Dedicated to recording, portraying, and indicting the social inequities that he witnessed in nineteenth century Victorian England, one of Charles Dickens' many concerns was the roles assigned to women both in the public and private spheres.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the narratives of Amy Dorrit and Miss Wade in Dickens' Little Dorrit and Esther Summerson in Bleak House to explore the ways in which each woman conforms to, subverts, or rejects her socially prescribed roles as she seeks to create her own identity while simultaneously complying to the duties and roles assigned her.

This study focuses on the oral and written narratives of these women exploring their words, stories, and symbolic imagery. It also contextualizes their narratives while answering the critical question: How does individual identity emerge amid rigorously circumscribed social roles?
Women's Voices: The Emergence of Female Identity in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*  

by  

Tamara L. Van Ras  

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APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy
Professor of English in charge of major

Redacted for Privacy
Head of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy
Dean of Graduate School

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Typed by Tamara L. Van Ras for Tamara L. Van Ras
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1  
   Background: Dickens and the Victorian ideal of womanhood 1

2. AMY DORRIT: THE FANTASY OF IDENTITY 7

3. MISS WADE: THE PERVERSION OF IDENTITY 15

4. ESTHER SUMMERSON: THE HIDDEN FACE OF IDENTITY 26

5. CONCLUSION: DICKENS AND IDENTITY 50

6. NOTES 55

7. WORKS CITED 57
1. INTRODUCTION

Background: Dickens and the Victorian ideal of womanhood

A man with many missions, Charles Dickens concerned himself with a variety of social ills that plagued Victorian England, many of which are reflected in his novels: the plight of the poor, educational inequities, class consciousness, the orphaned child, moral corruption, and so on. Although he was a masterful and diligent social critic, he was also a product of his times, shaped by the very Victorian mores that he critiqued.

The pinnacle of Dickens' literary career coincided with the height of the Victorian era, spanning the 1850s and 60s. England was enjoying unprecedented prosperity and leisure time was on the rise for the middle and upper classes. This increased prosperity and leisure helped create even sharper distinctions between the socially prescribed roles of men and women than had previously existed. Industry was a man's world and the home belonged to woman; men went warring at work while women kept the home fires burning. It became a mark of status
for women to remain in the home and for servants to perform household chores. In Victorian People and Ideas, Robert Altick writes

Woman's serfdom was sanctified by the Victorian conception of the female as a priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world. Convention dictated a rigorously stereotyped personality. She was to cultivate fragility, leaning always on the arm of the gentleman who walked with her in a country lane or escorted her in to dinner. The woman of the well-off middle class lived, in effect, under one of those capacious glass domes which protected parlor bric-a-brac--stuffed birds, ornate shells, papier-mâché constructions, wax fruit and flowers--from dust. . . . [S]he was The Angel in the House, to borrow [Coventry Patmore's title]. (53)

The ideal Victorian woman was nurse, mother, virgin, angel, and goddess all in one. A product of his times, Dickens, too, viewed women as angels of the house who were meant to nurture their families and redeem men's souls.

The Problem

Because Dickens subscribed to the social prescriptions governing women's lives, he has often been charged by his critics with portraying women characters in his novels as flat and static, devoid of depth or realism. Thus, characters like Amy Dorrit in Little Dorrit are regarded as dull and unrealistically too good,
while Miss Wade in the same novel is too monstrous, and Esther Summerson of Bleak House is too coy.

The Solution

My interests lie in exploring particular narrative events, namely, Amy Dorrit's fairy tale and Miss Wade's letter to Arthur Clennam in Little Dorrit, and Esther Summerson's narrative in Bleak House, to examine the ways in which each woman negotiates the demands of her socially prescribed responsibilities and her personal desires for identity, independence, and voice. I wish to argue, first, that each of these women's narratives can be viewed as narratives of socialization that bear witness to their emerging identities; second, that each narrative both challenges and affirms its sociological context; third, that each narrative informs the character's struggle with feminine and Victorian ideals; and last, that each of these narratives simultaneously exists as a part of Dickens's own narrative of socialization, so that just as Dickens critiques his society, he also confirms and conforms to its codes. I maintain that by reading these women's narratives as narratives of socialization, their emerging identities will be revealed, illustrating that they are, in fact, multi-dimensional, changing, realistic representations of women. And as they reveal themselves, so, too, Dickens
reveals his attitudes about women, about socially prescribed gender roles, and about his own identity.

Methodology

My discussion of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* as narratives of socialization is informed in part by the articles of Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen who assert that "[w]hen we read [narratives of socialization], we study how the text constructs a character's ongoing, social process of language acquisition" (174). Narratives of socialization are accounts of a character's attempts to operate within their society, and they reveal how language shapes and creates individual identities.

Personal narratives and storytelling events such as those of Amy Dorrit and Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit* and of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* can be described as narratives of socialization because they embody the speaker's attempts to construct language and identity within the framework of a given society. More than a record of observations and experiences, the narrative illuminates ways in which the speaker perceives the self. The narrative is more than a descriptive account of events. It also serves as a means for situating the self within a social context, for writing, recording, exploring, and acknowledging the existence of the self in a manner that counteracts or at least counterbalances the
negative effects of self-renunciation (a major component of the Victorian ideal of womanhood). By examining the content of the narrative, both what is and is not spoken, and by examining the forms and contexts of the narrative, the struggle for language acquisition and personal identity begins to bubble to the surface. The narratives of these women, then, illustrate how each woman resists and submits to the process of socialization and, simultaneously, affirms or denies the self. These narratives, therefore, serve as both confessional and evasive self-disclosures, exemplifying the divided self and the inherent difficulties of articulating identity.

Conclusion

Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit are the embodiment of feminine Victorian ideals, and, on the surface, they appear to be mirror images of one another. They devote themselves to dutiful service, are industrious, charitable, and self-sacrificing. They renounce their own dreams and desires and dedicate themselves to familial care and sustenance. They are identified by themselves and others in terms of their roles and relationships, but not in terms of individual personhood. Although initially they appear to be prototypes of Victorian femininity, their struggles for identity, for independence, and for voice keep rising to the surface. Beneath their calm exteriors run undercurrents of dreams,
desires, difficulties, and disappointments. Self-sacrifice and self-renunciation take a toll on the individual psyche, and the need for identity, independence, and voice will assert itself in dreams and in narratives. Hiding in the shadows of their fantasies and stories are attempts, even by these self-effacing Victorian women, to write themselves into being, to find words and acts that will articulate and acknowledge their existence and identities. As we examine the narratives of Amy and Esther, and the narrative of their negative counterpart, Miss Wade, we will explore the symbolic imagery of their dreams and fantasies, looking behind veils, into mirrors, and past the shadows to witness the emergence of their identities as they attempt to subvert and conform to their social roles.
2. AMY DORRIT: THE FANTASY OF IDENTITY

Although Dickens wrote Bleak House before writing Little Dorrit, I wish to begin by examining the narratives in the latter novel first. For it is my assertion that Amy Dorrit and Miss Wade each embody certain characteristics that are present in Esther Summerson. Esther, in fact, can be viewed as the engenderer of the other two, and this may be more readily apparent if we first explore the narratives of her successors. Therefore, I will begin with Amy Dorrit's fairy tale as told to the retarded Maggie in Little Dorrit. I contend that this tale exemplifies Amy's negotiation of her world through the use of fairy tale imagery and language.

Amy Dorrit is the youngest child of William Dorrit.² Born in the Marshalsea Prison where her father has been imprisoned for debt, she is nicknamed the "child of the Marshalsea." The care of her improvident father, her superficial older sister, and her shiftless older brother falls on Amy's shoulders. In a typically Dickensian inversion of roles, Amy becomes the parent of the family, earning money for the family's basic needs, keeping house for her father, and finding employment for her two older siblings.

