pulse-pounding suspense and that critics and readers repeatedly cite as a sensation-novel archetype – is also the one in which Walter appears the most speculative, uncertain, and self-reflective about the nature of his perspective:

“It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother’s cottage?” (23).

Here, Walter’s questions underscore his lack of confidence and authority, and once more, they speak as much to who he is as to the events that comprise the plot. In contrast, the Walter who returns from Central America is quite certain of himself: “I came back ... a changed man ... My will had learned to be strong ... my mind to rely on itself” (415). But this Walter is not so much a “changed man,” as one who has left change behind – literally relegated to the past tense. Once more, it is at this point in the text that Walter makes explicit his adoption of an almost absolute narrative authority. If, in the novel’s opening, Walter enacts rather than proclaims his character, using his interactions with and

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<sup>22</sup>Following D. A. Miller’s argument, Walter’s character is usually read in terms of this shift from a weak or feminized susceptibility to an authoritative, masculine conventionality. But this transition does more than stabilize gender conventions; it also reflects an important shift in narrative technique. Miller, “Sensation and Gender,” 146-191. See also Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992). For a recent nuanced reading of Walter’s exemplification of a “public” form of masculine identity, see Ablow, “Good Vibrations,” 5-117. Other recent critical examples that focus especially on normative and non-normative gender identity include Catherine Delafield, “The Diary and Sensation Fiction,” *Women’s Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 135-56; and Ann Gaylin, “The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*,” 303-333.



feelings towards other characters to illustrate his own personality, Walter later asserts his defining trait to be the narrative domination of others' voices: "I shall relate both narratives, not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves, but in the words of [a] brief, plain, studiously simple abstract ... So the tangled web will be most speedily and most intelligibly unrolled" (422). Interruption and confusion are here aligned with the problematic changeability that Walter has put behind him, as he implies that he will not only condense, but also improve on others' testimony, creating "the plainest narrative attainable" (468).

Here again the novel suggests a version of narrative authority and quasi-omniscience that is less all-seeing than all-controlling. Like Bakhtin's view of the novel as a genre which consumes and incorporates all others, this narrative perspective – closely aligned with the omniscience that is the hallmark of realist fiction – asserts itself at the expense of other forms of narrative authority. The novel's multi-narrative framework must be assimilated into Walter's own "brief, plain, studiously simple" speech in order for his forcefully static performance to be convincing. Even when an elderly clerk helps him in his investigation, Walter can barely contain his frustration at having to listen to another's "interrupted, confused" speech: "My anxiety to examine the registry did not dispose me to offer much encouragement to the old man's talkativeness" (510). And yet, Walter later admits, "Certain portions of the conversation of the talkative old clerk, which had wearied me at the time, now recurred to my memory with a new significance" (519). Walter's performance of narrative authority never succeeds in assimilating all narrative voices into his own, nor does it enable his own character and narration to exemplify the absolute consistency he declares. Rather, Walter's

performance of his character, unlike those of the novel's other first-person testimonies, makes explicit that his authority comes only at those other testimonies' expense. What seems at first like an assumption of editorial control is, by the novel's end, more like a failed attempt at censure.

Even so, Walter's ultimately unsuccessful attempt at realizing a compelling or convincing editorial authority and quasi-omniscience does speak to the novel's pursuit of a cohesive, encompassing perspective. Indeed, Walter's narration, at least in form, could be seen as recuperating a sympathetically inclusive version of protagonism by presenting an encompassing point of view that is at once individually differentiated and able to facilitate the appearance and autonomy of other points of view. After all, Walter's attempt at narrative control does echo the qualities of both an omniscient narrator and also those of the declarative personalities of the novel's first-person narrations. The pointed presentation of personal traits that characterizes the testimonies of Hester and Mrs. Michelson is only amplified in Walter's first-person narration, even as he projects a deliberately impersonal narrative authority. Yet, ultimately, Walter's narration functions at the expense of mutual understanding and socializing recognition. His hyperprotagonism only further conflates characterization with an aggrandizing, renegade narrative usurpation.

The protagonistic promise hinted at in Walter's narration is more fully present, however, in another of the novel's first-person testimonies: that of Marian Halcombe, who simultaneously presents both her own and others' perspectives. Marian's testimony, in the form of her diary, suggests that characters' inconsistencies, or, indeed, the partiality inherent in any single viewpoint – like the obvious concealment in the

testimonies of Hester and Mrs. Michelson – reflect the potential for a unifying protagonism. Despite being excerpted, intruded upon, and framed by others' voices, Marian's diary, set alongside the novel's performative characterizations, offers the novel's chief counterweight to Walter's assertion of editorial authority, despite being an ostensibly private document intended chiefly for her own eyes. A homodiegetic diary would seem to be antithetical to the qualities we typically associate with omniscient narrators. By its very nature, its primary object is the perspective and mind of its author, not that of other characters. Yet by illustrating an almost preternatural ability to intuit others' intentions and in sensitively attending to her own and other's interiority (an anomaly in the novel as a whole), Marian's narrative highlights the very inadequacy of Walter's would-be omniscience, particularly his unwillingness to entertain other's motivations, hardships, and even basic thought-processes. Marian herself describes such attentiveness as a uniquely female attribute: "Women, as everybody knows, constantly act on impulses which they cannot explain even to themselves" (259). While this statement initially marginalizes her narrative capabilities, making them seem unreflective, it also helps to draw an implicit association between narrative prowess and femininity. As Marian's diary illustrates, the authority of a narrative – and a narrator – depends on the ability to understand and incorporate multiple narrative perspectives.

Tellingly, in the later portion of the novel, Marian's voice is only contained and summarized within Walter's plot-driven narrative. However, in the book's first half, we do get over a quarter of *The Woman in White's* text through her diary. In the context of the novel's other first-person characterizations, her testimony proves to be exceptional by including precisely those qualities which Walter seeks to exclude from his own: the

maintenance of change, inconsistency, and tension between implicit and explicit versions of characters – especially her own. In an illuminating refraction of the novel’s central plot, Marian’s narrative speaks to how singular, coherent identity is itself synonymous with resolution – the end of change and transformation. Even the solution of double identity that is at the story’s center – the proof that Laura is neither dead, nor Anne Catherick, but the same person she always was – is only an artifice, contradicted in the constant reminders of Laura’s physical and psychological manifestations of change. Like its multiple narrators, the maintenance of multiple aspects of characters’ identity contributes to the narrative’s suspense and momentum.

Unlike Walter’s narrative, Marian’s diary provides not only plot and personal actions, but also, in its detailed, and often minute-by-minute, reporting, a variation on the doubled, self-revealing characterizations of Hester and Mrs. Michelson. For example, one diary entry closes with Marian convincing herself of Sir Percival’s “affectionate kindness;” the next opens with the exclamation, “I hate Sir Percival!” (194). The effect is a comic one, but it exemplifies a trend of Marian perceiving in others and herself forms of hesitation, contradiction, and transformation, and showing how those qualities may be productive. She repeatedly evaluates her past assumptions: “The misery of self-reproach which I suffered... kept me waking and wretched for hours ...” (271); describes herself as unconsciously influenced by mysterious, if beneficent forces: “I passed gradually into a strange condition, which was not waking ... my fevered mind broke loose from me” (277-8); and observes subtle alterations in her very identity: “Distorted by the suspicion which had now become a part of myself, even such trifles as these looked dangerous” (309). Even her perception of her beloved Laura is marked by a sense of omission:

“Others ... would probably think her improved ... But I miss something” (212). If the self-characterizations of Hester and Mrs. Michelson imply that “truth” is found outside explicit presentations, Marian’s testimony shows how the maintenance of multiple, often inconsistent aspects of identity need not reconcile at all.

Not coincidentally, Marian’s narrative introduces many of the novel’s most successful examples of characterization, especially Fosco. Even among critics who failed to appreciate the novel’s preference for character over plot, Fosco was often singled out as uniquely vivid and memorable, unlike the rather stock figures of the ostensible hero and heroine.<sup>23</sup> Less frequently noted by Victorian and contemporary critics is the extent to which that characterization depends on Marian’s unique narrative capabilities. Fosco’s character offers a hyperbolic version of the inconsistency and self-division that are seen, if only implicitly, in virtually all of the novel’s first-person testimonies. And it is this quality that Marian’s interpersonally attuned narration brings to the fore:

It seems hardly credible while I am writing it down, but it is certainly true, that this same man, who has all the fondness of an old maid for his cockatoo, and all the small dexterities of an organ-boy in managing his white mice, can talk, when anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe. (223)

Marian mentions specific examples of Fosco’s perplexing personality contrasts, but tellingly, few details about his emotions or thoughts. Yet Fosco becomes intriguing precisely because Marian seeks to find a way to reconcile these contrasts, to figure out the competing influences that have created his singular character. Only in relationship to

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<sup>23</sup> See unsigned reviews in the *Saturday Review* and the *Examiner*.

Fosco's characterization do we feel the absence of information about interiority to be just that – a lack. Marian herself calls attention to Fosco's most pointed trait as the presence of irreconcilability itself: "His tact and cleverness in small things are quite as noticeable as the *singular inconsistencies* (my italics) in his character, and the childish triviality of his ordinary tastes and pursuits" (223-4). Most revealingly, Marian ends her description of Fosco with a reflection on her own confused reaction to the man's puzzling traits: "I certainly never saw a man, in all my experience, whom I should be so sorry to have for an enemy. Is this because I like him, or because I am afraid of him? Chi sa? – as Count Fosco might say in his own language. Who knows?" (226). Marian's final step in rendering her introductory portrait of Fosco is to consider her relationship to him and the effect he has had on her, an act of reflection she completes by echoing one of the Count's own signature phrases. In a novel in which first-person speech is a hallmark of crafted identity and a gateway to a potentially antagonistic interpersonal understanding, Marian's willingness to share Fosco's individualized words is suggestive of an almost Smithean sympathy. As she attempts to understand her own feelings about his character, she must first try to place her perspective, and thus her speech, as close to his as possible.

With her own flexible perspective and her desire to astutely understand other characters, Marian is the novel's most successful example of the capaciously sympathetic insight typically associated with the archetypal omniscient narrators of Victorian realism. That this insight is located in her narration, and not in the novel's editorial frame or in Walter's authoritative voice, illustrates both protagonistism's importance to imaginative identification and sympathy and its potential failure at achieving such aims. Omniscient narration, narrative authority, editorial control – all these forms of agency are, within the

ethos of Victorian fiction, tools with which the novel pretends to transcend the scope of the self, the boundaries of one's own perspective. Although *The Woman in White* is known for its atypical narrative form, the apparent objective of its multiple narrators is, essentially, a variation on the same multi-perspective view afforded by loose, baggy monsters such as *Daniel Deronda* or *Bleak House*, a pursuit of "truth," found only in the minds of many, rather than one. If, in omniscient narration, this aim is almost always more aspired to than realized, sidetracked by the pull of an appealing Daniel or Esther, Marian's first-person narration suggests that protagonism is best enabled by a qualified version of fictional subjectivity. Considered in relationship to the whole of Collins's novel, Marian's narration makes apparent what overarching, objective narrative authority often lacks: against the claims of critics such as Wayne Booth and Ian Watt, who assert the novel's investment in the inherent consistency of character, *The Woman in White* implies that literary evidence of a complex, individualized consciousness lies not in its complete unfurling on the page, but in its continually partial appearance.<sup>24</sup> Both declarative, self-defining first-person narrations and editorializing or omniscient forms of narration continually risk diminishing or "flattening" characters through summation. Without registering awareness of the aspects of perspective that may exceed representation – either through internal focalization or the registering of subjective change – characterization risks seeming trivializingly absolute, suggesting a consciousness that is not only contained in, but also defined by its textual space.

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<sup>24</sup> Watt. *The Rise of the Novel*, 21. Watt uses Locke's definition of the individual as a consciousness sustained over a duration of time to generate one of his criteria of realism. Though Watt emphasizes realism's ability to represent individual consistency, many of the early first-person novels he cites, such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, combine the consistency of a first-person voice with often marked and sudden changes in character. Moll, for instance, forms and breaks personal attachments easily, willingly transforming herself as the situation and the audience requires.

### III. SHARING THE STAGE

I have suggested that *The Woman in White*'s hyperprotagonism largely resists the moral purpose that other forms of protagonism invoke, even as Marian's narration and the novel's multi-narrative form reflect a lingering investment in such a purpose. In this final section, I want to focus on Collins's own sensitivity to the moral dimension of a multi-perspective literary form, and suggest that he adapted his novel to the stage in a way that recasts the novel's hyperprotagonism in more deliberately sympathetic terms. While I have held up Eliot as my primary exemplar of a Victorian author with protagonistic designs, Collins's engagement with the afterlife of his novel through stage adaptations suggests that he was more invested in audiences' emotional involvement with multiple characters than the novel's defensive characterization and preoccupation with suspense suggest. Indeed, I want to claim that only in his own dramatic version of *The Woman in White* was Collins able to finally realize the genuinely inclusive system of character first promised by the novel's innovative narrative form. By considering the different opportunities for and limits on protagonism afforded by each genre, we can better perceive characterization's productively fraught engagement with questions of sympathy and individuation.

If *The Woman in White*'s hyperprotagonism speaks to how excessively individualized narration can curtail forms of interpersonal or sympathetic insight in novelistic characterization, the novel's theatrical afterlife reanimates and restructures the novel's multi-perspective form, privileging its inclusion of many "centers of consciousness" over the production of suspense. Like many popular Victorian novels, *The Woman in White* was quickly adapted for the stage. Just a few months after serial



publication concluded in August of 1860, a pirated stage version opened in November at the Surrey Theatre to packed houses and generally positive reviews, and many financially successful imitators followed suit, with productions appearing in France, Germany, and Australia.<sup>25</sup> All these productions seemed to have hewed as close as possible to the novel, albeit focusing the action largely on the Blackwater Park chapters. It was only a decade after the novel first appeared that Collins tried his own hand at a stage adaptation.

