SUPPOSING BLEAK HOUSE



By John Jordan
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Reviewed by Deirdre David on 2011-09-17.

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At the close of his long essay on *Bleak House*, John Jordan asks us what we see when we look at one of four illustrations by "Phiz" that were bound into the final, double monthly number of the novel. The illustration in question is "The Mausoleum at Chesney Wold" (below, scanned by George Landow). Deploying Mieke Bal's distinction between an external "focalizer" (a viewer looking at an image from an external perspective) and an internal "focalizer" (a viewer within an image looking at someone or something), Jordan pauses with the half-blind Sir Leicester Dedlock and the stalwart Trooper George, and sees a strange shadowy figure standing in front of the mausoleum door. Both outside and inside the illustration, Jordan sees a specter that haunts the novel, in all likelihood the ever-grieving Esther in search of her lost mother.



As every reader of this essay will feel compelled to do, I peered intently at the illustration, and wondered whether the text might be "telling us to look for something that Sir Leicester does not see" (149). I see no ghost: in fact, I see merely a kind of murky line across the mausoleum door. But in the long run, not seeing this particular specter matters little since Jordan elaborates the image to make us "see" other equally powerful ghosts: of class resentment, of Dickens's dead daughter Dora Annie, of the political and feminist meanings of the shade that haunts Chesney Wold, and of those "who have the strongest claim on Dickens's allegiance": ordinary people such as Nemo, Jo, and the Tom of Tom-all-Alone's (134). Through his meticulous attention to voice, stylistic shifts, Dickens biography, historical context, and narrative perspectives, Jordan urges us to see *Bleak House* afresh. In particular, his minutely detailed analysis of Esther Woodcourt's fractured narration takes us over to her shadowy side: less the dutiful, key-jangling little housewife and more a deeply troubled, mother-fixated young woman, she haunts Jordan's remarkable essay. His imaginative ghost-hunting brings to light much hitherto shadowed brilliance in Dickens's novel.

Choosing for methodological reasons to keep Dickens as author out of the picture until halfway through his essay, Jordan mounts a densely argued case for Esther Woodcourt as a character ripe for psychoanalytical interpretation (Woodcourt rather than Summerson because Jordan stresses the retrospective aspects of Esther's narrative). We learn that many of the "uncanny repetitions in Esther's story-telling arise out of her unconscious mind" (5); that they "emanate largely from Esther's unconscious, and they are the signs, the symptoms, of the unclaimed experience that shapes so much of her narrative" (8); that she "cannot keep her unconscious from speaking" (12). In other words, the fictional character emerges from this reading as a neurotic patient undergoing a pretty rough analysis. In fact, Jordan argues, "*Bleak House* is the story of a psychoanalysis, complete with episodes of extreme dissociation and even psychosis, narrated by the patient" (61).

Without question, Jordan's rigorous psychoanalytical approach renders some fine interpretive moments: for example, he offers a wonderful reading of Inspector Bucket as the "homely Orpheus"/cum psychoanalyst, who, taking Esther on her journey to find her dead mother, takes her down into the murky underworld to liberate her from the ghosts of her past (71). And his reading of Phiz's "Lady Dedlock in the Wood" (below, scanned by George Landow) argues that the scene of Esther and her mother facing each other, with Charley--head turned away from the viewer--picking violets, contains "another memory, or fantasy rather, that belongs to Esther" (41). The scene evokes and disguises the scene of Honaria Barbary "burying" the body of her infant daughter in Esther's "unarratable fantasy of origins." In this illustration, writes Jordan, Esther manages "to visualize in condensed and displaced form" what "she can never quite put directly into words" (41).