Throughout much of the novel, Amy is a quietly industrious background fixture: "[t]o pass in and out of
the prison unnoticed, and elsewhere to be overlooked and forgotten, were, for herself, her chief desires" (337). She never asserts herself except in the aid of others and even then she goes about her duty unobtrusively and efficiently. She is reserved and timid, seldom speaking except when spoken to. A notable exception, however, is the fairy tale she tells to Maggie, a retarded woman of twenty-eight with the mental capacity of a ten-year-old. With Maggie, Amy is open and demonstrative, as a mother to her child. Amy's fairy tale is an attempt to pacify Maggie and a means of avoiding Arthur Clennam, the man with whom Amy is secretly in love. It is a brief story about a king who has everything, a princess who knows everything, and "a poor little tiny woman" who spins at her wheel every day (Little Dorrit 341). The princess has the power of knowing other people's secrets and asks the tiny woman to remind her why she hides a shadow. The tiny woman replies that the shadow is the remembrance left her of a very good man who has gone away; this shadow is not missed by anyone else and will sink with her into the grave upon her death.

The fairy tale becomes an allegory for Amy's life. Amy is the "poor little tiny woman." Like the tiny woman who spins at her wheel alone all day, so Amy works with her needle, preferring solitude and isolation. The shadow of the man she loves is all she can hope to retain of Arthur Clennam; the only evidence of her love for him
is the secret/shadow she will take to her grave. On the surface, Amy's tale is meant to entertain Maggie, but it becomes a way of mediating reality, of controlling her desire for a man whom she believes will never come to feel for her as she feels for him. She tries to gain power over herself and her circumstances by imagining a reason to accept her fate. Her tale allows her to keep her love (the shadow) while losing the lover.

All of the implications of the fairy tale do not become apparent, however, until one explores the context that prompted the tale and the context within which the tale occurs. The fairy tale is the text. The context that prompts the fairy tale text is a conversation between Amy Dorrit and Flora Finching, Arthur Clennam's first love. During the course of the conversation, Amy, in her usual fashion, says very little, but absorbs all that Flora gushes forth. Flora intimates that her love affair with Clennam may soon be rekindled, and Amy accepts it as a foregone conclusion that what Flora presupposes will come to pass. In "The Blighted Tree and the Book of Fate," Nancy Metz suggests that "in a way the two narratives [of Amy and Flora] share the same masterplot... They each work out in fiction the question... of what to do with 'the shadow of Some one who had gone by long before.'" Flora unwittingly sets the stage for the fairy tale, and in response to this context, Amy puts aside any hope of realizing her own
relationship with Clennam. Within the text of the fairy tale she moves him out of her reach, as "[s]ome one [who] had gone on to those who were expecting him" (Little Dorrit 342).

Once Flora sets the stage for the fairy tale, what remains to be set is the scene in which the tale is told. When Arthur Clennam comes to pay Amy a visit, Amy induces Maggie, with the promise of a fairy tale, to tell Clennam she is ill and cannot see him. When Maggie returns, the tale unfolds. There is a suggestion that Amy is improvising as she narrates, for the tale is as spare of fanciful detail as the room in which it is told. Amy's barren room parallels the barren existence of the tiny woman, and Amy spins her tale as the little woman spins at her wheel, both in virtual solitude.

Interestingly, Amy imparts her secret to the antithesis of the all-knowing princess. She reveals the most about herself to the one person who is least capable of perceiving the revelation, the uncomprehending Maggie. Although Maggie misses the personal tie between the tale and its teller, Amy's connection to the tale is revealed in part by Maggie's questions and interjections. Maggie mistakenly concludes that the "poor little tiny woman, who lived all alone by herself" (341) is old. Because of Maggie's interruption, we learn that the tiny woman is quite young, the first clue, besides the diminutive size of both, that ties the fictional character to Amy.
Maggie assumes that the tiny woman might be afraid because she is young and alone, without a protector. And as the tale unfolds it becomes clear to the reader that the tiny woman is, indeed, afraid. In fact, the little woman is afraid of losing her shadow lover and of its hidden existence being discovered, fears that parallel Amy's fears of loss and discovery.

The reader, then, rather than Maggie, witnesses Amy's personal struggle to articulate her proper role within the framework of her fantasy. For Amy orates a tale of the perfect life, i.e., the king who had everything he wanted and the all-knowing princess who understood her lessons even "before her masters taught them to her" (341). In "Domestic Fictions: Feminine Deference and Maternal Shadow Labor in Dickens' Little Dorrit," Sarah Winter claims that this image is Amy's fantasy for herself and her father, "a perfect father-daughter family" in which labor and the control of desire need not be practiced (246). And Metz suggests that "the fiction enables Amy to flirt with despair and hope, entertaining alternate visions of her destiny" (235). But, as Winter goes on to argue, while "[m]embers of the ideal, aristocratic family are charitable and wise, . . . the 'head' of a 'fallen' family must defer and control the hidden and painful desires constantly generated by shadow labor" (246). Thus, Amy may fantasize about the
perfect family, but she must function in the realm of reality as the daughter of a fallen father.

Amy's personal narrative, couched as a fairy tale, illustrates her struggle to regain control over her emotions, to reassert her beliefs in duty and service to her family through self-renunciation and self-sacrifice. She struggles with the difficulty of choice, giving up what she desires for the sake of a mere shadow. Within her oral tale she authors a vision of her future that deviates only marginally from the tale of her past, choosing self-sacrifice for the sake of love. But she also struggles with language and the power that language has to both create and destroy. Because Amy's audience, Maggie, doesn't grasp the relationship between tale and teller, the feelings Amy hides within the narrative remain hidden. The story is merely entertainment to Maggie. For Amy, it is an attempt to articulate her desire while concealing her identity. But because Maggie doesn't apprehend Amy's relationship to the tiny woman, nothing is revealed to Maggie by having heard the tale; it is merely an oral fiction that Amy can (and later does) shrug off. As the tiny woman sinks into the silence of the grave, so Amy's feelings and experiences sink into silence as well.

Despite the ambiguities inherent in Amy's story, the attempt to give voice to an identity and to negotiate a social course of action defines this tale as a narrative
of socialization. The tale acts as both a response to and a product of external and internal circumstances. Amy's attempt to school herself through the course of her fantasy to obey duty rather than desire reflects her position within the larger context of the novel, for she constantly searches for the means to train herself and her siblings, to find places and occupations where they can be at least self-supporting, and, at most, of service to others. Repeatedly, she is identified as an "industrious little fairy" or as a "little Mother" by those characters that surround and rely upon her. These nicknames have a sort of silencing effect, for they deny her her name, mute her identity and make her seem more shadow than substance. She epitomizes the woman and the child who is seen and not heard, a prime example of the nineteenth-century ideal woman/child whose sole purpose is a quiet devotion to duty in the service of others. She is the deferential child to her father and to her surrogate father Clennam, and she is the tender and nurturing mother to her family and friends. Like the tiny woman in the fairy tale, Amy hides the shadow of her desire within.