While money was almost certainly a primary motivation (the very fact that Collins and his producer expected ample remuneration for their efforts after so many stage versions and so many years speaks to the novel's enduring popularity) Collins's version *was* a decided departure, both from the novel, and from the largely faithful theatrical versions that had already appeared. In his own words, he viewed his play as "preserving the original story in substance but materially altering it in form." As the playbill for the opening night's performance describes them, his changes were subtle yet significant ones:

In the first place, he has endeavored to produce a work which shall appeal to the audience purely on its own merits as a play. In the second place, he has refrained from making the interest of his drama dependent upon mechanical contrivance, and has relied in the play, as he relied in the novel, on the succession of incident, on the exhibition of character, and on the collision of human emotion rising naturally from those two sources.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> William Baker, *A Wilkie Collins Chronology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 158, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Playbill from Oct. 9, 1871. Quoted in Janice Norwood, "Sensation Drama? Collins's Stage Adaptation of *The Woman in White*." *Questioning the Boundaries of Sensation: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Work of Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Andrew Mangham (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 226.

This playbill's description of Collins's goals manages to feel specific while actually saying very little. However, two aspects of the announcement do stand out: the emphasis on the play's appeal, independent of one's experience of the novel, and the echo of Collins's own description of his work in his 1861 preface, in which the aim of telling a good story seems to naturally result in both dramatic events and engaging characterization. Though the genre has changed, this playbill introduction's aesthetic framing of the story remains surprisingly familiar.<sup>27</sup> Collins knew that virtually every audience member would know the plot, and to seek merely to reproduce the novel would therefore appear trite. Yet, at the same time, his audiences surely expected to see the story that they already knew they enjoyed. Collins's playbill statement implies that he has found a way out of this paradox in the theatrical form itself. Indeed, the reiteration of the preface's emphasis on the natural intersection of plot and character – an intersection which, as we have seen, is far from being so simple – seems to prompt potential viewers to remember not the book they actually read, but the author's claim about what it was supposed to be: a work in which characterization and plot feel seamlessly united.

As critics such as Janice Norwood, Jim Davis, and Peter Ackroyd have noted, the novel and the play differ most vividly in the latter's greater focus on psychological drama. As Ackroyd suggests, Collins, anticipating his audiences' familiarity with the novel, "generally relied more upon character than mystery," dropping the famous scene on Hampstead Heath in which Walter meets the Woman in White and expanding other

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<sup>27</sup> Collins's statement seems to make the same claim for an almost "Providential" narrative structure that Dickens makes in his October 1859 letter. While it might be easy to dismiss such statements as authorial posturing – claiming artistic seriousness to ameliorate any taint of tawdriness in sensationalism – the description does try to describe *The Woman in White* in realism's terms and extant context. Thus, rather than considering the sensation novel as a genre unto itself, I prefer to consider it as analogous to and aware of the Victorian novels that fit more easily into the category of literary realism.

encounters and conversations between the novel's central figures. In substance, however, this greater emphasis on characterization means that dialogue takes the place of both physical action and narrative description. Characters regularly speak their private thoughts to the audience. Collins himself thought the play's success was largely dependent upon individual performances – particularly that of the Fosco role, which he expanded from the novel: “The play is all Fosco. If he does not take the audience by storm, failure is certain. Mr. Vinning [the actor playing Fosco] is privately rehearsing with me – every line of dialogue is a matter of consultation between us.” Clearly, Collins wasn't banking on either familiarity with the story or sensation to sustaining audiences' interest in the play.

But the idea that Collins should choose to emphasize “psychology” rather than plot in the theatrical adaptation seems somewhat counterintuitive. In the era of high novelistic realism, why would Collins choose a play as his foremost representation of character's interiority? As Norwood points out, plenty of theatrical “sensation dramas” presenting scenes of action and drama were popular in the Victorian era; fires, violent deaths, insane asylums – all were portrayed with some regularity on the nineteenth-century stage, and all are certainly found in the novel and most of its pirated theatrical versions. Yet, all these events are excised or simply occur off-stage in Collins's adaptation.<sup>28</sup> Instead, tête-à-têtes between characters, often interrupted, overheard, or occurring in close proximity to other characters' similarly private conversations, move Collins's drama briskly along. While I disagree with Norwood that this emphasis on dialogue proves that the play is more concerned with “psychology” than the novel, I do

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<sup>28</sup> Norwood, “Sensation Drama,” 224-6

think that the drama places greater emphasis on sustained and simultaneous insight into multiple characters' perspectives.

When we compare the novel and the play, the play clearly is far more condensed in the scope of its action, its settings, and its cast of characters. Gone is any formal, delineated suggestion of multiple perspectives and organizing voices. The three characters whose narratives I singled out as characteristic of the novel's emphatic, self-defining first-person narration – Hester, Mrs. Michelson, and Frederick Fairlie – are excised from the play entirely. Yet their excision doesn't result in a less dispersed system of character. On the contrary, the play's characterization feels even more egalitarian than that of the novel. There is little suggestion of any single most important perspective or character – truly, it is a play without a hero. But also missing from the play are virtually *all* characters who are not directly involved in the action: servants, housekeepers, and effete uncles.<sup>29</sup>

The “prologue” that opens the play clearly illustrates both this condensation and the multi-character emphasis. Here, the first character we see *in medias res* is Sir Percival, on the verge of meeting Mrs. Catherick, who will help him gain access to the vestry and alter the marriage record. While waiting, Percival encounters a wandering

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<sup>29</sup> There are some significant differences between the plot of the play and the novel. In the play, Fosco first appears in Act I, at Limmeridge House, on his way to advise Sir Percival, where he meets both Anne and Walter for the first time. Act II, which I outline below, stays relatively close to the novel. In Act III, which opens with Marian and Walter at the asylum, waiting to see “Anne” and believing Laura to be dead, we learn that Percival has died offstage while traveling abroad. Knowing that Marian will recognize “Anne” as Laura, Fosco appears to warn her of the coming shock. The act ends with Marian and Laura reuniting. In the final act, Walter seeks advice from the Mr. Kyrle, the family lawyer (Mr. Gilmore doesn't appear in the play). Pesca helps Walter to confirm his suspicion that Fosco is an Italian spy. Walter confronts Fosco, bargaining for and receiving proof of “Anne's” true identity. As Fosco makes plans to flee, confidant of his escape, two men who have been half concealed on stage appear in full view and accost Fosco, stabbing him in the heart.

Anne Catherick whom he dismissively shoos away, though Anne observes the incriminating conversation between Percival and her mother. As this action moves offstage, we find Walter and Pesca coincidentally wandering about the same location, finding scenic spots to sketch. Here, in spoken asides, we learn of Pesca's assignment to kill a traitor to a secret Italian society – a strikingly fat man by the name of Fosco, and of the teaching post Pesca has secured for Walter with the Fairlie family. In this scene, long passages of spoken exposition present characters' histories and anticipate future tensions. All five of the characters presented have significant dialogue, and through their sometimes lengthy monologues, Percival, Pesca, and Anne are, at this point in the play, better candidates for the protagonist role than Walter, who, among all the characters on the stage, is the only one without something to hide or reveal. Such centrality is even more notable considering that none of these three characters were given significant first-person passages in the novel; even Mrs. Catherick had her confession shaped by Walter's framed introduction.

Certainly, Collins's choice to open his play with extended speeches from characters who don't narrate in the novel is a savvy amendment, capturing audiences' interest with fresh insight into heretofore-underrepresented figures. Like the first-person narrations of the novel, these characters' dialogue tends to be so focused on explanation and self-presentation that focalization seems to be beside the point – an alignment of perspective feels superfluous as their speech seemingly declares everything that one is supposed to know about them. Compounding this effect is the fact that what are apparently private, interior thoughts are necessarily spoken and implicitly offered to an audience. While a Barthesian “something more” may surely be produced in a play by the

simple presence of a live actor, the artificial, public revelation of interior thought still risks seemingly like interior summation rather than a partial glimpse of a more complex whole. Even so, these characters' monologues and dialogue are at least suggestive of individualized agency. Unlike the novel, the drama represents speech resulting from personal volition, rather than sanctioned by an unseen editor.

What we see in the play, then, is less a change in characterization (such as the greater emphasis on "psychology" that Norwood suggests) than a more studied attempt to place more characters' speech and presence on the equivalent footing that the novel anticipates, yet never fully realizes. This emphasis on equivalence is present even in Collins's quite explicit stage directions. Following the prologue, the action quickly moves to Blackwater Park, where Act II succinctly moves through Sir Percival's attempt to gain control over Laura's money, a report from the Countess Fosco to her husband about Anne's promise to reveal Percival's secret, and a murderous plot hatched between Fosco and Percival, which Marian overhears from behind the study door. The act closes with Fosco intercepting Anne on her way to meet Laura. When the girl faints, Fosco realizes her physical similarity to Laura, and the plan to switch the two women dawns on him. All this action – the crux of the entire play – takes place within a physically confined set that Collins describes in detail, emphasizing how it allows the audience to witness multiple simultaneous interactions and events:

The flat scene – which must not be placed further back than is absolutely necessary – represents a portion of the wall of SIR PERCIVAL GLYDE's country house; comprehending the ground floor and the floor above it. Three of the windows on the upper floor must be practicable ... All the windows look out on the sloping roof of an iron verandah, which shades the windows on the ground-floor. The light pillars which support the verandah are placed at wide distances apart, so as to allow space between them for the action of the scene ... COUNT FOSCO's canaries are seen in their cage on a table in the room which occupies a central position

under the verandah. The window is made on the French plan, and is open to the ground.<sup>30</sup>

Collins's directions suggest a dollhouse-like view, with multiple characters' activities taking place at the same time, all on view simultaneously to the audience, but unseen to one another. As the action plays out, the ability to see within multiple spaces in the house allows the audience to track characters' movements and anticipate encounters before they happen. In doing so, this inclusive view materializes the play's emphasis on a non-hierarchical character structure. Unique to staged drama, the continual physical presence of many characters, even more than their increased speech, serves as a reminder of the many perspectives, objectives, and interests equivalently at work within the story. Indeed, simply by allowing characters to share the stage, this manner of presenting their many different viewpoints is, in effect if not execution, the closest the play comes to replicating the novel's multiple first-person narrative form. Here, as in the novel, characters' lightly concealed secrets and overt statements and actions contribute to the plot's overarching generation of suspense while also implicitly reflecting the work of concealment and revelation that drives the narrative. What we lack in spoken description of characters' thoughts, the play supplements with physical action and sustained physical presence: even when one character has the spotlight, the others remain in view, or have their presence signaled by a light in a window or a looming shadow.

Through its staging and attentiveness to the abilities of drama, Collins's play doesn't simply re-imagine, but actively *builds* on the first-person narrative insight present within the novel. Certain as he is of his audiences' familiarity with that work, the play's

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<sup>30</sup> Wilkie Collins. *The Woman in White. A drama, in a prologue and four acts. Altered from the novel for performance on the stage* (1871). (London: British Library, Historical Print Editions, 2010), 33.

staging and condensed plot engage with audiences' preexisting knowledge of character traits and motivations. As separate entities, neither the play nor the novel fully manifests either characters' individuality or depth of perspective. Certainly, both play and novel suggest aspects of the protagonistic characterization we have seen in novels such as *Frankenstein* and *Villette*, and both, in different ways, consider the separate characterization abilities of all-seeing and first-person narrative forms. In the novel, the quasi-omniscient editor and the first-person narratives feel at odds with one another, even as the work's overarching, formally protagonistic narrative structure requires their co-presence. Similarly, in the play, the viewer's ability to concurrently witness multiple characters' independent volition is in tension with those characters' somewhat stagy, melodramatic expressions of interiority; here too, the presence of a form of semi-omniscience both enables and diminishes a simultaneous multi-character protagonism. Yet, when considered not as independent versions of the same story, but instead as complementary narrative forms invested in pursuit of the same representational object, the simultaneity of personages on the stage, and the multi-voiced first-person narratives of the novel generate a shared version of protagonism. On the stage, characters' presence and dialogue invoke the precise individuality of the novel's declarative first-person narrations while tempering the sense that they are narrating against one another or the novel's pervasive authoritative perspective. In these ways, *The Woman in White* does make good – albeit belatedly – on the inclusive protagonism promised by that initial declaration of a self-consciously egalitarian narrative form.

But something is still missing from this inclusive character system. The culminating, multi-generic protagonism of play and novel still comes at a cost: any



novelistic character who is only peripherally on the edge of the plot's action, or who is only present in the novel when testifying, is excised from the dramatic version of the story. Indeed, the cast of the play is relatively small, comprising only eleven speaking characters: Walter, Marian, Anne and Laura (played, of course, by the same actress), Percival, the Count and Countess Fosco, Pesca, Mr. Kyrle (in the novel, Mr. Gilmore's co-solicitor) and finally Philip, Percival's valet. Mrs. Catherick also appears, but is included only in the prologue. Additionally appearing, though not speaking, are a matron of the insane asylum, two servants, and two assassins who murder Fosco at the play's end. Among all these characters, the dialogue and staging focus on only seven: the Foscos, Walter, Pesca, Marian, Laura and Anne. When Mr. Kyrle and Philip speak, it is only to answer questions posed to them by other characters. And while Mrs. Catherick may be precisely rendered by the stage directions ("She is over-dressed for her age and her station in life, has a bold look, and speaks in a hard, defiant manner"), she is still set apart from the play's diegetic center by her exclusion from its main three acts.<sup>31</sup> Nor does the play give us any physical details about many of the briefly present characters – there are no specific directions about the appearance of the servants, nor are the valet Philip or Mr. Kyrle described in any way at all.<sup>32</sup> While in the novel, the atypical narrative structure took pains to include the detailed narrations – and thus, self-characterizations –

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Collins was involved in the direction and casting of the first production of his *Woman in White* drama, and it's certainly probable that additional details and directions were given to those actors portraying characters in the more marginal roles. Additionally, assuming that other productions would have the novel to work from, it's possible that additional details about character simply weren't deemed necessary for the play. But the very fact that some characters in the play are delineated quite clearly, while others' physical and personal traits receive no attention, suggests that the difference is both deliberate and important.

of figures who were, in terms of plot, the most marginal of all, the play, in emphasizing the audience's ability to witness multiple characters' actions and perspectives simultaneously, necessarily excludes those characters who too tend to observe rather than participate.