Yet however subtly developed, Jordan's argument makes us wonder how it is possible for Esther to exhibit any agency in this illustration, to possess "unnarratable" fantasies, to "visualize" what she cannot articulate. To state the obvious, the illustration was created by "Phiz" perhaps at the direction of Dickens, perhaps not: Esther can be nothing, do nothing, say nothing except what she is permitted to do and say by her creators. Might it not be more plausible to argue that Dickens, in his extraordinarily intuitive anticipation of Freudian theory, creates a character who seems to us, from our early twenty-first-century post-Freudian perspective, to be in serious need of treatment? Might it not do Dickens greater justice to say that one mark of his genius is, in fact, the way in which his fiction entices us to make psychoanalytic readings? Choosing to delay discussion of authorial agency until halfway through his essay, Jordan tends to compromise the powerful argument that has led to this midpoint.

It seems to me, too, that Jordan's understanding of what constitutes a successful analysis requires some adjustment, which is not to say he argues from an uninformed perspective. Quite the contrary, since he observes correctly that patients who experience failure "in their analysis or who reach an impasse with their first analyst sometimes undertake a second course of treatment" (74). But in what sense can Esther's narrative be seen as a "second analysis," undertaken by herself, as Jordan claims? No analysand can undertake analysis alone. To imply that Esther undergoes a form of treatment as she relates her story to the reader raises unanswerable questions about how the reader functions, in her or his turn, as the analyst. Finally, according to Jordan, both of Esther's "psychoanalyses" are only partially successful since at the close of the novel she slips back "into the underworld, not fully alive, still searching in Ada's face or in Jarndyce's or in Allan's for the look that will bring her back to life, but finding instead only 'my old looks'" (78). Surely the post-analysis analysand always slips back into the "underworld" of unresolved neurosis. The Freudian cure is to understand one's neurosis, to monitor the slipping back, and to disallow the trauma to regulate one's behavior.

And so, at the beginning of Chapter 5, we come to the question: "Where is Dickens in all this?" (87) Jordan declares that leaving him out has allowed him to "skirt the vexing questions of intentionality and purpose that accompany the concept of the 'author'" (87). Wishing not to "privilege biography at the expense of fiction or to argue that Dickens's 'life' is the source of the fictional representations we find in the novel" (98), he aims to align two different texts -- the life of the author and the story of Esther Summerson -- and perhaps to find "a mutually constitutive dynamic between the two" (98). Esther, he discovers, is both a "refraction" of Dickens's ninth child, Dora Annie, who died at the age of eight months, *and* a fantasy of what might have happened had she lived. But, he concludes, we should not "shine too bright a light on the shadowy zone that lies between the story of Dickens, Catherine, and Dora on the one hand, and that of Esther Woodcourt, Lady Dedlock, Captain Hawdon, and Esther Summerson on the other" (107) But why should we not, one wonders, since an extremely bright light has been shone on Esther as a patient and analyst? In other words, the first five chapters of Jordan's meditation beam an interpretive light into every crevice of Esther's psyche as if she were an autonomous human being with agency, rather than a fictional character created by a working author.

Eventually, allowing for the critical brilliance and theoretical assurance of Jordan's analysis, one wonders whether he might not have set himself up in an either-or situation: in the first half, he proceeds as if there is no author, no Dickens, no genius who will muddy the interpretive waters with pronouncements about "intentionality." In the second half, he conducts a scrupulously detailed analysis of how Esther Summerson's creation arose from Dickens's grief and guilt over the death of his baby daughter. Is there no way of linking a novel to the feelings or ideas of its author without assuming intentionality? And even if we allow intentionality, is that necessarily what we receive in the text? An author may intend one thing and end up -- consciously or not-- doing another. Is there no middle ground between psychoanalyzing fictional characters as if they possessed human agency and reading them as mere projections of an author's feelings?