The fact that Amy was born and raised in the Marshalsea Prison is telling, for imprisonment is a central theme in the novel. Just as her father has been physically imprisoned there, she is imprisoned within her silence and within her place in society, and always, her
place is in the background patiently serving others. Although Amy is imprisoned more by her own consciousness than by the Marshalsea, ultimately her attempts at socialization are successful, for her fantasy helps her find her place, and, by living up to the Victorian feminine ideal, she is rewarded with her shadowy lover, Arthur Clennam.
3. MISS WADE: THE PERVERSION OF IDENTITY

The inverse of Amy's devotion to duty presents itself in the character of Miss Wade, illustrating imprisonment of a different kind. One of the few independent women in the novel, Miss Wade has bought her autonomy by her own means. But the price is dear for she must live frugally, and she becomes embittered by her social status and scornful of her superiors. Rather than being self-sacrificing, Miss Wade is self-centered; rather than looking outward to discern what she can do to make the lives of those around her easier, she looks inward and discerns only the poison that rises within her own breast. This poison erupts from within and spews itself upon all those who would show her affection. Her neurotic obsession with perverting the intentions and attentions of others is clearly evident in her letter to Arthur Clennam in which she outlines her perceived mistreatment by peers and employers:

I was told I was an orphan... and I perceived (here was the first disadvantage of not being a fool) that [the other girls] conciliated me in an insolent pity, and in a sense of superiority... I could hardly make them quarrel with me. When I succeeded with any of them, they were sure to come after an hour or two, and begin a reconciliation... They were always forgiving me, in their vanity and condescension. (726)
The blight of her illegitimacy and subsequent abandonment clearly resides within her own mind. In "Miss Wade and George Silverman: the Forms of Fictional Monologue," Carol Bock remarks that Miss Wade is "isolated from other people by [her] idiosyncratic perceptions of reality . . . [and] by behaving in a manner that [she] believe[s] is self-suppressive but which can only be construed as morbidly egocentric" (113). On three separate occasions within the body of her letter, Miss Wade notes that others have marked her as having an "unhappy temper," a phrase that she construes as "an easy way of accounting for everything" (730), and therefore, she feels herself to be the object of condescension and damnation.

Miss Wade's narrative, which Dickens appropriately titles "The History of a Self-Tormentor" is, in fact, the history of a woman refusing to be socialized into the role of the model, dutiful, self-renouncing woman. On the one hand, Miss Wade desires and achieves independence just as she resents those who would seem to pity and condescend to her. On the other hand, she perverts the affection shown her by others into derision and vanity, yet it is she who is full of scorn and pride. She desires equality and respect, yet she can neither forget nor forgive her blighted past, nor accept her station and its inherent responsibilities. She cannot forgive anyone who seems to hint at her station, yet she cannot rise above her own perceptions of what her station is. Thus,
Miss Wade's letter works as the antithesis to Amy's fairy tale, illustrating the tragic consequences of a woman who shirks her duty by sacrificing others for the sake of the self. Commenting on the introduction of Miss Wade's narrative into the "thematic framework" of the novel, Bock writes:

Miss Wade's narrative functions as an exemplum illustrating the psychological and ethical dangers of rampant personal will. . . . The role of Miss Wade's narrative can be understood within the broader context of ethical purpose. . . . Her narrative has a fable-like effect, for it makes a cautionary statement by depicting Miss Wade as a victim of her own unlicensed, and therefore perverted, self will. (114)

This self-will, however, seems to manifest itself only after Miss Wade learns, as a child of twelve, that she is an orphan, that the grandmother who has reared her is not, in reality, her grandmother, and that she has no "recognised station." From this moment on she "carried the light of that information both into [her] past and into [her] future" (Little Dorrit 728). The truths of her childhood have been shattered, leading us to a second recurring theme in her letter.

In the opening paragraph of Miss Wade's epistle, she makes the pronouncement that she is not a fool:

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. (725)

Yet her letter is filled with scenes in which the reverse is true, when she did not grasp the truth and in which she was fooled or perceived herself to be made foolish. Indeed, much of her misery seems to stem from the moments in which she feels she has been played for a fool. She prides herself on her abilities to apprehend the natures of others, to see beneath surface civilities, and to discern the underlying meanings of others' words and deeds. Yet she constantly misreads those cues. She feels shame because she so ardently loved her childhood friend and fellow student, Charlotte. Believing that Charlotte has been false towards her, she feels foolish for having loved such a "stupid mite" (726). When Gowan congratulates her on her engagement to his wealthy friend, she feels he is "full of mockery" (732), and that her engagement has made her ridiculous. It is a great irony in her narrative that she identifies with Gowan and claims him as a kindred spirit, as someone who understands her and shares her knowledge of other people. But Gowan, somewhat reflective of Skimpole in Bleak House, is as great a fool and as foolish as Miss Wade. Having once been fooled about her status and her parentage, she spends the rest of her life trying to thwart others from fooling her again; however, Winter points out that "Miss Wade's discernment of the truth and
her indictment of social hypocrisy, despite Dickens' own similar criticisms, finally are shown to result merely from her bad attitude" (248). The fact that Miss Wade transfers her love to Gowan, a man whose mockery and cynicism are surpassed only by his indolence, illustrates how self-deluded she is.

The aversion to being fooled, coupled with her unhappy temper and the circumstances of her birth, are the major components that form Miss Wade's character. At first, we sympathize with Miss Wade because her early circumstances seem to legitimize some of her feelings of being wronged. She does not sustain our sympathy, however, for, finally, she chooses to be unhappy and to torment others as she has tormented herself, and Dickens shapes our reading of her story by the very title of the chapter in which it unfolds. "The History of a Self-Tortmentor," as Bock suggests, is "an illustration of the novel's thematic interest in psychic self-imprisonment" (114), an interest of which we have already seen evidenced in Amy Dorrit.

As with Amy's fairy tale, examining the context that inspires Miss Wade's letter further illuminates the necessity for her narrative, and reveals that she is portrayed as Amy's negative counterpart. Miss Wade claims she has written to Clennam so that he may understand the depths of her hatred for Pet Meagles, a woman with whom Clennam has pondered the possibility of
romantic attachment. Pet has married Gowan; thus, to Miss Wade she is the winning rival. Secondly, Miss Wade feels disdain for Pet's parents who tried to keep the marriage from occurring, and the implication that Gowan is unworthy of Pet further aggravates her. Since Clennam has repeatedly expressed admiration for Pet, it is in keeping with Miss Wade's temperament to torment him with her hatred of his beloved.

Miss Wade claims an interest in Tattycoram, the Meagles' servant, because she sees in Tatty a reflection of herself. She tells Mr. Meagles, "What your broken plaything is as to birth, I am. She has no name, I have no name. Her wrong is my wrong" (378). Tattycoram, employed as a domestic, has a disposition and station similar to Miss Wade's--unhappy with her lot in life, and resentful of the treatment she receives from her employers. Furthermore, it was to Pet that Tattycoram acted as a sister/companion. By taking Tattycoram in tow, Miss Wade not only acquires a protégé that she can rear in her own image, but she also has a means of hurting Pet and her family. Underlying her reasons for writing Clennam and her association with Tattycoram, lie her mutual needs to be understood and to rail against her inequities. But neither effort gains her any reward or solace.
According to Winter, Miss Wade acts as Amy's negative shadow because she refuses to do her duty and defer to others:

Miss Wade's fate demonstrates what seems to be the novel's message of domestic accommodation: in order to achieve and maintain a reasonably "happy" temper, one must learn to accept the imposition of domestic fictions. (248)

Thus, it would appear that one is not born with an "unhappy temper," but rather, achieves and maintains it by resisting "the imposition of domestic fictions." If Miss Wade (and likewise Tattycoram) is to achieve the reward of a cheerful disposition, she must accept her station; she must accept the adopted role to which she was assigned; and she must perform her duties within the service of her household. Bereft of friends because she refuses to accept her position, her life becomes a wasteland containing only contempt for others and torment for herself.