In order to present the inclusively protagonistic structure of the novel's narrative form in more literal terms, the play also makes material the functional, instrumental nature of the novel's self-conscious first-person narrators. Here, those characters who stand on the fringes of the plot – and who are included in the novel precisely because of the potential insight that marginal perspective affords – are divested of their significance, reduced once again to quite literal background figures who are merely ancillary assistants to the seven highlighted characters. This, then, is a concrete manifestation of Woloch's definition of minor characters in a "helper" role: characters who are significant solely for the way they throw the vividness and complexity of major characters into relief. But as *The Woman in White's* dual genres illustrate, such a "helper" function seems poorly suited to the realist novel, in which seemingly marginal or incidental figures are still deliberately rendered, described in some detail and at least placed within another character or narrator's perspective, even if their own remains obscure.

Instead, the play reveals a character system that is both inclusive – within limits – and indicative of the kind of zero-sum economy of characterization that is the foundation of Woloch's character theory of one vs. many.<sup>33</sup> Divested of an overtly shaping, directing

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<sup>33</sup> I'm not arguing here that the dramatic genre as a whole is ill-suited to protagonism. On the contrary, Victorian drama has its own unique means of activating and illustrating the protagonistic forms of character that I've elsewhere described. Rather, in comparison to the novel, the dramatic production of *The Woman in White* play emphasizes the kind of divided character system that Woloch outlines in *The One vs. the Many*.

narrative perspective or significant detail about appearance or demeanor, the play's characters are more absolutely defined by categories of scale – easily classed as important or marginal based on amount of dialogue and stage time. The very fact that “helper” figures such as valets, assassins, and servants are most likely played by the same repeated set of actors only underscores their relative lack of individuality. They are fungible, made marginal enough that any details of individuality that do exist are willfully obscured.<sup>34</sup> In the play, the characters who in the novel are largely dependent on others to speak for them – characters such as Laura, Anne, and the Countess Fosco (not coincidentally, all women) – are placed on more equal footing with Walter and Marian, their speech presented as equivalently first-hand, unframed by another's voice, their agency correspondingly more palpable. Once more, their sustained and simultaneous presence on the stage unites their role in generating suspense with the success of their characterization; as their motives and actions conflict, both tension and characterization build. In turn, however, we are given a character underclass; in exchange for the focused narrative attention among many characters, we are allowed to simply ignore and sideline others.

In the end, it is Mrs. Catherick's character who best exemplifies the tradeoffs of the play's attempt to realize *The Woman in White*'s protagonistic aspirations. The script briefly extends to her the same prestige it later offers to characters such as Anne and Laura: her appearance is extensively detailed by the stage directions; her lines are individualized, expressive, and informative; and her presence on the stage in the opening

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<sup>34</sup> The servant figures, then, go from being surprisingly individualized in the novel, to being reduced to the generality that, as Bruce Robbins has described, typifies representations of the proletariat in nineteenth-century British fiction. See Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993 [1986]).

scene is significant. Indeed, even the dialogue that closes this opening scene places Mrs. Catherick on par with Walter himself. As Mrs. Catherick struggles to silence Anne and monitor Sir Percival in the vestry, while Walter and Pesca stand outside, listening, Mrs. Catherick and Walter each speak the same word to their respective companions:

“Hush.”<sup>35</sup> At this, the curtain falls and the prologue – already set apart in the script by its own cast list and title – closes. Mrs. Catherick embodies the fullest extent of the play’s successful union of character and plot – her interrogation of Sir Percival’s motives and her clearly fraught interactions with her daughter indicate her as a person of interest, in every sense. Yet “hush” is the last word she utters. Her only other presence in the play is through the mention of her name in later scenes, when Percival declares that she’s blackmailing him. Mrs. Catherick, then, from a character as prominent and active as the play’s central-character septet will later be, is reduced to merely a name. It’s not simply that Mrs. Catherick only appears for a single short scene. Rather, the very fact that her character is at first so keenly present and has such a vital role in the action, only to disappear entirely, makes her a figure for the transition and trade-offs of *The Woman in White*’s protagonistism as a whole. The novel’s multiple first-person narratives are unable to realize an inclusively sympathetic protagonistism, while the play’s equitable distribution of attention is unable to stretch beyond the representations of a central set of characters.

*The Woman in White*’s multi-genre characterization registers a narrative anxiety about protagonistism’s aspirations and capabilities. The novel’s first-person characterizations often feel combative, the curtailng force of an omniscient editor resulting in a sense that they are actively vying to realize their individuality in the brief space allotted to them. Yet the play’s more contentedly shared protagonistism is still also

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<sup>35</sup> *The Woman in White: A drama*, 16.

selective, still marked as much by what it excludes as includes. In the other novels on which I've focused, protagonism captures the Barthesian "something more," not just of character, but also of narrative – specifically, the novel's capacity to represent a sense of reality that necessarily exceeds the sum of stated detail on the page. Just as the reader is able to vivify Hayslope without needing to "see" every facet of its streets and buildings, so our sense of character relies on more than just an allotted amount of description or dialogue. Instead of Woloch's circumscribed one vs. many, I have suggested a flexible view of many and ones. In *The Woman in White*, however, there is a sense that a reader's attention can only sustain so much protagonistic characterization before resorting to some form of abridgement or simple disregard.

This is not to say that such limits are the same as Woloch's zero-sum economy of narrative attention. The anxiety *The Woman in White* registers isn't over a narrative's ability to make room for many protagonistic characters, but instead over the ability to sustain a reader's interest in them. Such anxiety speaks as much to the sympathetic limits of the individual as it does to the moral status of the novel or the workings of characterization. Here again, George Eliot provides a definitive articulation of the problem. If, as we've seen, Eliot gives voice to protagonism's capacious potential, making a case for realism's moral significance in its capacity to "amplify" and "extend" the limits of an individual's sympathy and understanding beyond that of his own experience, Eliot's later work also regularly articulates the potential limits of such ethical knowledge. Consider *Middlemarch*'s framing of Dorothea's unfortunate honeymoon:

Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by

what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

Though the squirrel's heartbeat is a touchstone for any description of Victorian sympathy, it's helpful to recall the larger context. Concerned that her reader may regard Dorothea's disappointment with her marriage with a sense of unsympathetic complacency – of course, as is “not unusual,” a naïve young woman will be disappointed with her cold and elderly husband – *Middlemarch*'s narrator seeks to disassociate Mrs. Casaubon from the familiarity of such disappointment. By doing so, the reader is encouraged to recognize and sympathize with what is, to Dorothea, a genuine tragedy. Simultaneously, however, the narrator reminds us that, were we able or willing to, we might find similar objects for sympathy in every one of those personal circumstances that are subsumed within the “frequent” type. Our inadequate sympathetic perception, wadded as it is with stupidity, is thus at once called out and embraced. Lacking the ability to experience the tragedy of the many Dorotheas, we must content ourselves with sympathizing with just the one.

In its own way, Collins's hyperprotagonism tried to resist such a concession. With *The Woman in White*'s emphasis on vivid idiosyncrasy, there is no possibility of deferring to type. Each character, once made fully present on the page or in the footlights, moves to the generalizing obscurity of the background only grudgingly, if at all. Yet at a certain point, this method of drawing attention to multiple characters simply breaks down: in the novel, first-person testimonies give way to the authoritative perspective that steps in to cohere and organize them, while in the play, certain kinds of characters are

simply pushed out. In this sense, then, Collins's sensation fiction makes explicit what the realist novel can only imply: no matter how well-rendered, vivid, or compelling a character may be, she still may not extend our sympathies or understanding any farther than her own fictional persona, nor, in knowing her well, are we any better equipped to hold her newly illuminated consciousness alongside an equivalent awareness of those of many others. Omniscient narration, while ostensibly all-seeing, can in fact seem to cater to an easy version of sympathy and identification – one in which we can reasonably assume our knowledge of another is accurate, and in which characters' perspectives, simply by virtue of being highlighted, are imbued with particular significance. Eliot recognizes these limitations and often attempts to compensate for them by giving her narrators a canny critical distance and a penchant for self-critique. Yet it is Collins's novel that, by hazarding a genuinely hero-less and expansive field of character, most pointedly captures the difficulty of not just realizing but also sustaining a protagonistic view. *The Woman in White* speaks to the very difficulty posed by our habituation to the novel's means of representing individuals. Here too, it is "the very fact of frequency" that contains both protagonism's moral onus and its potential for failure. Collins's characterizations suggest that no matter how successful protagonism might be at illuminating many centers of consciousness, we may simply tune out the insights it offers us.

## Chapter Four

### An Individuated Crowd: Protagonism, the City, and *Bleak House*

The passenger is not enthroned high up; he looks out on the same level as everyone else and brushes the passers-by with his sleeve ... Where Europeans, on their rapid journeys, enjoy superiority, dominance over the masses, the Muscovite in the little sleigh is closely mingled with people and things ... No condescending gaze: a tender, swift brushing along stones, people, and horses. You feel like a child gliding through the house on its little chair.

Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*

#### I. PROXIMATE UNDERSTANDING

A contemporary edited edition of Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* appends two epigraphs to Mayhew's text: one from Trollope's *The Three Clerks*, and the other from Dickens's *Little Dorrit*. Both passages detail fictional scenes full of the classes and types that Mayhew's own journalistic account describes: "drunken men coming down from the night supper-houses in the Haymarket;" "the horse waterman from the cabstand;" "night beggar-women;" and "homeless people."<sup>1</sup> Such epigraphs seem intended to underscore the pervasiveness of such figures in London life, while also highlighting the difference between fiction and Mayhew's journalistic project; the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* [1851], ed. Victor Neuberg (New York: Penguin, 1985) xxxi.



shadowy background figures of Dickensian drama and Trollopean realism are, in Mayhew, flesh and blood.

Here, protagonism appears to meet its match when faced with the challenge of representing the teeming city. The epigraphs highlight the particular challenge urban life poses for fictional representation, particularly characterization. In the memorable scene from *Little Dorrit* in Dickens's epigraph, the titular heroine and her vulnerable companion are forced to wander London's nighttime streets, encountering their fellow city-dwellers in the form of glimpsed faces and detached voices. The very proliferation of the urban crowd, vaguely threatening or coolly indifferent, refuses even the briefest of gestures toward interiority or specificity. Such detail, it seems, must be left to non-fiction accounts that can make such information their primary focus. The novel necessarily contents itself with the detached perspective of the flâneur, the depiction of the stock representative figure, or the generalized summary of the crowd. *The Three Clerks* and *Little Dorrit*, like so many other Victorian urban novels, depict the texture of city life through types, generalities, and stock figures.

Yet, the divide between fictional and non-fictional urban representation is not so simple. As faithful and accurate as it attempts to be, Mayhew's proto-sociological account of London's laboring underbelly is itself prone to summary and typification. As his critics have often observed, Mayhew's tendency to moralize on his subjects, along with the specimen-like illustrations that accompany his prose, can at times appear as callously generalizing as a novelistic description of nameless slum-dwellers.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>2</sup> As E.P. Thompson suggests, "the poor had long before discovered themselves ... [Mayhew] discovered, not poverty, but a middle-class consciousness of poverty." Thompson, "The Political Education of Henry Mayhew," *Victorian Studies*, 11.1 (1967): 41-61. Thompson suggests that Mayhew was considered "quaint" in his own time, but critics such as Catherine Gallagher,

juxtaposition of epigraphic novel quotes with Mayhew's prose reveals that virtually *any* attempt to render a city's populace must negotiate between individualized and general detail, between the instance and the rule. In this sense, Mayhew's project usefully frames and anticipates another quintessentially urban text: Dickens's 1853 novel *Bleak House*.<sup>3</sup> While Mayhew's and Dickens's approaches to their urban subjects are notably distinct in genre and focus, both draw on forms of narratorial and perspectival distance to signify complex subjectivities, using their respective narrative positions to highlight the challenge of capturing both individual and type.

Such distance itself reflects a distinctly urban affective understanding. As in our prior examples of protagonism, narrative represents subjectivity not through descriptive detail, but through a concise, immediate sense of interior specificity. In *Bleak House*, however, such representation tends to speak as much to a way of seeing urban life as to a specific consciousness – a distanced and yet intimate narrative stance able to take in both the crowd and the individuality of its members. This protagonism proves to be uniquely suited to representations of metropolitan life, in which both the practical and the moral

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Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Audrey Jaffe have argued that his ambivalent attitude toward the typification and categorization of the poor was indicative of a larger Victorian tendency to dehumanize such figures. See Gallagher, "The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew," *Representations* 14 (1986): 83-106; Himmelfarb, "Mayhew's Poor: A Problem of Identity," *Victorian Studies*, 14.3 (1971): 307-320; and Jaffe, "Detecting the Beggar: Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Mayhew, and 'The Man with the Twisted Lip,'" *Representations* 31 (1990): 96-117.