But for all the questions raised by his method, Jordan does shed new light on Esther. What I finally saw best after finishing his essay was his brilliance in bringing out "the darker, more powerful and conflicted side of Esther's character"

(73), especially the often overlooked sarcastic side of her personality (as when she calls herself "not so good" as Mrs. Rachael in parting, and weeps "bitterly"). As Jordan observes, Esther is fully the equal of Jane Eyre, Lucy Snow, and Catherine Earnshaw, and *Bleak House* unquestionably "deserves recognition as one of the great achievements in the tradition of the female gothic" (73). Perhaps what one sees in the illustration for "The Mausoleum at Chesney Wold" is the ghost of the gothic lurking outside Lady Dedlock's tomb, the shade of an earlier form that haunts Dickens's great novels.

Deirdre David is Professor of English Emerita at Temple University and a Senior Scholar in the Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University.

John Jordan Responds (09-29-11)

I thank Deirdre David for her thoughtful and generous review of my book. David's review raises important methodological issues regarding agency and authorship that have larger implications for literary study. David questions my attribution of "agency" to Esther in her role as narrator of the verbal and visual texts of *Bleak House*. She writes, "Esther can be nothing, do nothing, say nothing except what she is permitted to do and say by her creators." And she believes that I have treated Esther "as if she were an autonomous human being with agency instead of a fictional character created by a working author." And again, "Choosing to delay discussion of authorial agency until halfway through his essay, Jordan tends to compromise the powerful argument that has led to this midpoint."

Can a fictional character have "agency"? Can a character have an "unconscious" that one can psychoanalyze? And what exactly is the role of the author? Following Benveniste ("Subjectivity in Language"), I believe the answer to the first two questions is "yes." Esther has agency and subjectivity within the linguistic and visual structures of the novel by virtue of her role as narrator and, in Mieke Bal's terms, as "focalizer" of half the novel's illustrations. Her use of the first-person pronoun and her acknowledgement that she is writing the text we read are sufficient justification for such claims. Rather than credit the writing to Dickens, I choose to bracket the author concept and focus initially on the narrator. Doing so is in one sense a simple critical move, like attributing the language of a dramatic monologue to the poem's speaker rather than to its author. The critical payoff that results from focusing on Esther's retrospective viewpoint (hence "Esther Woodcourt") is considerable.

What troubles David most, however, is the relationship I draw--or that I draw in terms different from those she would prefer--between Dickens as author and the text of his novel. I allow the text of *Bleak House* considerable independence, and when I turn to Dickens himself in chapter 5 of my book, I analyze events in his life during the years surrounding the composition of *Bleak House* as offering productive parallels to elements in the novel, but not as their source, origin, and cause. I consider Dickens's "life" to be a series of texts rather than a "real" that precedes and grounds the fiction, and I reference the work of Rosemarie Bodenheimer (especially her *Knowing Dickens*) as precedent and model for such an approach. David holds to a more traditional idea of authorship. She insists that characters can do, say, write, or see nothing except as they are "permitted" by their author. For her the author is a "creator," a "genius," whose "extraordinary intuitive anticipation of Freudian theory" enables him to create characters whom we, from our post-Freudian position, interpret as ripe for psychoanalytic treatment. (In reviewing Michael Slater's recent biography of Dickens, she again calls for an explanation of Dickens's "genius.") Many theorists (Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida among them) have challenged the idea of the author as genius, and their arguments have influenced my approach to Dickens. At the same time, I do not want to eliminate the author entirely from consideration.

Delaying discussion of events in Dickens's life between 1850 and 1852 until after my interpretation of Esther is in place was a deliberate choice, designed to promote interpretive complexity without falling into the "either-or" binary that David believes has compromised my argument. I would describe the argument as "both-and" rather than "either-or," though it is a "both-and" that leaves considerable room for indeterminacy. David's model produces a simple one-directional causality: author creates work. Mine allows for more flexibility, pointing to parallels between life and work, without privileging the former over the latter and without appealing to the authority of a creator as first and final cause.

Such an approach is speculative and entails risks. How well the approach succeeds I leave for other readers to judge. In any event, I am grateful to Deirdre David for posing these challenges and for prompting me to define more sharply the difference in our theoretical positions.

John O. Jordan is Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Director of the Dickens Project.

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