The wasteland of her inner life is also reflected in her exterior world. Each time Clennam seeks her out, he finds her in incommodious abodes. In London, she resides in a "dingy house, apparently empty" (374) with a dark and "confined entrance" (375). In Calais, he finds her in

A dead sort of house, with a dead wall over the way and a dead gateway at the side, where a pendant bell-handle produced two dead tinkles, and a knocker produced a dead, flat, surface-tapping, that seemed not to
have depth enough in it to penetrate even the cracked door. However, the door jarred open on a dead sort of spring; and he closed it behind him as he entered a dull yard, soon brought to a close by another dead wall, where an attempt had been made to train some creeping shrubs, which were dead; and to make a little fountain in a grotto, which was dry; and to decorate that with a little statue, which was gone. (716)

Whether she chooses such places to live because they help to perpetuate her rage, or whether they are merely the lodgings she can afford, her surroundings reflect and reinforce her inner self. For within the dead house lives a woman who lacks the depth of fellow-feeling, who is dull and dry and rotting in spirit. Presumably, within the confines of such a dead house, she writes her history to Clennam.

The only advantage to Miss Wade's existence is that she need not submit to the will and whim of others. Her refusal to conform allows her to be autonomous, though isolated. She seems willing to pay such a price for her autonomy, however, and this need for autonomy, couched as spiteful self-disclosure, is the reason she chooses to write her history down in the form of a letter, rather than telling it to Clennam in a face-to-face interview. By giving her history in epistolary form, she retains control of the narrative, unencumbered by outside influences or interruptions, and she maintains authority over her own text by controlling her audience. Indeed, as Lisa Delpit suggests in "The Silenced Dialogue," our
private experiences may be the only aspect of our lives in which we can maintain authority:

We must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives. There are certainly aspects of the outside world of which they may not be aware, but they can be the only authentic chroniclers of their own experience. (297)

There is much of the outside world which Miss Wade fails to apprehend; nevertheless, this does not altogether negate her experiences, and her experiences give her power over Tattycoram. But this power, as Mr. Meagles points out, is a perversion of sisterhood, and he warns Miss Wade against reproducing herself and her hatred in Tattycoram (Little Dorrit 379). Through Tatty's eyes, Dickens gives us a final look at Miss Wade and her peculiar and frightening behavior:

I was afraid of her from the first time I saw her. I knew she had got a power over me through understanding what was bad in me so well. It was a madness in me, and she could raise it whenever she liked. I used to think . . . that people were all against me because of my first beginning; and the kinder they were to me, the worse fault I found with them. I made it out that they triumphed above me, and that they wanted to make me envy them. . . . I have had Miss Wade before me all this time, as if it was my own self grown ripe--turning everything the wrong way, and twisting all good into evil. (880)

Tatty's monologue seals our dislike for Miss Wade, for we witness not only Miss Wade's self-torture, but her torture of Tattycoram as well. Tatty's monologue also
sets up Mr. Meagles' reiteration of the Victorian precepts of deference and devotion to duty, pointing to Little Dorrit as someone worthy of imitation. The dialogue between Tatty and Mr. Meagles, according to Winter, teaches Tatty "part of the secret about how Little Dorrit is repaid for her deferential emotion work: it is a simple exchange--when you give deference you get deference back" (248). Thus, the ideology of Victorian womanhood is reinforced once more by praising Amy at the same instance in which Miss Wade (and by implication her independence) is disparaged. Affirming Amy also affirms the social codes within which Dickens was writing--conforming to the ideologies of class hierarchies and deferential compliance. As Robert Altick observes:

In Victorian England the concept of "deference"--willing acknowledgment that the people in the classes above one's own were justly entitled to their superiority--was so strong that it was proof against all the subversive and disintegrating forces which were brought to bear against it. (16)

Although in the character of Miss Wade Dickens dabbles with the idea of a woman stepping outside the boundaries of social convention, ultimately she proves to be a failed experiment. Refusing to be dutiful or deferential, Miss Wade succeeds in living independently only by becoming a warped personality and by shunning society and its class structures with its inherent inequities. Miss Wade refuses to be socialized, and
because she rejects and perverts the Victorian ideal of womanhood, she becomes a social outcast.
4. ESTHER SUMMERSON: THE HIDDEN FACE OF IDENTITY

In *Bleak House*, Dickens writes the story of another woman whose circumstances of birth and position parallel those of Miss Wade's and Tattycoram's, but whose disposition is more in keeping with Amy Dorrit's. When John Jarndyce takes Esther Summerson (whose benefactor he has been for years, although unbeknownst to her) into his home to act as companion to his ward Ada Clare, he gives "her a clear role to fulfill," as Frances Armstrong writes in *Dickens and the Concept of Home*, "to prevent her from feeling patronized and embarrassed" (117). Esther is every bit as deferential and duty-bound as her successor, Amy Dorrit. However, because approximately half of the events that unfold in the novel are narrated in the first-person by Esther, we are witness to Esther's personal struggles and inner trials to a much greater degree than we are witness to Amy's struggles in *Little Dorrit*. In Esther we will witness the struggle between devotion to duty and a need for independence and identity that is missing in *Little Dorrit*. For in *Little Dorrit*, the separation between good and evil, right and wrong, selflessness and selfishness is definitively apportioned between Amy and Miss Wade.

Esther's childhood parallels Miss Wade's on at least two counts: neither knows her parentage, and both are raised by women who are other than they seem, for Miss
Wade's grandmother is no relation to her at all, and Esther's godmother is really her aunt. Each woman begins her life in a web of deception that will color her perceptions of herself and her relationships to others. But while Miss Wade's childhood might have been pleasant had she not self-righteously condemned others, Esther's childhood is made miserable by her godmother, Miss Barbary, who condemns her because of the circumstances of her birth. Nevertheless, Esther, unlike Miss Wade, blames herself for her strained relations with her godmother. Indeed, from the opening lines of their narratives, their different natures are apparent, for while Miss Wade begins her letter by complaining to "have the misfortune of not being a fool" (Little Dorrit 725), Esther begins by apologizing for not being clever (Bleak House 62).

Esther's earliest perceptions of self-identity are colored by her godmother's treatment of and reaction to her. Miss Barbary is cold and distant, and as harsh and cruel as her name suggests, making Esther feel that she fills a place in the house "which ought to have been empty" (66). The origins of her birth are kept secret from her. When she is told that she is her mother's shame and her mother is hers, and that it would have been better had she never been born, Esther feels guilt and shame, but remains confused about her origins. She lives under the shadow of a disgrace she can neither name nor
understand, and she recognizes that her life has brought no joy to others and no love to herself.

Esther's childhood experiences sow the seeds of a negative self-image, as frequently throughout her narrative she makes allusions to being a nonentity. She isn't allowed to attend her classmates' birthday parties, and her own birthdays pass by unacknowledged and uncelebrated. Her godmother treats her coldly and brusquely. She feels insignificant, unloved, and undeserving of love. The one possession upon which Esther can bestow her love is her doll. Raised in a house full of secrets to which she seems excluded, Esther shares secrets of her own with the doll. The doll becomes a repository for Esther's confidences, a solitary and trusted friend. But the doll cannot alter Esther's self-image; indeed, it seems to unconsciously confirm Esther's feelings of nonexistence for even as she pours her heart out to it, it stares blankly ahead "as at nothing" (62).

Just as Amy Dorrit's fairy tale is imparted to the uncomprehending Maggie, so Esther imparts her confidences to the doll. Each attempts to acknowledge and create identity, but each chooses an audience who cannot offer a response. Each articulates her desires, fears, and secrets, authoring the self into being, but the articulation falls on deaf ears. The act of speech in each instance is an act both of self-creation and self-revelation and an act of self-denial; a means of
acknowledging and articulating the existence and desires of the self, yet withholding expression to a comprehending other. Such self-disclosure negates their personal identities because the objects of their narratives are uncomprehending. Their claims of existence and identity remain locked within the confines of the self, a simultaneous expression of sound and silence. The subject, meaning, and identity of the narrative remain buried, hidden within the speaker, and therefore, the speaker is neither perceived nor affirmed by an other.