<sup>3</sup> See Patrick Brantlinger, "Bluebooks, the Social Organism, and the Victorian Novel," *Criticism* 14.4 (1972): 328-344; and Harland S. Nelson, "Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 20.3 (1965): 207-222 for discussions of the literary connections between Mayhew and Dickens. Brantlinger points out that Mayhew regarded himself as more of a "literary" figure than a journalist, using facts, statistics, and categories so loosely and imaginatively that their human objects seemed as "idiosyncratic" as Dickens's characters.

dimensions of living in close proximity to many people amplify protagonist's aesthetic and theoretical stakes.

Consider, for example, that in Mayhew the most illuminating descriptions of laborers' thoughts and feelings come not in their direct reported speech, but rather in the author's presentation of his subject's own testimony, apparently garnered through personal interviews. Though Mayhew certainly editorializes on the moral character of the workers, often explaining their "vices" as the result of their poverty rather than its cause, by presenting their words in a combination of quotation, paraphrase, and summary, he manages to convey a kind of deferential distance from these workers, as in an account given to him from a "mud-lark" – a scavenger who collects bits of metal from the Thames banks. While Mayhew includes long passages framed as direct quotation, the speech is clearly prompted by an interlocutor's questions, and moves in and out of both the young man's voice and that of Mayhew's journalistic summation:

He said his father was a coal-backer; he had been dead eight years ... he remembered once to have a pair of shoes, but it was a long time since. 'It is very cold in the winter,' he said, 'to stand in the mud without shoes,' but he did not mind it in summer. He had been three years mud-larking, and supposed he should remain a mud-lark all his life. What else could he be? for there was nothing else that he knew *how* to do.<sup>4</sup>

Typically, Mayhew allows this exchange to stand without further comment; indeed, the reporter staunchly refuses much sentimental commentary on even the most abject of

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<sup>4</sup> Mayhew, 211.

individuals and conditions he encounters.<sup>5</sup> Yet the interview with the mud-lark, like his other summarized and edited dialogues, conveys a sense of sympathetic connection with his interviewee. Mayhew's combination of summary and quotation illustrates both sensitivity to and interest in the boy's speech, mimicking tone and thought through a kind of focalizing free indirect discourse. The rhetorical question – "What else could he be" – followed by the italicized "how," indicates Mayhew's deliberate attempt not merely to report, but also to echo this child's distinct voice. At the same time, however, Mayhew allows one portion of the mud-lark's testimony to stand as a quotation: his straightforward acknowledgement of his work's hardship during the winter. By allowing the most abject aspect of the boy's doubtlessly grueling existence to be presented as direct speech, Mayhew tacitly acknowledges a limit to his own understanding of the boy's affective life. This narrative distance between reporter and subject, in combination with Mayhew's externally focalized and sympathetically aligned free indirect discourse, creates a surprisingly full portrait of the boy's subjectivity; suggesting his affective complexity by granting him agency and sympathy without presuming to fully understand, or be capable of representing, his lived experience.

Mayhew's description of the London mud-lark, and indeed, his journalistic prose in general, help us to see similar characteristics throughout Dickens's *Bleak House*. Though Dickens is often charged with over-sentimentalized portrayals of the poor, the combination of sympathy, independent agency, and insurmountable difference often informs *Bleak House*'s characterizations. Most notably, Mayhew's mud-lark resembles

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<sup>5</sup> Mayhew goes so far as to argue that sentiment is actually counterproductive to the perception of "truth" and, consequently, to any efficacious attempt to address the causes and problems of poverty: "Let me here confess that my immediate aim is the elimination of the truth; without this, of course, all other principles must be sheer sentimentality" (447).

*Bleak House*'s Jo, a crossing sweep and beggar, who despite, or perhaps because of, his lowly stature, comes in contact with and embodies connection between characters who initially appear to have little in common. In the novel's fullest depiction of Jo, the rather imperious narrator speculates about the boy's thought, in a passage that is unique to the novel in its description of a character's *possible* perspective. As in *London Labour*, this description remains at a distance, underscoring the depth of Jo's marginalization and social exclusion while simultaneously preserving the impenetrability of his direct consciousness:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in the utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of the streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not, to have the least of all that language – to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! ... To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I am here somehow too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human (as in the case of my offering myself for a witness), but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life!<sup>6</sup>

The narrator, and, by extension, the reader can only ever be “like” Jo, separated from him by qualifiers of equivalence and a “state” of being; wondering what it would simply ‘be like to be Jo’ remains, if not inconceivable, still left to the volition of the reader, as a more direct portrayal is implicitly refused by the narrator. And yet, as the narrator deepens his imagination of Jo's “state,” he moves from a description of that hypothetical perspective to a first-person expression of the feelings generated by that perspective: “to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere.” The distance between this “I” and that of Jo's is palpable, however. The

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: Oxford, 1998) 236. Pages hereafter cited parenthetically.

implied object of the reader's identification in this scene is not simply Jo, but also the narrator himself, engaged in the work of "filling in" the perspective, thought process, and state of being of a character whose consciousness is placed beyond the view even of omniscience. Here, then, the desire – and the inability – to "know" Jo suggests a form of sympathizing, agential distance similar to that which we saw in the description of the mud-lark. In both examples, the presentation of these figures is as much a narrative stance as it is a form of description – an attitude, assumed by a narrator in a position of power, that presumes to represent – yet not understand – another's subjectivity.

As we see in Jo's characterization, *Bleak House*'s narratives present a version of the personably journalistic character of Mayhew's prose. Both the third-person narrator and Esther Summerson prove to be objective though not anonymous; distanced though not unsympathetic; authoritative though not oppressive; focused yet transitory. Like Mayhew, each narrator negotiates between anonymity and personalized engagement in an attempt to find a form of narrative distance that can facilitate the recognition of other subjectivities without presuming to "know" them. While it may seem counterintuitive that distance produces a more nuanced approximation of subjectivity, and hence, a version of protagonism, *Bleak House*'s narrators employ more self-reflective versions of the professionalized distance found in Mayhew's journalistic record. Mayhew refuses to speculate about the inner lives of his subjects, but this disassociation is less an expression of clinical detachment than a judicious admission of the limits of his own ability to understand them. In the same vein, both the reticent first-person narrator Esther Summerson and the commanding omniscient narrator offer focalizations of characters that carefully negotiate distinctions between sympathy, understanding, and identification.

This is not to say that Esther and the third-person narrator exhibit identical narrative strategies, but they do display remarkably similar versions of protagonism. Esther's first-person narration ironically often elides her own presence while at the same time foregrounding the consciousness of other characters. Likewise, the omniscient narrator, already cloaked in anonymity, maintains distance from characters' interiority yet prompts affective identification with them, as we have seen in his speculation about Jo.

Of course, neither the first-person nor third person view is absolute – indeed, that seems to be the point. *Bleak House*'s split narration is the most direct attempt to obstruct readers' complete identification with a single perspective we have seen since Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As critics such as Peter K. Garrett and Audrey Jaffe have suggested, the tensions between the novel's individual and omniscient perspectives suggest that *Bleak House* acknowledges the inevitable insufficiency of any perspective; only through a sense of the strengths and weakness of each view is a full portrait of the social universe created.<sup>7</sup> I want to claim, however, that this narrative split also underscores how the distribution of narrative attention – protagonism's central feature – becomes a distinctly novelistic response to the perceived difficulty of maintaining numerous affective connections in an urban society.

As we saw in *The Woman in White*, the narrative facilitation of multiple perspectives is established not just by an all-seeing power of description or an incontestable authority. Instead, a narrator might successfully portray such a multi-perspectival view by incorporating adaptability and self-questioning into her own

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<sup>7</sup> Peter K. Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) 30; Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points*, 128-131. See also E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 79-80; and W. J. Harvey, "Bleak House: The Double Narrative," *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 89-99.

narrative voice, as in the case of *The Woman in White*'s Marian Halcombe. In *Bleak House*, though, this changeable, speculative, and porous narration is taken a step further. As they narrate their portions of the novel, the voices of Esther and the omniscient narrator continually play with self-effacement, distance, differentiation, and focalization, using such shifts to cultivate a protagonism that finds equivalences between the subjectivities of individuals from wildly divergent social classes. Echoing Ann Banfield's argument about the value of an outsider's perspective in the cultivation of a social consciousness in, for example, Jane Austen's "represented thought" in *Mansfield Park*, *Bleak House*'s narrators use narrative distance to cultivate perspectives that are strongly conscious of both their construction of and participation in a notion of the social body.<sup>8</sup>

These narrative perspectives serve as a formal counterpoint to the novel's strong interest in the appropriate objects and scope of altruism, improvement, and charity.<sup>9</sup> *Bleak House* memorably abounds with examples of bad good intentions and the most self-serving of self-sacrifices. Whether it is Mrs. Jellyby's "telescopic philanthropy," which allows her to bear a single-minded focus on the comfort of "the natives of Borrioboola-Gha" to the detriment of her own family's well-being (48-9); the faux-naïve Skimpole's cruelly narcissistic version of "cosmopolitanism," which allows him to appreciate the "poetry" of American slaves working on a plantation; or the heavy-handed Mrs. Pardiggle's utterly ineffectual proselytizing to the poor, *Bleak House* waxes

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<sup>8</sup> Ann Banfield, "The Influence of Place: Jane Austen and the Novel of Social Consciousness," *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (Totowa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981) 28-48.

<sup>9</sup> For two notable readings of philanthropy and reform in the novel, see Chris R. Vanden Bossche, "Class Discourse and Popular Agency in *Bleak House*," *Victorian Studies* 47 (2004) 7-31; and Daniel Hack, "Close Reading at a Distance: The African Americanization of *Bleak House*," *Critical Inquiry* 34.4 (2008): 729-753.



eloquent on the many ways social consciousness – and social work – can fail. Tellingly, however, the novel offers few corresponding successes. While Esther’s “benefactor,” John Jarndyce, provides an alternative model of charity, one based on personal ties and immediate proximity rather than self-aggrandizement, the endpoint of this altruism is always a retreat from the dense society of urban life. Esther, Ada, Richard, and Charley are aided only by being absorbed into Jarndyce’s Bleak House retreat. Here, charity and broad social consciousness appear incompatible.

Rather than locating a constructive view of social engagement in a single representative figure, then, the novel’s narrations and their shifts in perspective are themselves sites in which *Bleak House* speculates about forms of productive social understanding. For example, in the same chapter in which Mrs. Jellyby appears, Esther attempts to identify the proper objects of her own sympathetic concern. While Mrs. Jellyby attempts to woo Esther to her African cause, the narrative directs attention towards Mrs. Jellyby’s small son and grown daughter, the accident-prone little Peepy and the sulking, ink-covered Caddy, conscripted to her mother’s letter-writing campaigns. And as ever, Esther remains constantly attentive towards Ada, her own charge and companion. It is against these divided attentions that Mrs. Jellyby presents her charitable concerns through lectures, declarations, and abstract measures of success:

‘The African project at present employs my whole time. It involves me in correspondence with public bodies, and with private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species all over the country. I am happy to say it is advancing. We hope by this time next year to have from a hundred and fifty to two hundred

healthy families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha.’  
(47-8)

The very phrase “African project” epitomizes Mrs. Jellyby’s attitude towards her preoccupation. “African” is a mere modifier of the all-important and decidedly generalized “project,” the work of, again, abstract entities such as “public bodies” and “private individuals,” a distinction that itself severs the collective from the individual, much like the distinction between the hundreds of “healthy [and, we must assume, white and Western] families” and the “natives” who will be the objects of their pedagogical endeavors. Buried – almost literally – in her constant communication *about* “the African project,” Mrs. Jellyby distances herself not only from the needs and feelings of her own children, but also from communication with or understanding of any distinct subjectivity whatsoever, whether in Africa or at home. When Esther notes that Mrs. Jellyby dismisses the wounded Peepy, “fix[ing] her fine eyes on Africa,” the point is not merely that, as critics have often observed, Dickens is condemning a focus on foreign interests to the detriment of domestic ones. Rather, Mrs. Jellyby focuses her affective concern on an abstract, rather than a personal object, a choice that, rather than bringing the needs or experience of any other individual into clearer view, only underscores her own intransigent character. As in John Jarndyce’s form of charity, an implicit choice is made between distant and immediate objects of emotional concern.

In contrast, the objects and manner of Esther’s affective engagement are continually in flux. Her narration’s avoidance of either an abstract or personal perspective is best exemplified in a passage in which the contours of her own character seem to literally dissolve. Unlike Mrs. Jellyby and Jarndyce’s attitudes towards social concern,

proximity is, for Esther, less a form of selection than a conceptual model. Within Esther's self-effacing narration, proximity is itself a figure for a social consciousness that refuses the diminishing powers of abstract entities, generalizations, types, or taxonomies. As we see Esther attempting to rest after soothing the petulant Caddy, who has collapsed in tears on her lap, she tells us,

At first I was painfully awake, and vainly tried to lose myself, with my eyes closed, among the scenes of the day. At length, by slow degrees, they became indistinct and mingled. I began to lose the identity of the sleeper resting on me. Now, it was Ada; now, one of my old Reading friends from whom I could not believe I had so recently parted. Now, it was the little mad woman worn out with curtsying and smiling; now, some one in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one.

The purblind day was feebly struggling with the fog, when I opened my eyes to encounter those of a dirty-faced little spectre fixed upon me. Peepy had scaled his crib, and crept down in his bedgown and cap, and was so cold that his teeth were chattering as if he had cut them all. (54-5)

In one sense, the blending of Esther's experiences as she falls asleep recalls Mrs.

Jellyby's treatment of Africa. Esther too engages in a kind of abstraction, as each of the characters she has encountered during that day, in person or in imagination, merge into a kind of generalized figure in need of her care. Yet in contrast to Mrs. Jellyby's discussion of her philanthropic objects, Esther's narration of her engagement with others focuses on *their* individual aspects, while diminishing the precise character of her *own* voice and consciousness. Esther tries to "lose herself" not merely in "the scenes of the day," but also in the subjects who are those "scene's" focal points.

While the heroine often downplays her own benevolent agency, narrating her actions in straightforwardly descriptive passages as inevitable or done without question, interludes such as the one quoted above suggest a more reflective distance from those events. As Esther slides into sleep, her narrative ironically and impossibly marks the very

moment that she appears to lose her sense of self, a temporal dissociation that is then repeated in the narrator's description of the "purblind day" – marking the moment just before she comes into consciousness. That descriptive phrase, echoing the persona of the omniscient narrator, is quickly undercut by a rapid return to Esther's selfless voice, concerned only for the hapless Peepy. This narrative separation – both temporal and perspectival – allows Esther to place herself among the characters she describes and assists while maintaining an objective distance from them – as well as from that iteration of herself. Unlike Mrs. Jellyby, for whom individuals and collectives, self and other, are clearly held apart from one another, Esther's narration is capable of holding together both distance and a resemblance, both the general and the personal. As a template for social consciousness, the spatial model of proximity, as opposed to the thoroughly abstract "telescopic philanthropy," suggests this form of distance and connection. Proximity implies a shared space or context – a point of potential likeness – yet, by its very definition, it also maintains a sense of separation: "next to" preserves difference even as it describes a relationship between entities. While for Mrs. Jellyby social forms exist only as a kind of bland, uniform entity, differentiated only by their contrast to herself, Esther's perception of the social seeks to perceive individual distinctions *within* shared and collectively shaping contexts.

This view of the social is an inherently urban one, represented by the city's melding of individual and crowd, similarity and difference, but also extending the concept of urban proximity as a model for social consciousness. It is to this model – exemplified by Esther's self-aware yet self-effacing narration – that we should look for protagonist's expression in *Bleak House*. As we have seen in prior chapters, novels most

strongly exhibit protagonism in quite condensed and precise contexts – in the internal focalization of a seemingly minor character, for instance, or in the repeated assertion of an “I” in an interpolated first-person narrative – but *Bleak House* reveals protagonism through a kind of narrative accretion. Like the layers of mud and soot caked upon the London streets, the novel slowly builds narrative evidence of many minor characters’ importance, consciousness, and, consequently, connection to one another. At the same time, though, local characterizations also suggest protagonism’s deep yet condensed sense of interiority, albeit in ways that tend to delimit characters through those repeated behaviors, tics, and typifications for which Dickens’s characters are famous. Here, the shorthand precision of *Bleak House*’s characterizations can, while suggesting protagonistic individuation, also convey a sense of isolation and problematic incongruity, as characters become so particularized as to appear connected to their social milieu only by chance, rather than affective or agential means.

Conversely, Esther and the omniscient narrator repeatedly play, in different ways, with a narrative presence that feels anti-particular, capable of both personalized agency and objective distance (as we have seen in the omniscient narrator’s speculation about Jo, and in Esther’s narration of her semi-conscious state).<sup>10</sup> In these passages, *Bleak House* counters the fractured particularization present in individual characterizations with

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<sup>10</sup> See Jeremy Hawthorne on the limits of omniscience in the novel’s third person narration. Hawthorne suggests that limitations on omniscience ensure that the reader herself must be more “morally active” in her understanding of character. Hawthorne, (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987). James Eli Adams characterizes the relationship between Esther and the omniscient narrator as one of knowledge and “privileged distance”: “An anonymous, omniscient narrator witnesses events in the present tense and comments on them with worldly outrage; his record alternates with the retrospective, first-person account of an orphaned teenager, Esther Summerson ... As the third-person narrator tacitly frames Esther’s ‘progress’ from a privileged distance, he captures connections that elude her inexperienced eye (Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature*, 145).

perspectives that mediate between these disparate parts and a sense of a social whole. As we will see, however, this stance is an ambivalent one. It often – though not always – requires a narrator to engage in precisely the kind of abstract distance that, as we’ve seen in the character of Mrs. Jellyby, implies a kind of taxonomical separation – a position of all-seeing privilege that provides linkages or categories to an otherwise potentially disparate selection of individuals. Yet, as the next section will suggest, sometimes a description of absence, abstraction, or unknowing can be as revelatory to our understanding of a character as a detail-packed description.

## II. THE SOCIAL TYPE

Critics tend to typify Dickens’s characterization as excessively reductive and caricaturish. According to such arguments, repeated catch-phrases from characters, such as the perpetually “willin” Barkis in *David Copperfield*, to memorable traits, such as Flora’s inapposite flirting in *Little Dorrit*, make memorable but exaggerated and one-dimensional characters.<sup>11</sup> But I want to suggest that the repeated tics and traits that appear so often in the author’s characters have the effect of emphasizing idiosyncrasy while at the same time producing a sense of type – a feeling that we are recognizing someone who

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<sup>11</sup> A definitive assessment of Dickens’s characterizations appears in E. D. H. Johnson’s *Charles Dickens: An Introduction to His Novels* (New York: Random House, 1969) 115-116. Johnson’s reading of the surface-level personality typical of Dickens’s characters is archetypal, echoed in both twentieth-century and contemporary readings of Dickensian character: “The characters in Dickens’ novels are real in the same way that characters in plays are real, and in the same way, perhaps, that living people seem real to each other. Their true identities are masked even from themselves under conventionally prescribed poses, yet declare themselves through all kinds of surface clues: not only in the overt act, but in its accompanying gesture and facial expression; not just in the spoken word, but in the intonation and turn of speech with which it is uttered. Dickens’ method of characterization does not allow for the delicate probing of psychological states of mind; rather its success depends on the artist’s resourcefulness in creating consistent and emphatically defined patterns of individualized responses to external circumstance.”

is both unique yet strangely familiar.<sup>12</sup> When, for example, E. M. Forster uses Dickens to illustrate the difference between round and flat characters, he tells us that virtually all Dickens's characters are flat; they are, in other words, based upon a single, fixed, easily articulated idea. And yet, the flatness of these characters is never devoid of recognizable humanity:

Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own. It is a conjuring trick; at any moment we may look at Mr. Pickwick edge-ways and find him no thicker than a gramophone record. But we never get the sideway view.<sup>13</sup>

For Forster, being capable of single-sentence summary is inherently antithetical to actual roundness, even as an illusion of depth may still be achieved. Whatever of these qualities Dickens's characters possess is, to Forster, purely incidental. Yet easy summary and "human depth" – or, at least, the human – need not be opposed. Following on Forster's heels, I would suggest that it is precisely the tendency of Dickens's characters to be both idiosyncratic and familiar – both individual and type – that makes them an example of protagonism.

Indeed, even in this early novel, humanity need not be seen as only a conjuring trick. There is striking formal continuity between Mr. Pickwick's "vitality" and *Bleak*

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<sup>12</sup> Woloch reads character in Dickens as largely a matter of "eccentric" minor characters and weak protagonists; as minor characters become increasingly and distractingly distorted, they reflect on the very pressure of centrality itself. In a sense, *Bleak House's* divided narrative ensures that both a central consciousness and many minor characters will be given their due space (Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 177-79).

<sup>13</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 71.

*House's* urban individualism. Consider, for example, the characterization in *Pickwick's* two introductory chapters. Here we are introduced to Mr. Pickwick, Mr. Tupman, Mr. Snodgrass, and Mr. Winkle and first observe them on one of their club excursions. From the opening sentence, the reader is allowed a sense of almost immediate understanding and familiarity. The characters' *in media res* presentation both rapidly convinces the reader of their always-already recognizable characters, not only suggesting a type or category, but also at the same time emphasizing the individualizing distinctions between them. As "The first ray of light which illuminates the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved," Pickwick is before us all at once, shown, along with his friends, in all the defining glory of their club, placed into a context that, with its rituals and terminology, appears entirely unique and fully established.<sup>14</sup> Such a context, then, is strikingly comprehensible to the reader who has no prior experience with it:

The eloquent Pickwick, with one hand gracefully concealed behind his coat tails, and the other waving in air to assist his glowing declamation; his elevated position revealing those tights and gaiters, which, had they clothed an ordinary man, might have passed without observation, but which, when Pickwick clothed them—if we may use the expression—inspired involuntary awe and respect; surrounded by the men who had volunteered to share the perils of his travels, and who were destined to participate in the glories of his discoveries. On his right sat Mr. Tracy Tupman—the too susceptible Tupman, who to the wisdom and experience of maturer years superadded the enthusiasm and ardour of a boy in the most interesting and pardonable of human weaknesses—love. Time and feeding had expanded that once romantic form; the black silk waistcoat had become more and more developed; inch by inch had the gold watch-chain beneath it disappeared from within the range of Tupman's vision; and gradually had the capacious chin encroached upon the borders of the white cravat ... On the left of his great leader sat the poetic Snodgrass, and near him again the sporting Winkle; the former poetically enveloped in a mysterious blue cloak with a canine-skin

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (New York: Penguin, 1999) 5.



collar, and the latter communicating additional lustre to a new green shooting-coat, plaid neckerchief, and closely-fitted drabs.<sup>15</sup>

*The Pickwick Paper's* narrator manages to introduce and indoctrinate us all at once, typifying each character with distinctive roles, personality traits, and dress, but in so mannered a way that Pickwick and his companions seem to almost knowingly participate in their classification – they not only exemplify their roles, they also play them.<sup>16</sup>

Here, a sense of “roundness” comes not from a sense of complex, multi-sentence psychological description, but instead from our very recognition of the characters’ ongoing, fully formed identities. Marked personal traits and self-generating types don’t necessarily substitute for personal history, but they end up serving the same function: we feel as if we have known these figures for years. Here, in other words, the specific leads to the general: the trait suggests the type; the present moment implies its broader history; the unique instance sparks the feeling of a familiar pattern. When another character in this introductory scene “beg[s] it to be at once understood, that his own observations had been merely intended to bear a Pickwickian construction,” we feel that we understand exactly what he means, despite having been introduced to Pickwick only a few sentences

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.17.

<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Chittick discusses how *The Pickwick Papers* gradually transitions from the mode of the character sketch to a self-consciously literary work. In the course of writing the text Dickens sought to develop his reputation as a serious novelist while shedding the tendency to be seen as just a comic writer of cockney types. Despite this deliberate transition, however, the character sketch, with its suggestion of rich but brief summation, remains a useful model for understanding Dickens’s approach to characterization. We might even say that Dickens adapts the model of the sketch to the demands of the novel. *Pickwick's* Sam Weller, for example, straddles the category of sketch and literary character. He is a figure who, despite his relative “flatness,” is nonetheless singled out by Victorian critics for his “well-sustained” personality. See Chittick, *Dickens and the 1830s* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); and also Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965) for Dickens’s indebtedness to Fielding, Smollett, and Goldsmith in his approach to character.

prior.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Pickwick's own pseudoscientific observations of the world work by inferring broad generalities from specific instances; upon hearing that his cab's horse is a full forty-two years old, he "entered every word of this statement in his note-book, with the view of communicating it to the club, as a singular instance of the tenacity of the life of horses, under trying circumstances."<sup>18</sup> Implicit then, in *The Pickwick Papers*' characterizations and in Pickwick's own makeshift scientific method, is a point of view that always links the highly particular to some encompassing context – a shared approach to identity, a taxonomy or type, or a suggested but unseen collective history.

*Bleak House* largely shares this approach to particular characterization, with character's heightened personal traits imbued with not only a feeling of the individual or the specific, but also a sense of long-held consistency. In this novel, however, the narrators' habitually detached perspectives function to connect this specificity and consistency to some form of established social position. Just as the specificity of *The Pickwick Papers*'s characters is never far from some sense of general type, in *Bleak House* the individual is never far from a collectively established social context. While we have seen instances of such characterization from Esther's viewpoint, nowhere is this practice more marked than in the omniscient narrator's description of Mr. George, the shooting-gallery owner who also turns out to be the Dedlock housekeeper's long-lost son:

He is a swarthy browned man of fifty; well made, and good-looking; with crisp dark hair, bright eyes, and a broad chest. His sinewy and powerful hands, as sunburnt as his face, have evidently been used to a pretty rough life. What is curious about him is, that he sits forward on his chair as if he were, from long habit, allowing space for some dress or accoutrements that he has altogether laid aside. His step is too measured and heavy, and would go well with a weighty clash and jingle of spurs. He is close-shaved now, but his mouth is set as if his

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 21.

upper lip had been for years familiar with a great moustache ... Altogether, one might guess Mr. George to have been a trouper once upon a time. (314)

In this description the emphasis is all on external traits. The narrator's perspective preserves a sense of detachment by only assuming to know Mr. George from surface-level characteristics, presenting the character as though not only introducing us to him, but also seeing him for the first time. Yet despite this estranged description of Mr. George, the narrator takes pains to deduce aspects of the man's biography, not by the details present on him, but instead by the absences that define his every action. All tallied, the traces of George's "rough life" and vanished "accoutrements," "spurs," and "moustache" make the narrator's speculation about the man's military past feel ostentatiously understated. Everything about George in the moment in which we meet him registers who he is by who he was, situating him not only in a personal history, but also in a clearly defined social category. In fact, George's military history is far from an incidental point. It will eventually connect him back to his mother, the housekeeper Mrs. Rouncewell, which in turn connects him to the Dedlocks, and, by extension, to Esther herself. But this personal history's importance doesn't lie solely with the novel's intricately networked plot points and characters. George's particularized character is defined not just by excessively specific traits, but also by the context those traits register. As if to mark this very point, this presentation of Mr. George is immediately and emphatically followed by a description of social contrast, as the rugged ex-soldier is thrown into relief against the aptly named Smallweed family: "His developed figure, and their stunted forms, his large manner, filling any amount of room; and their little narrow pinched ways; his sounding voice, and their sharp spare tones; are in the strongest and strangest opposition" (314). In Mr. George's characterization, the social conditions of

particularization are implicit. In order to see the individual, we have to recognize both the social roles that have shaped him and the differences that make him stand out. As in *The Pickwick Papers*, this is not a characterization of “round” psychology, but its present-tense immediacy and capacity for recognition nonetheless imbues it with a kind of rich personal depth.