Moreover, each speaker associates her secretiveness with the need to "bury" the self. Amy buries her identity in the anonymity of a fairy-tale little woman spinning at a wheel, a woman who is dead and buried along with the shadow of her lover at the end of the tale. Esther buries her identity by literally burying the doll, the repository containing her hopes and fears. The burial is especially curious because it takes place several days before Esther is to leave her childhood home behind forever following the death of her godmother. Esther takes with her some boxes and a bird in a cage, but leaves behind her treasured doll. By burying the doll, she not only buries her treasure, but she also buries her childhood self and all her hurts, fears, and desires. "The [burial] ceremony," as Alex Zwerdling remarks in "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," "reveals her
guilt about any form of self-indulgence, even such a sorry substitute for maternal acceptance" (434). Yet she continues to live under the shadow of an unknown disgrace, and in the shadow of her godmother's words:

"Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart." (65)

Esther resolves "to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good and win some love" (65) to herself (65). Although she has ample reason to complain against her godmother's treatment of her, she blames herself for the lack of feeling in others. Unlike Miss Wade, Esther internalizes the actions and words of others, and, rather than blaming them, she is self-reproachful.

Yet there is a critical difference between Amy's fairy tale and Esther's confessions to the doll: Esther's confessions are revealed to another when she writes her part of the narrative for the reader. Her autobiographical narrative is the continuation of self-definition, of writing herself into being. Her narration begins, after all, under the title of "A Progress," and so it is--a progress towards identity. But just as Esther's narrative is a search for identity, so also is it a confession of disappointment, loss, and struggle.
The confession gives voice to her own process of coming into language, but it also allows her to evade what she doesn't wish to acknowledge. This evasion is made apparent by her frequent apologizing for reentering the tale she is supposedly telling about others and by her apologies for making critical observations regarding the characters of others. She discerns, for example, that Jarndyce's friend, Skimpole, is a shiftless parasite, and that Richard Carstone, Ada's betrothed, lacks a work ethic and is obsessed instead with the Jarndyce suit in the hopes of getting rich quick. Although she glosses over and apologizes for these observations, they are critical to the narrative, lending clues to Esther's beliefs and values, and therefore, to identity, since character and identity are inextricably linked. For part of identity is bound up in our perceptions of other and in others' perceptions of us, and we internalize the characteristics and characterizations with which others imbue us. Consciously and unconsciously, these characterizations help define our identities. Esther's need to apologize for her observations signals her lack of self-confidence about her own judgments.7

Some of these characterizations are evident in other female characters within the novel who act as counterpoints and complements to Esther. Ada Clare, for example, the young woman for whom Esther acts as a companion, is Esther's alter ego. Esther transfers all
the characteristics of goodness, kindness, self-renunciation, and physical beauty to Ada, and when Ada compliments Esther's good deeds, Esther insists that all the merit lies with Ada. She loves Ada unconditionally and devotedly, finding in her a kindred spirit. The relationship between Ada and Esther is reflexive, each seeing in the other the ideal image of selflessness. But the self also becomes divided by the transference of selfless acts to another, so that Esther sees herself as flawed and Ada as the embodiment of goodness. Thus, Esther's identity becomes partially entwined with and dependent upon Ada's.

Counterpoint to the benignity of Esther and Ada are Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. Esther notes that both women believe themselves to be devoted to the duty of social work, but she also notes that their devotion to the public sphere creates havoc in the private home. Mrs. Jellyby's household is constantly on the verge of total chaos and collapse, her children are unwashed and untended, her cupboards and crockery are in disrepair, and her husband is forgotten and neglected all for the sake of sending support to missionaries in Borrioboola-Gha. Equally ineffectual is Mrs. Pardiggle, a woman who insists she never tires and is intent on "rapacious benevolence," and who drags her discontented young family from house to house through poor neighborhoods reading religious tracts and sermonizing (150). Although
selfless duty is clearly a Dickensian theme, devotion to public duty at the neglect of private duty is clearly an evil in the eyes of Esther and Dickens for it threatens the collapse of both the private and public spheres. Furthermore, as the children of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle illustrate, neglect of home and family lead to dysfunction and deficiency in moral character, creating ill-tempered children who seek to dissociate themselves from their parents. Although Victorian feminine ideals allowed for women to participate in charitable community work, such work was never meant to interfere with a woman's work in the home. Her first priority was to husband and hearth. Esther and Dickens both confirm and conform to this ideal. The home, to both Dickens and Esther, should be the foundation upon which the nation is built. Thus the character and identity of a nation built upon foundations of neglected households and resting on the shoulders of neglected children, threatens to topple in upon itself.⁹

Throughout Esther's narrative, the question of duty keeps arising because the question of identity remains unanswered. Like Amy Dorrit, Esther is determined to be content, dutiful, and self-sacrificing. Unlike Amy, however, Esther frequently struggles with her role in the Jarndyce household and with the shadow of her past and her parentage, searching for familial connections:
My fancy wandered back to my godmother's house, and came along the intervening track, raising up shadowy speculations which had sometimes trembled there in the dark, as to what knowledge Mr Jarndyce had of my earliest history—even as to the possibility of his being my father—though that idle dream was quite gone now. (131)

Although Esther constantly pushes such musings aside, they continuously resurface as evidence that Esther can neither forget her current status within the household, nor cease to wonder at the mysteriousness of her origins. Frequently mystified and distracted by events that occur around her and the feelings that they inspire within her, Esther constantly wrestles with her wish to be good and dutiful—denying her identity—and with her desire for self-discovery. Even when she manages to put down concerns regarding her identity, circumstances around her force the issue to the forefront once again.

It is not surprising, then, that the veiled ladies, who keep appearing and disappearing in Esther's narrative and within the larger narrative framework of the novel, bear an uncanny resemblance to Esther and tell us something about her identity. The illiterate, poverty-stricken, and orphaned Jo has the misfortune to witness these mysterious comings and goings. The first veiled woman he meets gives him a sovereign to take her to the burying ground in Tom-all-Alone's. He meets what appears to be the same veiled woman again at lawyer Tulkinghorn's office, though he notices that her hands and rings are
different. He sees the veiled lady a third time while staying at the brickmaker's house. Esther is this third lady, who, having never met Jo before, is surprised by his response to her. He expresses not only his confusion, but the reader's confusion as well when he cries, "She looks to me the t'other one. It ain't the bonnet, nor yet it ain't the gownd, but she looks to me the t'other one" (486). Because Jo is in the throes of fever, Esther attributes his remarks to delirium. But when police detective Bucket appears on the scene trying to solve the mystery of the veiled ladies and the murder of Tulkinghorn, Esther once again finds herself in the middle of a muddle of confused identities. Although Esther has learned of her parentage from Lady Dedlock, Esther is forced to keep her mother's identity locked away to protect the Dedlock family. But when Lady Dedlock's story comes to light and she flees the Dedlock estate, she confuses identity once more by exchanging her dress for that of the brickmaker's wife, Jenny. The flight and pursuit of Lady Dedlock which follows parallels Esther's inner flight from and pursuit of personal identity. Esther has both sought after and hidden the truth of her origins, and just at the moment of discovery, when it seems possible for her to acknowledge her mother's existence, she loses her mother to death. Just as she has buried a piece of herself in
burying the doll, she must now bury another portion of her life and her identity with her mother.