But if, in *The Pickwick Papers*, our challenge is to see how characters’ “flatness” – the capacity to be summed in a single sentence – can paradoxically contain a sense of protagonistic personal depth, *Bleak House* presents a different though related question about Dickens’s approach to character. The example of Mr. George may shows us how social influences are still apparent in particularized characters, but how do such individual characterizations contribute to the representation of a society? It is this question that is at the heart of another assessment of Dickensian character, one whose primary spokesperson was one of Dickens’s contemporaries – George Eliot. For Eliot, the problem isn’t merely that Dickens’s characters are “flat.” Instead, the charge is that their lack of recognizable interiority diminishes the author’s social critique. If, for an author such as Wilkie Collins, one-dimensional character could be seen as the natural price of a compelling plot, Dickens’s externalized characters are, in this line of thinking, a failure of realism, possessed of superficial psychology that undermines the author’s attempts to represent and reflect on social ills. As Eliot says in “The Natural History of German Life”:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological characters – their conceptions of life, and their emotions – with the same truth as

their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies.<sup>19</sup>

The charge that Eliot levels at Dickens is not simply that of capturing surface and ignoring depth – an earlier version of Alex’s Woloch’s take on Dickens’s minor characters as nothing but exaggerated external traits.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Eliot takes issue with Dickens’s representations of character in *social contexts*. Eliot valorizes “psychological” character not simply as end in itself or as an inherently more realistic approach to character. Instead, she claims that attentiveness to characters’ minds is necessary for both the accurate representation of a social body – the “town population” – and “the awakening [in the reader, and thus the world at large] of social sympathies.” For Eliot, in other words, the portrayal of “psychological character” is less about the fictional rendering of an individual than it is about a form of interpersonal, and by, extension, social, understanding.

If, in Dickens’s characterizations, the particular and the general are always dialectically present, for Eliot, generalization is always the thing to be guarded against, and only rich psychological interiority is up to the task. No matter if, in *Little Dorrit*’s presentation of Mrs. Plornish, Dickens “cop[ies] [her] colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture.” Even the most descriptive of external presentations can only produce a superficial specificity. In Eliot’s view, it is only by accessing individual psychology that realist authors and their readers can resist generalization’s inherent reductiveness:

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<sup>19</sup> Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” 111.

<sup>20</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 35.

The tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economic science, and that the relations of men to their neighbors may be settled by algebraic equations ... none of these diverging mistakes can co-exist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives.”<sup>21</sup>

Again Eliot emphasizes psychological specificity alongside its social efficacy. But although abstraction is to be avoided, the ultimate aim of such representations is still, for Eliot, plural: “the People”; and “the relations of men to their neighbors.” In faulting Dickens for his lack of psychology, she questions his ability to both spark social sympathy in his readers and also present a society in all its nuanced complexity.

Eliot’s criticism of Dickens’s characters implies that representations of social types or bodies will inevitably fall short of psychological realism, and, in doing so, unwittingly lend themselves to superficial and stereotyped views of the very populations who seem most to need our sympathy and understanding. At its best, Eliot implies, characterization can help readers understand the unique psychology of individuals and, in doing so, teach us to guard against dehumanizing labels. Indeed, Eliot takes pains not to simply equate Dickens’s portraits of poor and working-class characters with the idealistic and unredeemable stereotyping of authors such as Eugène Sue. She compliments Dickens’s acutely observed detail, and, as in her use of the term “copy” in her reading of Mrs. Plornish, associates his external characterizations with one form of truthful representation. Yet ultimately for Eliot, the only kind of characterization that can accurately represent “the people” is one that resists that concept. Here, “the people” are only comprehensible as *persons*.

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<sup>21</sup> Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” 111-2.

For Dickens, however, the opposite is true. *Pickwick* and Mr. George demonstrate the extent to which the author's characterizations view social constructions – types, generalities, categories – as inherent to the way we understand others' identities. Indeed, what Mayhew says of facts Dickens might well say of characters:

To give the least mental value to facts, therefore, we must generalize them, that is to say, we must contemplate them in connection with other facts, and so discover their agreements and differences, their antecedents, concomitants, and consequences ... It is true we may frame erroneous and defective theories in doing so ... nevertheless, if theory may occasionally teach us wrongly, facts without theory of generalization cannot possibly teach us at all.<sup>22</sup>

The potential reductiveness of considering people or characters as units of a larger whole is a concept to which I'll return in this chapter's final section, but the efficacy of the concept for Dickens's approach to character and social representation is a real one. What Forster describes as the defining trait of the round character – its ability to continually surprise us – is, for Dickens, a potential impediment to the very kind of instantaneous familiarity that his characterization seeks.<sup>23</sup> To be immediately familiar is not the same as to be known intimately or understood fully, but it does imply the ability to grasp in a concrete and decisive manner. As Mayhew suggests, this form of knowledge is certainly incomplete, but it is not without value. It spurs the pursuit of a broader context, an encompassing, meaningful form that enlivens and shapes the discrete unit. For Dickens,

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<sup>22</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour*, 448.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Forster says that all Jane Austen's characters tend towards the round, because they are all "ready for an extended life," as evidenced by their ability to break, even if briefly, from type (*Aspects of the Novel*, 75).

to discard the general, the classifiable, is to ignore individuals' participation in institutional or collective social structures.

### III. BEING JO

*Bleak House's* characterizations do more than just lend themselves to generalization, however. They also underscore the extent to which social legibility actually allows one to "count" as an individual. Not only does the novel suggest that classification and type can be seen as an example of protagonism; it also, in certain cases, figures the unknowability of characters' psychology as a way to elicit a kind of social agency and legibility that is otherwise denied to problematic or briefly mentioned characters. If Eliot sees the representation of characters' psychology as a way to cultivate social sympathy, Dickens uses such psychology's occlusion to the same end. Dickens's focalization of *Bleak House's* characters is never fully internal – it allows readers little actual knowledge or perspectival alignment with characters – but it nonetheless helps to produce his characterization's hallmark of immediate familiarity. In *Bleak House*, unknowable characters appear before the reader fully-formed and entrenched in their small corner of the novel's fictional universe. Here, this intransigent completeness at once marks characters as the product of their encompassing society and yet, at the same time, alienates them from participation within it. In turn, however, the external view invites the reader herself to re-inscribe such characters with a sense of their social function.

I want to return now to the example of Jo. We have seen how the narrator uses a distanced yet sympathetic stance to win understanding for his character without



discounting the extremity of his social marginalization. But the actual introduction of Jo's character – the moment, in other words, in which a sense of familiarity with him can be elicited – also considers the nature of such marginalization itself. Critics often single out Jo as an example of a character who takes on a larger social significance not because of his individuality, but because he provides a point of connection between characters and settings. Jo is the fatal link between Lady Dedlock, Nemo, Esther, and the literal and figurative disease of Tom-All-Along's, not to mention numerous other connections that emerge between these characters in the course of the novel's plot.<sup>24</sup> But long before such linkages become apparent, the scene in which Jo first appears also exemplifies the social significance of the omniscient narrator's mode of characterization, a detached external focalization that at once leaves the content of Jo's interiority obscure even as it guides the reader towards a refracted sense of his social position – or the lack thereof.

Introduced in a parenthetical exception that marks his marginalized status as well as any description – “(excepting the boy that sweeps the crossing)” – Jo first enters the novel as a witness, called to testify about the sudden death of Nemo, another mysterious, socially marginalized character. Indeed, Jo is present only in a small portion of a scene that primarily depicts the coroner's investigation into Nemo's life and demise, an event that the omniscient narrator presents in the detached, ironic tone that often governs his chapters. Yet, paradoxically, it is the narrator's very detachment that ultimately foregrounds and foreshadows Jo's significance to the plot as well as his social interpolation: the way in which his anomalous and inscrutable social presence produces

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<sup>24</sup> For representative examples see Garrett Stewart, “The New Morality of *Bleak House*,” *ELH* 45.3 (1978): 443-487; Caroline Levine, “Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form,” *Novel* 42.3 (2009): 517-523; and Michael Ragussis, “The Ghostly Signs of *Bleak House*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 43.3 (1979): 253-280.

both a sense of his own interiority and refracts outward to represent and critique his social context. The narrator in the inquest scene renders both the haphazard order of the public house “ceremony” and the frisson of salacious curiosity among the titillated spectators in a detail that manages to be both simultaneously satirical and journalistic, an effect largely created by paraphrasing characters’ speech. In doing so, the narrator takes on an impersonal third-person stance that echoes the perspectival inhabitation of free indirect discourse without the sense of intimacy generated by internally focalized viewpoint:

O! Here’s the boy, gentlemen!  
Here is he, very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged. Now, boy! – But stop a minute. Caution. This boy must be put through a few preliminary paces.  
Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don’t know that everybody has two names. Never heard of sich a think [sic]... Can’t exactly say what’ll be done to him arter he’s dead if he tells a lie to the gentleman here, but believes it’ll be something wery bad to punish him...  
‘This won’t do, gentlemen!’ says the Coroner. (176-7)

The passage’s opening vocative exclamation complicates Jo’s initial parenthetical introduction, combining a mock-heroic tone with a paraphrased statement that presents Jo to both the coroner and to the reader and portends his narrative importance. Likewise, the “caution” with which Jo is regarded makes his outsider status a signal to the reader to regard him with special care, predisposing us to take his statement at face value, and to question the coroner’s willingness to dismiss his speech. Indeed, in the entirety of the six-page scene, Jo’s testimony proves to be the one enduring detail in a passage that largely reads like a satiric vignette, and indeed, that for the remainder of the novel’s plot, has only a minor function. Jo’s speech is presented with just enough detail of pronunciation – “heard of sich”; “wery” – to suggest both directly reported dialogue and to draw the reader’s attention to that dialogue’s mediation by the narrator’s impersonal

yet sympathetic paraphrase, using the report of a one-sided series of defensive yet confused answers to elicit an emotional connection with Jo.

Jo's rejected testimony – inadmissible because he doesn't have the ability to swear to its truth – is, like the information and biography of Nemo's life and death, in the end of little relevance to the inquest scene. Indeed, we never learn many details about either character's existence even as their integral roles in the plot come to light. And yet, this absence of information is less of a denial of agency or identity than an illustration of social marginalization itself. Jo's knowledge and experience is here rendered devoid of content, lacking the only kind of "truth" and witness that the Coroner understands. If, for Eliot, to deny characters "habits," "ideas," and "motives" is to deny their figurative participation in "the People," for Dickens, the rendering of such information is to deny the very extremity of their marginalization. To presume to know Jo's thoughts is to risk trivializing the horror of his position and implicitly absolving his society of their willful blindness towards him. Instead, the detached yet intimate omniscient perspective renders Joe's speech in the same semi-paraphrase of the scene's other characters, albeit with a sympathetic, as opposed to ironic, edge. By denying Jo interior content while at the same time sketching the contours of his interiority through tonally distinct, externally paraphrased speech, the reader is thus invited to do the work of imagining his consciousness, thereby inscribing his character with the social agency that the Coroner denies him. Like the dead Nemo himself – "no one" – the potential meaning and identity that coalesces around the void of Jo's interiority is itself a reconstitution of the society legibility from which he is otherwise excluded.

While Jo is doubtlessly exceptional within *Bleak House*'s system of character, he exemplifies a version of the moral characterization Eliot promotes in "The Natural History of German Life" that echoes throughout the omniscient narrator's characterizations. If the omniscient narrator's impersonal distance and summarizing discourse expertly capture the paradox of representing a character denied social forms of representation – truth and testimony – those externally focalizing techniques are also used in the representation of other characters on the social margins. In addition to Joe and Nemo, characters as diverse as the workhouse servant Guster, who "goes cheap with this unaccountable drawback of fits" and who mainly serves as a convenient object for the temper of her employer, Mrs. Snagsby (156); and Inspector Bucket, who seems to appear out of nowhere and whose all-seeing gaze is rivaled only by that of the omniscient narrator, yet who can, when he chooses, appear as an affable everyman; are represented with the same distanced, outlined contours as Jo. In the case of each of these characters, the reader is given enough sense of specificity to imagine the presence of a distinct consciousness, even as the content of that consciousness is withheld, a denial of information that at once reflects the alternately problematic social extremities and prompts the reader to perform the work of social inscription that those characters' marginal social positions occlude.

Even Lady Dedlock, extreme in both her stratospheric social stature and her scandalous secret, is denied much actual agency. Her place as one of the "Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty" and a leading figure in "the world of fashion" might seem to ensure her narrative and social centrality, but instead, these categories underscore the extent to which she is sidelined, precluded from direct participation by the very

superficiality of her milieu: “it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger world, and cannot see them as they circle around the sun” (20). Subject to frivolous attention, though never understanding, Lady Dedlock is as divorced from social legibility as Jo, albeit in a way that makes her complicit in her own marginalization. Indeed, even the event she desires most – Tulkinghorn’s death – is at once ascribed to and independent from her agency:

Her enemy he was, and she has often, often, often wished him dead. Her enemy he is, even in his grave ... The horror that is upon her, is unutterable. If she really were the murderess, it could hardly be, for the moment, more intense.

For, as her murderous perspective, before the doing of the deed, however subtle the precautions for its commission, would have been closed up by a gigantic dilation of the hateful figure, preventing her from seeing any consequences beyond it; and as those consequences would have rushed in, in an unimaginable flood, the moment the figure was laid low ... so, now she sees that ... it was but wishing that all he held against her in his hand might be flung to the winds, and chance-sown in many places. (790)

Here, with the same detached free indirect discourse we saw in Jo’s introduction (the repeated “often”), the narrator details the extent to which Lady Dedlock is unknown not only to us, but also to herself. Her furtive motivations aren’t even a proxy cause of Tulkinghorn’s murder; instead they demonstrate that the only actual desire she possesses is itself a kind of relinquishment – a giving-in to “chance-sown” possibility. All that precipitates Lady Dedlock’s crisis is in the subjunctive. Like Jo, she is besought less by actions than by their absence. Her wish to act is unfulfilled, yet that unfulfillment brings its own unforeseen consequences. Indeed, the only avenue of action left to Lady Dedlock in the novel’s conclusion is that of an embrace of the position of abject marginalization –

the only social agency she can assert is that of claiming her place an outcast – a unwed mother and a fraud.<sup>25</sup>

As Jo and Lady Dedlock demonstrate, the omniscient narrator's characterization works by a form of impersonal, if paradoxically intimate, external focalization, a technique which serves to both represent the profound exclusion and social marginalization of characters even as it spurs the reader to perform the work of sympathetic imagination. It is only in this last regard that *Bleak House*, by providing just the contours of marginal characters' interiority, hazards to write them into the social consciousness that Eliot largely takes for granted. Indeed, this version of Dickensian characterization suggests a new reading of Eliot's plea for a thoughtfully particularized characterization: by placing the burden of sympathetic understanding squarely on the shoulders of descriptive content – the very exhaustive psychological detail that Dickens excludes – she implies that the only impediment to this sensitive social understanding is a lack of individualized realism – were we only capable of writing and disseminating the rich individuality of, say, “the old woman bending over her flour pot,” or “the awkward bridegroom” and his “high-shouldered, broad-faced bride,” our extant understanding would be capable of extending sympathy and recognition towards these otherwise trivialized or sentimentalized figures. In *Bleak House*, however, we must consider the social preconditions of both identity and sympathy. How, the novel asks, can we extend understanding to those who are unable to claim their own social agency? To those who are socially illegible? The novel's omniscient characterization implies that before we can

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<sup>25</sup> A position that, of course, would already have been prepared for her by coterminous representations of and discourses surrounding the “fallen woman.” See Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Nina Auerbach, “The Rise of the Fallen Woman,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.1 (1980), 29-52.

consider sympathy we must comprehend the extent of social marginalization itself. In this view, *Bleak House*'s web of connections appears less like a revelation of the interrelatedness of social classes and more like a testament to those connections' inadequacy; we may, though coincidence, disease, bureaucracy, currency, and even smoggy atmosphere be brought into contact with one another, but even within this density of urban relationships, or perhaps because of them, the extent and the profundity of those connections tends to remain obscure.

But what of Esther? As an autodiegetic narrator, she is in the story while at the same time able to reflect on it from the inherent distance of her narrative stance. She is blind to certain social connections yet the facilitator of others; regularly on view to the reader though also often – and at the same time – self-effacing. Tellingly, however, the novel makes Esther's physical appearance a central component of both its plot and its discourse, using her own contemplation of her external traits in her narration as a further occasion to consider the role form of external or physical legibility play in collective contexts – whether social or narrative. Esther's physical appearance is, of course, the first suggestion of her relationship to Lady Dedlock. The two women's resemblance is first noted by Guppy after seeing Lady Dedlock's portrait, and then by Lady Dedlock herself when she sees her lost daughter in church. But the nature of Esther's appearance is nowhere more at issue than in its disfiguring transformation by smallpox. Following her illness, Esther realizes that all the mirrors in her room have been removed. She then gently questions her maid Charley, only to have Charley's tears confirm what she has already felt – that the disease has scarred and irrevocably altered her face. To be sure, Esther's changed appearance is significant in its potential to preserve the hidden identity

of her mother, but its consequence most pointedly lies in the very act of self-examination it precipitates:

There was a little muslin curtain drawn across [the looking glass]. I drew it back; and stood for a moment looking through such a veil of my own hair, that I could see nothing else. Then I put my hair aside, and looked at the reflection in the mirror: encouraged by seeing how placidly it looked at me. I was very much changed—O very, very much. At first, my face was so strange to me, that I think I should have put my hands before it and started back, but for the encouragement I have mentioned. Very soon it became more familiar, and then I knew the extent of the alteration in it better than I had done at first. (528)

In its emphasis on gradual revelation and the acts of lifting curtains and veils, Esther's study of her face mimics the trope of the very kinds of psychological revelations an author such as Eliot seeks in her characterizations; behind the obstructing external drapery lies the true self.<sup>26</sup> What lies behind Esther's veils, however, is another version of outward facing identity, a variation of the Esther who is already on "public" view. Once more, in this scene of what undoubtedly constitutes a point of personal crisis, the extent of Esther's emotional response remain muted. All the reader is given are the surface indicators of inner tumult – a vocative exclamation, a physical reaction forestalled. What we do "see," however, is an instance of unrecognition and dawning familiarity, as Esther's reflection goes from that of a stranger placidly looking back at her, to one that she connects to the version of herself that she knows. In this way, then, Esther participates in the forms of external characterization and social (re)inscription that we have seen in the omniscient narrator's chapters. By viewing herself anew, as if for the first time, Esther's narration implicitly registers the extent to which even her identity is

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<sup>26</sup> Helena Michie reads this scene as both an erasure and affirmation of Esther's body that irrevocably connects her to her mother. See Michie, "'Who is this in Pain?': Scarring, Disfigurement, and Female Identity in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*," *Novel* 22 (1989): 203, 206. See also Nicholas Dames's reading of interiority, "surfacing," and phrenology in *Villette* (*Amnesiac Selves*, 86).



shaped by an external, social view. Physically marked not just through familial likeness but also now through literal and figurative societal disease, the narration of her re-appearance ties her own characterization to the problematic social legibility of figures such as Jo and Lady Dedlock, and to the forms and uses of character apparent within the novel's third-person passages.

Esther's narration closes the novel with a return to her changed appearance. In doing so, however, the novel turns the glass away, so to speak, to reflect an ideally socialized form of character – and thus, a kind of ideal potential protagonism. This characterization maintains its emphasis on immediate recognition through external traits, but without the potential for misreading, misrecognition, or illegibility. In this last view of Esther, we find her telling her husband that her thoughts have momentarily returned to her “old looks – such as they were”:

‘My dear Dame Durden,’ said Allan, drawing my arm through his, ‘do you ever look in the glass?’

‘You know I do; you see me do it.’

‘And don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?’

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—. (914)

In this final sentence, Esther describes the figures who form her own close-knit society in simple and equivalent terms – “pretty”; “beautiful”; “handsome”; and “bright.” Crucially, such traits are associated with a form of stable knowledge – she “knows” that each of these characters is inseparable from their straightforward aesthetic signifiers. In this example of perfect interpersonal understanding there is no need to explicate all that the shorthand traits imply. What Esther's narration demonstrates, then, is the kind of clear

social legibility that the novel elsewhere finds problematic. While a description of beloved friends and family through almost childlike terminology may reveal little about characters' identity or psychology, it does demonstrate a kind of summation of deep familiarity; Esther's children, husband, and companions "are" these superficial traits, but they are also manifestly so much more. As Allen remarks on Esther's appearance – her own "prettiness" – he inscribes her within this perfectly legible system of signifiers, "mirroring" not her image of herself, but the way others see her.

Of course, the society depicted in this final scene is, in a sense, a hermetic one. The second, better Bleak House that is the married Esther's home is untouched by the urban, worldly influences that contaminate the first – no easterly wind blows here. Esther's ideal community is as self-selected as it is homogenous, suggesting, perhaps, that the novel views what I am calling a social protagonism – a condition in which a first glance is enough to make each individual legible as both a unique person and a collective member – as a utopian ideal at best. However it would be a mistake to assume that *Bleak House* associates the city only with a version of protagonism's failure. As we will see in this chapter's final section, the city's defining paradox of disparate parts within a somehow unified whole is itself an extension of Esther's final ideally social protagonism. In *Bleak House*'s London, the very instability of individual and general categories is the key to understanding their mutually defining protagonistic potential.

#### IV. "LIKE A DEWDROP IN THE OCEAN"

It is the city, after all, to which *Bleak House* first introduces us. With its infamous fog and implacable November weather, *Bleak House*'s opening description of the London

metropolis is easily read in terms of vague and anonymous bureaucratic power, an all-pervasive extension of that creeping, curling, veiling fog.<sup>27</sup> Yet for all this murky evocation, the passage still carries a tone of decisive fixity, from its opening sentence – “London.” – to its details: “Dogs, indistinguishable in the mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas,” and, of course, “Fog everywhere” (11). Or, we might say, nouns everywhere. *Things* predominate here, but of a specific sort, precise enough to feel concrete, but categorical enough to, like that fog, erase meaningful differences and details. The description feels as though the narrator, standing from a survey point, is calling out salient features in a kind of of-the-moment taxonomy, first the place itself, then the things in it, then, stepping back, the miasma that envelopes them all. The very phrase “Fog everywhere” encapsulates this combination of linguistic specificity and conceptual generality – Fog, in all its exact noun-ness, is at once a component of the scene and, at the same time, “everywhere,” inseparable and indistinct from our perception of any other aspect of the setting.

This combination of precise points within a confused whole continues throughout the novel. Even Esther’s first impression of London, though lacking the omniscient narrator’s all-seeing vantage, maintains a sense of the city as a union of specificity and vagueness:

We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that were ever seen in the world (I thought), and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses, until we passed into a sudden quietude under an

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<sup>27</sup> For representative examples see Lauren M. E. Goodlad, “Is There a Pastor in the ‘House’?: Sanitary Reform, Professionalism, and Philanthropy in Dickens’s Mid-Century Fiction,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31.2 (2003): 525-553; and Allan Pritchard, “The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45.4 (1991): 432-452.

old gateway, and drove on through a silent square until we came to an odd nook in a corner, where there was an entrance up a steep flight of stairs, like an entrance to a church. (37)

Dirt, darkness, and confusion give way to a precise sense of local place, a “silent square” and an “odd nook” that all at once break through urban tumult.<sup>28</sup> Whether describing the confused city streets or the quiet square, Esther’s terms feel reserved, preferring careful documentation of her own perceptions to vivid, ornately adjectival renderings of what she sees. The sense of sudden precision that attends her description of the square comes less from added detail or richer terminology (“old,” “silent,” “odd,” and “steep” give the imagination little to build upon) than from the heightened sense of difference between *this* place – the square – and the remainder of the city. The phrase “until we passed into a sudden quietude” serves as a stark temporal and spatial demarcation, dividing a now and here from the then and there. Like the omniscient narrator’s introduction to London, then, Esther too assumes a narratorial persona that reflects the city’s paradoxical amalgam of likeness and difference, using a general descriptive terminology to register distinctions that, with only a slight change in emphasis, can slide into blended similarities. But while the omniscient narrator uses a detached perspectival distance to produce such an effect, Esther’s assumed naïveté results in a noticeably similar result; within the city, though still an outsider, she remarks on London with a newcomer’s attention to differences and distinctions, rather than details.

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<sup>28</sup> See Garrett Ziegler, “The City of London, Real and Unreal,” *Victorian Studies* 49.3 (2007) 431-455, for a discussion of how mid Victorian London transitions from an affective space of lived experience to an abstract metaphor in wake of growing economic speculation.

Such differentiation – and the perspectives that foreground it – are not merely a way of making sense of a convoluted urban landscape, but are also a model for a kind of urban persona that recognizes the minute distinctions of urban life while blending into its whole. One of the hallmarks of Baudelaire’s flâneur, after all, is a kind of assimilation that maintains personal distance. Like the poet who is “able to be himself or someone else,” the flâneur is “able to be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, as Esther and the omniscient narrator use forms of generality and differentiation to describe the city, they also self-reflexively place their own personas in the terms of likeness and difference. Unlike Collins’s *The Woman in White*, in which protagonism is evidenced by a rejection of instrumentalizing similarities in favor of an outsized emphasis on unique personal traits, *Bleak House*’s social protagonism stems from forms of likeness and proximity. The narrative’s reflection of the urban milieu negotiates between specificity and typology in descriptions of its setting, in characterizations, and in the narrators’ personas themselves.

In one sense, the idea that conceptions of the metropolitan environment shape an understanding of the individuals within it implies a troubling equivalence, as ways of judging places and things extend to people. This way of perceiving the city is, in part, the foundation of Friedrich Engel’s famous critique of London life in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Writing in the early 1840’s, Engels offered a damning assessment of life in the contemporary metropolis, in which the commercial basis of the city’ development proves to be inseparable from the fractured, cruelly impersonal society it fosters: “This colossal centralization, this heaping together of two and a half millions of

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” [1863], in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, tr. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964) 9-10.

human beings at one point, has multiplied the power of this two and half millions a hundredfold ... [but] one realizes ... that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature.”<sup>30</sup> Engels contrasts impersonal, and indeed, almost inconceivably vast numerical estimates with the unquantifiable aspects of “human nature.” Here, the extreme proximity of “heap”-like London living makes society seem to have little more connection than that. Like large numbers themselves, the London population becomes little more than discrete units comprising a greater whole:

The more Londoners are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and disgraceful becomes the brutal indifference with which they ignore their neighbors and selfishly concentrate upon their private affairs. We know well enough that the isolation of the individual – this narrow-minded egotism – is everywhere the fundamental principle of modern society. But nowhere is this selfish egoism so blatantly evident as in the frantic bustle of the great city. The disintegration of society into individuals, each guided by his private principles and each pursuing his own aims has been pushed to its furthest limits in London.<sup>31</sup>

For Engels, the sheer pressure of jumbled nearness has the effect of intensifying individual vices. Shared space becomes an ironically empty substitute for shared social character and the concern for others on which, for Engels, a society depends. In his simultaneous position of an evaluating outsider and his interest in the individual effects of living in the metropolis, Engels pinpoints an enduring paradox of the city: the more crowded the city appears, the more affectively and psychically isolated are its individual inhabitants.