Esther's divided self and the confusion of identity are manifested in a number of ways throughout her narrative as the episodes with the veiled ladies illustrates. The veil acts as a mask, concealing the identity of the wearer. It also confuses identity because the woman behind the veil cannot be identified by others, so that what appears to be one woman is really several women. Jo's perplexity exemplifies the fractured reality created by this confusion of identities. And the fracturing of reality--the splitting off between what appears to be real and what is real--is again apparent when Esther discovers her mother's body but believes it to be the body of the poor brickmaker's wife--"Jenny, the mother of the dead child" (868). Although Detective Bucket explains that Jenny and Lady Dedlock exchanged clothes so that Lady Dedlock could escape detection, Esther's mind cannot reconcile his words with her first impression:

I could repeat [Detective Bucket's explanation] in my mind too, but I had not the least idea what it meant. I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child. She lay there, with one arm creeping round a bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it... She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature... who had come to this condition by some means connected with my mother that I could not follow. (868)
Esther is capable of repeating Detective Bucket's words, but she is incapable of grasping their meaning. The fallen woman appears to be Jenny, the mother of the dead child and a mirror image of Lady Dedlock who had believed her child was dead; but the reflection is reversed. Esther realizes it is her mother who lies before her when she lifts "the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face" to see her mother, "cold and dead" (869). Her mother's hair serves as another veil—confusing appearance and identity. As Esther lifts this veil of hair from her mother's face and discovers her real identity, the reader is reminded of a similar incident in which Esther's appearance was veiled beneath a mass of hair.

Before examining this earlier unveiling, we should explore what precipitates the event. Perhaps the most obvious clues to Esther's divided self are revealed during and following her long illness. In the midst of her fever, Esther confuses her past and present selves, at one moment believing herself to be at school, then at her godmother's and then at Bleak House, "oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station [and] by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them" (543). She envisions herself toiling up "colossal staircases" (544), endeavoring to reach the top, but continually turned aside. Such fevered laboring is indicative of the body trying to fight its way back to
health, but it also illustrates the psychological battle that she constantly wages between duty and self-fulfillment. The feelings of oppression, which she has repeatedly repressed in her attempts to be dutiful and obedient, manifest themselves in her fever-induced dreams. Particularly symbolic is the dream in which she sees herself as part of an unbroken circle:

Dare I hint at that worse time when strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing? (544)

Again, her prayer might appear to be the physical expression of illness—the desire for death and the end of painful suffering. But she prays "to be taken off from the rest," implying a need to be disassociated from the others in the circle. Implicated within that desire to be disconnected is a longing for independence, the separation of the self from the circle, and the removal of burdensome relationships and responsibilities that have oppressed her. Surely the self is asserting its need to be set apart from others, but whether in need of isolation or in need of recognition is unclear. She has frequently expressed the desire to "win some love" for herself, yet the wish to be taken off from the rest, the cry that to be part of the "dreadful thing" is "such
inexplicable agony and misery," seems to point more toward a need for isolation. Within the circle identity is muted, obscured, transferable from one bead to the next. Apart from the circle, the bead not only draws attention to itself, it can move independently of the other beads that are strung together. Bound up in her desire for separateness may be a fear of dependence and connection. Since her origins have been a mystery to her most of her life, she may fear being defined by others, or she may fear having her identity defined in terms of relationship to another.

Esther herself is disturbed by her dreams and their signification, illustrating her self-division by acknowledging that she is "almost afraid to hint at that time" in her "disorder," but inferring that to record such "afflictions" might "alleviate their intensity" (544). While she assures the reader that she doesn't recall these events to make others unhappy or because she is unhappy, her assurances insure that the reader must, indeed, wonder about her happiness. And although she notes that it might be better not to speak about her fevered dreams, she makes this admission only after her dreams have been revealed. Once again, the appearance of the divided self is represented both in her need to share the dreams and in her need to apologize for them, and depicts the inner struggle between succumbing to socialization and asserting individual autonomy.
Concurrently she seeks to reveal and conceal. To the anonymous reader, Esther's revelations might serve as explanation for her words and actions. To reveal herself to strangers would be of no consequence, yet the need to protect her loved ones (and perhaps also herself) causes her to gloss over or undermine the importance of her dreams and feelings as if, or in case, her narrative should fall into the hands of someone she could hurt. Just as she tried to reconcile her "cares and difficulties adapted to each station," so she tries to reconcile her dreams with her waking conception of reality (543). At one moment the veil is lifted to reveal identity, then dropped again to conceal it.

Once freed from the fever, however, appearance and identity continue to be problematic for Esther. Realizing that all of the mirrors have been removed from her rooms, she begins the process of reconciling herself to the prospect that her appearance must, indeed, be quite altered by the ravages of the disease. Although at first she hasn't the courage to ask for the mirrors to be returned, she carefully watches the reactions of others, trying to gauge her disfigurement by the reflections that cross their faces. When Esther asks her maid Charley about the missing mirrors, Charley leaves the room and Esther hears her stifle a sob. And when her guardian is allowed to see her for the first time, he sits with his hand momentarily covering his face. While Esther treats
these incidents lightly, the mere mention of them attests to the impact they have on her self-image. Although Esther claims to being resigned to her altered appearance, the fact remains that she doesn't ask for the mirrors to be restored to their places. Neither can the reactions of her maid and her guardian have offered her any hope that she might not be as altered as she fears. Consider also that she continues to refuse her beloved Ada admittance into her rooms, preferring to talk to her from behind a window-curtain:

Yet I never saw her; for I had not as yet the courage to look at the dear face, though I could have done so easily without her seeing me. (551)

Her acclaimed resignation is clearly a fiction. Because of the reflexive nature of the relationship between Ada and Esther, to see Ada, still beautiful and unscarred by disease, and, more importantly, to see Ada's reaction to her appearance, would be a little like looking in the mirror. Clearly, Esther is not yet capable of that act.

Not until she is removed to Chesney Wold is she able to look into a mirror, but again, appearance is hidden behind a series of veils. Before she can gaze upon her reflection, she contemplates her blessings, placing before her mind's eye a sort of mental filtering screen through which to view her appearance. Then, she lets down her hair, creating a physical screen or veil through which to filter the view of herself. Likewise, the
mirror is also veiled, covered in a little muslin curtain. To look upon her reflection, she must first draw back the curtain, and then the veil of her own hair:

    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--0 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. . . . (559)

Esther's psychologically divided self seems almost to become a physical division. The face in the mirror seems to belong to someone else who "placidly" looks at her. Throughout much of Esther's narrative, she has sought to efface her role and accomplishments, trying to fade into the background while foregrounding the kindnesses and good deeds of others. Now, Esther would have us believe that she is literally defaced, her former self not merely hidden, but erased entirely. As Richard Gaughan writes in "'Their Places are a Blank': the Two Narratives in Bleak House," "Esther has lost in her disfigurement the only sure source of her identity--her face" (90). The reflection in the mirror is a stranger to her.

    Psychological, physical, and symbolic mirroring play a crucial role in much of Esther's narrative. I've already discussed the reflective nature of Esther's and Ada's relationship as a kind of psychological, though unconscious, mirroring of the admirable qualities of each woman. But other reflective images also come to mind.
Caddy Jellyby and Charley Neckett become mirror images of Esther's industrious and good-natured service to others by following her example and instruction and by placing others before themselves and endeavoring to care for their loved ones. The reverse of the vituperative Miss Wade who tries to make Tattycoram an acolyte in her perversion of honest affection, Esther has taken each young woman under her wing and replicated matronly devotion and motherly affection.

A physical and symbolic mirroring occurs when Esther sees her mother, Lady Dedlock, for the first time. Although she is completely ignorant of her blood-connection to Lady Dedlock, Esther is acutely aware of an "association" (304) with this woman, and, once again, mirror and mirrored images are foregrounded. Even in the brief moment that her gaze meets Lady Dedlock's, Esther is immediately transported back to the "lonely days" at her godmother's house, "to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass, after dressing my doll" (304). Within the space of a few seconds (and four paragraphs of narration), a flurry of images and admissions occurs:

I knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time. . . . And, very strangely, there was something quickened within me . . . to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass, after dressing my doll. . . . But why her face should be, in a
confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances . . . I could not think. . . . [D]id Lady Dedlock's face accidentally resemble my godmother's? It might be that it did, a little; but the expression was so different . . . that it could not be that resemblance which had struck me. Neither did I know the lof

ness and haughtiness of Lady Dedlock's face, at all, in any one. And yet I--I, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing--seemed to rise before my own eyes. . . . (304-5)

All of the most symbolic elements of Esther's fractured identity are present. The doll, the stern face of her godmother, the uncelebrated birthday are all parts of herself and her past that she has tried to bury. Each image represents the unknown of who she is and of what she is guilty--why she must find comfort in a doll, why her godmother is so removed, why her birthday goes unnoticed. All of these images are recalled upon seeing Lady Dedlock's face. Yet the critical image is the reflection of her own face in that of Lady Dedlock's. However, as Cynthia Northcutt Malone asserts in "'Flight' and 'Pursuit': Fugitive Identity in Bleak House," the mirror-like moment offers no steadily reflected image of the self that might confirm a coherent and unified identity; instead, this moment splinters the "I," exposing its divisions and multiplicity, refracting it in "a broken glass" (110).

Esther is confronted with an image that is both familiar and strange to her, much as she will be confronted by her
own reflection the first time she looks in a mirror after her illness.

Another symbolic reflection of Esther occurs in the final chapter of the novel in which she notes that her goddaughter and namesake, Caddy's baby, is both deaf and dumb. Throughout the course of her narrative, Esther has been deaf to compliments directed towards herself. Even at the end of the novel, she refuses to believe that she merits the praise of others, claiming to "owe it all" to her husband (935). She has been "dumb" regarding her parentage throughout much of the novel, and remains mute for most of the novel even when she learns of her mother's existence. Finally, her godchild, described previously as "a tiny old-faced mite" with "curious little dark veins in its face, and curious little dark marks under its eyes, like faint remembrances of poor Caddy's inky days" (736), seems marked by the sin of familial neglect (resulting from her grandmother Jellyby's devotion to Africa13) as Esther is marked by the illegitimacy of her birth and the neglect of her godmother. In each instance--in Caddy and Charley, in Lady Dedlock, and in Caddy's baby--Esther, whether consciously or unconsciously, seeks the location of self in the images of others.

The last important clues to Esther's search for self lie within the language of her narrative. Not only is her identity obfuscated by mirrors and veils, but also by
the words she chooses and the events she portrays in the writing of her narrative. In Dickens and Women, Michael Slater convincingly argues that her language—"her self-deprecating flutterings about any compliment paid to her . . . her painfully contorted references to [Allan] Woodcourt" with whom she is in love, her repeated apologies for talking about herself, all point to an "authentic-sounding mimicry of . . . a certain kind of neurosis . . . in which the sufferer is always struggling with a crushing sense of . . . her own worthlessness" (256). Much of this sense of worthlessness is implicit in the use of the subjunctive mood which is present from the opening pages of her story ("I never loved my godmother . . . as I felt I must have loved her if I had been a better girl")14) to the end of her narrative when she leaves the reader "even supposing" whether she is prettier than ever, as her husband asserts (935).15 In "'I'll Follow the Other': Tracing the (M)other in Bleak House," Marcia Goodman writes, "[Esther] is disfigured or beautiful, depending on how we read her, but she is neither with any certainty" (166). She remains faceless just as for much of the novel she has been nameless. And Malone contends, "'Esther Summerson,' is only a pseudonym" upon which "accrues a wealth of nicknames"—Dame Durden, Mrs. Shipton, Old Woman, Little Woman, and so on (113). The language of naming serves as another veiling of Esther's identity.
Reflecting the struggle to describe others and her relationships to others, Esther's narrative can never be more than a faulty personal perspective. Esther is still in the concurrent processes of self-identification and socialization, still becoming aware of who she is and what she desires, still defining her social responsibilities and her individual identity, as the ending of her story attests. What Suzanne Graver calls Esther's "anxiety of authorship" is, I believe, her attempt to write herself into being within the swirling vortex of multiple voices (13). These voices, both public and private, have tried to define and sometimes deny her identity. Who she is and what she is becoming are the result of her conforming to, subverting, and rejecting these definitions and denials. Esther's language, suggests Gaughan,

is the language of alienation, but it is the alienation produced by a multiplicity that cannot be resolved into simple confrontations or choices. Esther, like the characters associated with her, is damaged by the conflicting claims of the many languages that go into making her up. She bears the scars of this damage on her face and incorporates her alienation into the very fabric of her narrative. (92)

It is no wonder then that Esther has often been charged with being coy and oblique (Graver even charges her with being static\(^{16}\)), but few of us, I would argue, could tell the story of our own lives and relationships and be fully cognizant of the implications of our words, actions, and
connections. Furthermore, the fact that Esther is writing to an unknown audience, in conjunction with the third-person narrator (whose identity and connection to Esther are never revealed to the reader), must only add to her difficulties with storytelling. Unlike Amy Dorrit and Miss Wade who are each narrating to an identified audience of one, Esther's story is being written for the unidentified many. Whatever Esther chooses to reveal, then, must be done in such a manner that not only protects her own areas of vulnerability, but also protects the vulnerability of her loved ones—the ultimate end of the well "socialized" narrative—complying with the codes of duty and deference. But because Esther is trying to discover and make sense of her own history, she must also recognize and come to terms with some of the flaws in herself and others, and as she does so, she bears witness to the damage that such flaws and human errors can cause. Some of the slipperiness of Esther's text, therefore, is born out of her desire to both protect and discover, to conceal blame and culpability while revealing the damage that results from human failings. Her narrative cannot help but be the natural by-product of faulty and limited personal perspective.

Thus, *Bleak House* is the story of damaged lives resulting from destructive social practices. But it is also the story of the house itself and its inhabitants,
Esther in particular, who rise, phoenixlike, from out of the rubble of human and social failure to create family, fellowship, and an environment in which the scars of social suffering can be nursed and, perhaps, mended. And because Esther strives to conform to the socially prescribed Victorian ideal of womanhood, she, like Amy, is rewarded with the lover she desires. Her process of socialization is, therefore, successful.
5. CONCLUSION: DICKENS AND IDENTITY

Like his heroines Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit, Dickens, too, was concerned with identity. He was also aware that many factors shape individual identity and that childhood events and traumas can have lasting affects on the adult psyche. His own traumatic childhood haunted his adult life and provided the impetus for many of the settings, events, and characters within his novels. His father's imprisonment in the Marshalsea Prison for debtors and his own removal from school at the age of twelve so that he could be sent to work in a blacking factory to help support himself and his family were critical experiences that left lasting marks on the writer. As biographer Edgar Johnson notes in Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, Dickens's early experiences were so painful that he would later reveal them only to his close friend John Forster. Johnson writes,

No emphasis can overstate the depth and intensity with which these experiences ate into his childish soul. . . .