To an extent, Engels’s version of London is apparent in *Bleak House*, reflected in the sheer number of characters and in the hyperbolically specific traits that often define them. As we are successively dropped into new scenes among new personalities, *Bleak*

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<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1887] (New York: Oxford, 1999) 36.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

*House* manages to diminish our sense of a novel's inevitable purposefulness of plot and authorial agency enough to make palpable the uncertainty and isolation of the lives of characters such as Jo, the scribe Nemo, the rag-and-bottle shop owner Krook, and even the dubiously privileged Lady Dedlock. Even the novel's oft-noted interest in the forms of branching connection suggested by both coincidence and detection feel surprisingly inadequate to the portrait of urban disorder the novel so successfully draws. Although critics such as Anne Humpherys and Richard Maxwell have emphasized the novel's ordering features, suggesting that coincidence represents an "integration of the diffuse experiences of modern urban life," while detection indicates a form of knowledge and power uniquely suited to the city's obfuscating disorder, these ordering structures still feel notably unavailable to the reader, and indeed, most of the novel's characters.<sup>32</sup> Even for Maxwell, the ultimate aim of the novel's combination of mystery and revelation is only the "sickness of society," making coincidence and detection feel like compensatory forms of order at best, weak bulwarks against a threatening chaos.

Indeed, despite these prominent features of the novel's structure, a sense of Engels's fractured disassociation still comes through. Rather than appearing as the products of forms of privileged agency – whether divine, authorial, or individual – coincidence and detection seem to be governed by nothing more than the weak order imposed by the same power of urban proximity notes by Engels.<sup>33</sup> While connections

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<sup>32</sup> See Anne Humphreys, "Generic Strands and Urban Twists: The Victorian Mysteries Novel," *Victorian Studies*, 34.4 (1991): 457; and Richard C. Maxwell Jr., "G.M. Reynolds, Dickens, and the Mysteries of London," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 32.2 (1977): 188-213.

<sup>33</sup> As Richard Maxwell observes, G. M. W. Reynold's sensational Victorian weekly series, *The Mysteries of London*, could be seen as a forerunner to *Bleak House's* interest in urban chance, disorder, and opaque connections. In this context the city appears not as a nexus, but instead as the primary sight of bureaucratic secrecy and obscurity.

emerge between characters who initially seem have little to do with one another, such as the ties between Jo, Esther, Lady Dedlock, Nemo, and the law writer Snagsby, it is only the reader, rather than the characters themselves (or indeed, even the dual narrators) who has the capacity to recognize the full extent of these linkages, underscoring the fact that a view of the full extent of this interconnectedness is virtually impossible from within the context the characters share. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, even Inspector Bucket, the novel's primary figure of detection, has just a modest power; he can only follow "the classic script of the fallen woman" in his search for Lady Dedlock, his dependency on an urban archetype leading him not on her path, but first to the docks and bridges from which she may have jumped.<sup>34</sup> His ultimate success in finding her is as much a result of the sheer amount of ground he covers as it is any heightened power of insight.<sup>35</sup> In these ways, the novel's coincidence and detection appear to be merely chance side effects of urban proximity, rather than causal participants in a connected social identity.

But this is not to say that *Bleak House* or its protagonist are uninterested in the potential for uniting linkages with its metropolitan setting. While the novel in some ways reflects Engels's stark paradox of dense humanity and fracturing individuality, Georg Simmel's essay on "The Metropolis and Mental Life" helps to illustrate *Bleak House*'s alternative to the impersonal chance connections of proximity.<sup>36</sup> Here, a sense of isolation

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<sup>34</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007) 195-6.

<sup>35</sup> See D. A. Miller's point about the novel's amateur detectives – unable to "impose a will to truth and power." *The Novel and the Police*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Elana Gomel discusses Simmel in relationship to Dickens as she considers how the concept of the flâneur explains the author's negotiation of distance and sympathy. See Gomel, "The Urban Chronotope of *Bleak House*," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 9.2 (2011): 297-309, form



is itself a shared sensation, a defining contradiction of the city similar to the one Engels observes, but with a different emphasis:

The mutual reserve and indifference, and the intellectual conditions of life in large social units are never more sharply appreciated in their significance for the independence of the individual than in the dense crowds of the metropolis, because the bodily closeness and lack of space make the intellectual distance really perceivable for the first time. It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom that, under certain circumstances, one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons.<sup>37</sup>

Here again is the suggestion of heightened self-interest and isolation within the urban throngs. But whereas Engels views such isolation in largely moral terms – leading, inevitably to “selfish egoism” – Simmel emphasizes the “mutual” sensation of separation itself. And while Engels views the excesses of individualism as leading only to the dissolution of all productive social connections, Simmel attempts to define the kinds of relationships that are possible given the extreme conditions of urban existence. Believing that “man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences,” or the drawing of distinctions between “present impressions and those which have preceded,” Simmel contends that the rapid and even “violent” changes in impressions that the city produces lead its inhabitants to develop not merely a strongly individualized, but also an “intellectualistic” persona, as rationality becomes a way to insulate their “inner” or emotional selves” from the rapid “fluctuations and discontinuities” of the metropolitan milieu. Thus, the relationship of the individual urban dweller to the city, and of the city’s

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<sup>37</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1971) 334.

residents to one another, is one that develops out of a propensity to distinguish impersonal comparisons and linkages between different objects.

Rather than the problem of balancing social interests with individual ones, the question here becomes how it is possible to recognize others' individuality when one's own sense of subjectivity depends upon the flattening of personal difference and the application of organizing categories or units of comparison. In Simmel's estimate, "All emotional relationships between persons rest on their individuality, whereas intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers."<sup>38</sup> Here, the perception of individuality – rather than likeness – becomes impossible for the city resident who is continually confronted with extreme and varying degrees of difference. For Simmel, then, individual and collective interests rarely fall into a static binary. Indeed, Simmel's essay culminates with an argument for the city as a space in which two distinct versions of individuality compete and converge – one, based in the Enlightenment belief in the inherent independence and equality of human beings, and the other in the Romantic emphasis on the "qualitative uniqueness" of each person. In this context, "individual independence" carries the potential for relationships of likeness between city dwellers, while the "elaboration of personal peculiarities" enables the recognition of distinguishing subjective differences amid the impersonal crowd.<sup>39</sup>

Both Engels's emphasis on urban proximity's weak social coherence, and Simmel's articulation of the kinds of relationships produced by urban individualism help to define *Bleak House*'s approach to subjectivity and character. As we've seen in the two narrators' introductory descriptions of London, differentiation and abstraction are often

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 325-6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 338-9.

presented as two sides of the same coin. In these examples, particularized detail appears less descriptive than a perspective that can select salient objects and define significant distinctions between them – particularly in the context of an endlessly complex urban environment. Such a perspective manages difference in the way that Simmel suggests is necessary for the metropolitan citizen’s self-preservation, using general terms and categories to suggest a sense of relationship and coherence between widely varied objects. But it also refuses the suggestion that such a perspective must inherently result in impersonal reductiveness.

For the novel, of course, a narrowing of focus is necessary. Despite *Bleak House*’s expansive cast of characters and clear investment in the representation of massive governing social institutions such as Chancery, there is still some necessary principle of selection at work in the plot. When a character is introduced to us, we know it is for a reason; he or she will likely have some connection to others or to the events of the narrative, a sense that is only heightened as characters reappear and are reintroduced in each of the narrator’s voices. We trust the novel to provide a linking coherence, even if we may feel adrift in the moment. As in the logic of sensation fiction, in which even the smallest detail may be filled with a charged significance, *Bleak House*’s densely urban milieu heightens the sense of charged importance in characters’ appearances. Pulled out of the crowd, we know we should pay attention to them. In the context of the city, then, difference, and, more importantly, *differentiation*, are organizing principles of the novel’s protagonism.

In one sense, such differentiation is only of the most superficial kind, serving, like Simmel’s description of people treated as numbers, to demarcate mere units that together

form a cohesive sum. This is the version of character in *Bleak House* most evident in contemporary criticism's take on the novel as network. In recent discussions of network theory and characterization, a literary text's depictions of interiority or psychology become less significant than their role in generating connections and juxtapositions – both thematic and formal. As Caroline Levine has argued of *Bleak House*'s characterizations: "Though characters do represent social groups, the novel actually goes to some trouble to stress that characters are less important because they are exemplary or synecdochal than because they play crucial roles in social, economic, and institutional networks."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in Franco Moretti's account of quantitative plot analysis and networks, the most important aspect of a character is not a realistic consciousness but the extent to which that character "minimize[s] the sum of the distances to all other vertices." Here, character binaries such as "major" and "minor" are meaningless, as network theory suggests that by ignoring (or not being able to account for) characters' interiority, we can view their relative importance in the more concrete terms of their connections to one another.<sup>41</sup> In different ways, Levine and Moretti imply that excessive difference – like the kinds of personal specificity found in representations of interiority, individuality, or vivid external traits – are intrinsically opposed to the perception of networked connections between characters throughout a plot. In this view of character structure, one mode of characterization precludes the other; the more focused a text is on characters' psychology, the more obscure is those characters' larger roles within both a plot and a text's social representation. As in Simmel's portrayal of the perception of urban personhood, each

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<sup>40</sup> Levine, "Narrative Networks," 517-523.

<sup>41</sup> Franco Moretti, "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," Stanford Literary Lab, <http://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet2.pdf>. Accessed February 10, 2013.

nodal character is both similar and distinct from all others. What literary network theory implies, however, is a valorization of large-scale perception over the recognition of individual difference; only by conceptually viewing the form that incorporates *all* characters can we correctly evaluate the significance of each one.

Yet to read *Bleak House*'s characters *only* in terms of their role in the novel's networked view of society or their implicit significance to the plot is to diminish the sheer amount of attention the novel pays to individual characterizations, and indeed, to overestimate the significance of the connections that do emerge. While the novel's appeal to literary network theorists is not surprising – the sheer number of characters and their repeated introductions within the dual narratives practically compels a reader to chart out their connections – their interests tend to have the effect of making networked connections appear explanatory, as if, by seeing the network, something of greater importance is revealed. In fact, however, the very confusion that results from the novel's numerous characterizations and their appearances, reappearances, and lingering effects, is itself key to the novel's representation of urban individuality. The ways connections are lost or obscured are as significant as the ways they are revealed, a dialectical relationship that underscores how each glimpse of specificity and significance, each view of a structure, is, from a slightly different standpoint, merely an arbitrary one, part of the teeming city that can also serve merely as the background against which another view of significance can be set.

In both their dual form and their individual voices, *Bleak House*'s narrations exist less to fill in gaps in the other's perspectives than to illustrate such arbitrariness as a principle of city life, and as a factor in any attempt to recognize an individual within its

dense human crowd. Indeed, the demonstration of such arbitrariness is, in *Bleak House*, a moral counterweight to an equally inevitable process of notice and selection. Without it, one is like Skimpole, a man whom, as he says, has “sympathy for everything,” without genuine care for *anyone*, including his own family (625). Here, to disregard the processes by which we single out persons from the crowd is itself a form of narcissism. When, for example, Skimpole accompanies Esther and Mr. Jarndyce in their search for the bill-collector Coavinses’s newly orphaned children, his initial reaction to their abject state is one of pleasure that “he and the Court of Chancery had fallen upon each other in the pleasantest way, and nobody was much the worse,” for “he had been giving employment to a most deserving man . . . enabling Coavinses to bring up these charming children in this agreeable way, developing these social virtues” (232). Paraphrased in Esther’s voice, and thus distanced from her authorizing agency, Skimpole’s attitude of “sympathy” is not only plainly callous, but also self-aggrandizing. Skimpole has no difficulty charting the connections of fate and chance, for he places himself solidly in their center, a cool sun around which the rest of humanity must orbit, bathed in a bright but disobliging light. In contrast, this is how Esther closes her description of Coavinses’s children, focusing on his eldest daughter, who has prematurely assumed the role of a caretaker:

We kissed Charley, and took her down stairs with us, and stopped outside the house to see her run away to her work. I don’t know where she was going, but we saw her run, such a little, little creature, in her womanly bonnet and apron, through a covered way at the bottom of the court; and melt into the city’s strife and sound, like a dewdrop in an ocean (233).

Perpetually self-effacing, Esther couches her interaction with Charley in the context of a collective pronoun, attaching her own “I” only to an absence – her uncertainty about where Charley will go. Like her earlier description of driving through London’s unfamiliar streets, an architectural marker – the “covered way” – signals a change between general and specific. Here, however, the specific gives way to the general, rather than vice versa. Esther’s personalized view of Charley – the one that makes the girl a figure of note, differentiated from “everything else,” and thus, an object of attention and concern – transitions, as the child moves through the covered way, to an anonymous one. As Charley moves into the generalized public space, Esther’s narration reflects this shift, noting the moment that she becomes absorbed into the unnumbered mass, a collective composed as much of sensations and physical structures as of people. Unlike Skimpole’s weak general sympathy, however, Esther’s self-decentering perspective uses periodic affective distance to capture the distinct conditions of urban individuality. Her ability to capture at once the exceptional subjectivity of another and also the arbitrariness of singling out that subjectivity speaks to a version of protagonism that reflects the conditions of the city itself – not just one and many, part and whole, but a fluid space in which the parameters of each of these categories are continually in flux.

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