But it is more than a mere unavailing ache in the heart, however poignant, and however prolonged into manhood, that gives the Marshalsea and Warren's Blacking their significance in Dickens's life. They were formative. (45)

Some of Dickens' experiences are certainly portrayed in Little Dorrit, as events in Amy's life parallel some of
her author's: the Marshalsea setting, Amy's profligate father, the family dependent upon a child for its support. The marks of psychological trauma are also evident in Dickens's portrayal of children and diminutive women/girls as "poor little mites" who are abandoned by their families either physically or emotionally or both (Johnson 45). Such emotional abandonment is present in *Little Dorrit* and both physical and emotional abandonment are present in *Bleak House*. In *Dickens and the Parent-Child Relationship* Arthur Adrian sums up Dickens' connection to his characters:

That Dickens kept returning to the theme of the delinquent parent and the homeless and alienated child in search of identity is evidence . . . that his own boyhood had left impressions never to be obliterated. His own past neglect became inseparable from the general character of the age. (136)

The very metaphors Dickens uses in his novels are suggested in his personal life as well. Light and shadow, for instance, are recurrent images in *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*. As *Little Dorrit* ends with Amy and Arthur descending from the church down into the street, "pass[ing] along in sunshine and shadow" (895), the symbolism of Amy's fairy tale comes full circle. Like the tiny spinning woman, Amy (as sunlight and good angel) has her husband, Arthur (as shade or shadow), whose adulthood, like Dickens's, has been haunted by events in his childhood. In *Bleak House*, Esther
Summerson, as sunshine and good angel, ministers over her own copy of Bleak House, as the original emerges from under the shadow of the Chancery suit that has ensnared so many lives. Dickens, too, wrestled with shadows and was ministered to by his own good angels, his wife's sisters Mary and, especially, Georgina (to whom a number of Dickens scholars liken Esther).¹⁶

In Bleak House and Little Dorrit, Dickens explores female identity, self-division, and the roles to which women were assigned in Victorian England, but he does so, I believe, with an eye toward his own needs. That Dickens felt a sense of emotional abandonment by his parents, particularly his mother, informs his characterizations of Amy and Esther who are figuratively and literally abandoned. And, according to Michael Slater, "Making the child invariably female increased both the heroism and the pathos, so providing an adequate fictional representation of Dickens as he essentially saw himself in the domestic aspect of his life from childhood" (388). But having identified with Esther and Amy in their childhood miseries, Dickens creates in them the Victorian characteristics of ideal womanhood that he seems to have found lacking in his relationships with his mother and his wife. As Johnson asserts, Dickens "increasingly felt an 'unhappy loss or want of something'" (625), of never having known that "one happiness . . . in life," that "one friend and companion"
In Amy and Esther he seeks to create that friend and companion, the ministering angel who protects and nurtures. Graver contends

The values of the heart—sympathy, love, selfless care for and commitment to others—which were identified with woman's domestic sphere, were to counteract the negative psychic and moral effects of aggressive, competitive, marketplace individualism. Dickens's relation to the women in his own life—particularly his mother who failed him and his sister-in-law, Georgina, who selflessly served him—makes clear how much he desired such protection. (12-13)

Clearly Dickens' idealized female characters conform to the prescribed social codes by which women were governed. Yet equally clear is his acknowledgment of the price that women must pay in sacrificing themselves for their families.

Nevertheless, like the characters in his novels, Dickens is trapped within self-perpetuating systems of social convention. Perhaps his critique of society is only possible because to be a victim of social injustice and corruption is to be victimized by an impersonal bureaucratic mechanism, and therefore, to lash out against it is to lash out at no one in particular. But to critique one's own family, to acknowledge victimization by the corruption and sins of one's close relations, becomes too personal an indictment to make directly. The perpetrators have faces and names. To indict the family, then, the accuser must use subterfuge
to protect one's self and to deny personal complicity and/or culpability. So fairy tales and "coy" narratives are born to help the victim survive social and familial sins. Yet one must also adhere to social strictures and gender and familial roles or risk being outcast. Thus, to author one's own identity requires a balancing act between social prescription and personal freedom.

Like his fictional female counterparts, Dickens sought to create his own identity, and like them, he, too, suffered from the "anxiety of authorship" (Graver 13). Yet perhaps it is this anxiety of authorship that makes Dickens' novels and characters so enduring, for we continue to search for ways to stand out from the crowd without standing apart, to be noticed for our individuality without being ostracized for our differences. That we continue to read these women, as we continue to read their author, with such sympathy for their lot, attests to the difficulties of creating individual identity and of allowing it to emerge and survive amid the processes of socialization.
6. NOTES

1. My discussion of Little Dorrit and Bleak House as narratives of socialization is also informed by the articles by James A. Berlin, "Literacy, Pedagogy, and English Studies: Postmodern Connections," and by Lisa D. Delpit's "The Silenced Dialogue."

2. Edgar Johnson notes that the character of William Dorrit was likely patterned after Dickens's own father, John, a "tremulously tragic" figure who, like Dorrit, was imprisoned (briefly) for debt (35).

3. Metz (233) and Little Dorrit (341).

4. Cynthia Northcutt Malone specifically addresses Esther's familial identity noting that the "'I' that asserts self-recognition gives way to an indefinite 'some one,' and at last, to 'no one'" (115).

5. See also the articles by Richard T. Gaughan (88-89), Cynthia Malone (116-117), and Alex Zwerdling (434) for more discussion of Esther's doll and her relationship with it. Zwerdling, for example, asserts that the doll is a symbol of Esther's "'selfishness,' her need for someone who loves her absolutely."

6. Zwerdling contends that Esther is "wounded by her godmother's speech, but not crushed" and he argues that she has "a supremely practical turn of mind, and her first impulse is to formulate a strategy for survival" by altering her godmother's dictum to a gentler motto (430).

7. Zwerdling argues that "the difference between Dickens and Esther as narrators lies not in their perceptiveness but in their self-confidence about their perceptiveness" (432).

8. My discussion of the reflexive relationship of Ada and Esther is informed by Cynthia Malone's and Alex Zwerdling's discussions. Malone argues that "Ada represents the 'I' that Esther has lost" (112), while Zwerdling contends that Ada is Esther's "idealized second self" (431).
9. For extended discussions of Dickens's views of the home and parent-child relationships, see Arthur Adrian's Dickens and the Parent-Child Relationship, and Frances Armstrong's Dickens and the Concept of Home.

10. For a broader discussion of Detective Bucket's and Lady Dedlock's relationship to fugitive identity see Marcia Renee Goodman's "I'll Follow the Other": Tracing the (M)other in Bleak House" and Cynthia Malone's "'Flight' and 'Pursuit': Fugitive Identity in Bleak House."

11. Goodman (154-155) and Malone (108-110) make some connections to the third-person narrator as well. Malone writes "the plot itself functions as a concealing surface" (108).

12. My discussion of Esther's fevered dreams is informed by the articles of Richard Gaughan, Marcia Goodman, and Alex Zwerdling.

13. Goodman claims that "Mrs. Jellyby's many letters lead to an angry, deprived, ink-stained daughter and in turn to her deaf and mute baby girl" (165).


15. I am grateful to Dr. Betty Campbell for pointing out that even Esther's husband's name, Allan Woodcourt, suggests the subjunctive mood.

16. Although I agree with Alex Zwerdling that Esther is not a static figure, Graver's argument is worth noting.

17. See Arthur Adrian (29) and Edgar Johnson (44) for discussion of Dickens's remark "I know that all these things have worked together to make me what I am."

18. See also Alexander Welsh's The City of Dickens (141-248) and Dianne F. Sadoff's Monsters of Affection for a brief synopsis and discussion of Welsh's description of women in Dickens' novels as good angels and as angels of death (51-69).
7. WORKS CITED


Goodman, Marcia Renee. "'I'll Follow the Other': Tracing the (M)other in *Bleak House*." *Dickens Studies Annual* 19 (1990): 147-167.


