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Esther Summerson: Regal Fiction and the Morality of a Princess in *Bleak House*

Queen Victoria reigned in England for most of Charles Dickens' life, and her name came to represent the time period and characteristics of Dickens' work. Described as "emblematically Victorian" (Smiley 43), Dickens carried her name with the title of "the first Victorian novelist" (Smiley 16). Interested in the world around him, the author often wrote real-life muses into his work. As the living heir to the throne, and later his queen, Victoria may have been one of his real-life muses, as seen in the similarities between her and Dickens' character Esther Summerson of *Bleak House*. Esther shares many similar life experiences with Victoria, including growing up "like some princess in the fairy stories" (Dickens 28), but the most prominent similarity between the women is the development and strengthening of their moral potential through the sufferings of their youth: relative poverty, the search for a father-figure, and personal disfigurement. By creating a moral heroine in *Bleak House*, Dickens reinforces and places his approval on Queen Victoria and England's moral development.

From their birth, the two women are linked; Esther's birth is even explicitly connected to the queen's by Esther's belief in equality at birth. Esther said, "I knew I was as innocent of my birth, as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it" (Dickens 587). Although the women belonged to different life stations—one middle class and one a queen—they both suffered in their young age and were not shielded from hardship. Esther and Queen Victoria's different social status also did not exempt either of the women from performing their moral duty to society; both held benevolent positions for the people

around them. This may have been Dickens' motivation for creating a middle class character in Victoria's likeness: he wanted to promote the political view that in all things—regardless of, and perhaps because of, social rank or suffering—each citizen has a moral standard to live up to and a moral duty to serve others.

Because of his political interest, Dickens would have had ample opportunity to learn what it meant to grow up like a princess through the young Victoria. Jane Smiley describes Dickens, who was interested in politics most of his life, as a “self-conscious and responsible citizen” who used his reputation to “comment upon and influence political events” (Smiley 17). He often used writing as a means of social commentary, as evident in his satire of the legal system in *Bleak House*. He may have found inspiration for the creation of Esther's character at the age of nineteen when he began writing as a parliamentary reporter. He would have heard Parliament discussing matters such as Victoria's annual allowances and who should act as Regent if King William IV should die before Victoria turned eighteen. Such proceedings gave him insight into the Princess's life and mirrored the Chancery Court which held the fate of Esther and her beloved Ada and Richard in terms of wealth and guardianship.

The royal family was always in the public eye, and as a reporter, Dickens would have heard and read numerous accounts of royal events, parties, and parades, as well as family problems. Beginning in 1832, Princess Victoria went on royal tours to present her to the country. These highly publicized events would have been near impossible for Dickens to have missed. Even the King, annoyed at all of the attention the young princess received, commented on the publicity whirlwind. In 1835 he wrote a letter to Victoria stating, “I hope the newspapers will not inform me of your traveling this year”

(Charlot 65). Because she was a media favorite, Dickens would not have been wanting for information with which to base a character on Victoria.

Published in 1853 at a time when Queen Victoria and the royal family were in the forefront of the media's attention, *Bleak House* introduced society to Esther Summerson, a female moral leader. At the same time, magazines, newspapers, and periodicals targeted the "ever-growing reading and viewing public eager to be informed about every trivial little detail in the dress, demeanour, the fortunes and misfortunes of the Queen, Prince Albert [her husband] and their children" (Schneider 51). Society viewed the royal couple and their children as "the model family" and regarded the Queen as the "Head of [British] *morality*" as noted by the nineteenth century author Walter Bagehot (Schneider 50, original emphasis and notation). As a social commentator this could not have escaped Charles Dickens' observation. His consciousness of the Queen's role in defining his country's morality may have translated into the creation of Esther Summerson, the moral leader of *Bleak House*.

Before becoming moral leaders, both women suffered through a lonely and bleak childhood. As an orphan raised by her unloving aunt, Esther grew up in Windsor, where Queen Victoria would later hold her court (Charlot 101). Often told that it would have been better had she never been born, Esther had few friends. Other girls lived around her to play with, but Esther wrote that "there seemed to be a separation between us" (Dickens 29). Esther's aunt justified the separation by explaining, "You were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart" (Dickens 31). Victoria, who would later reside in Windsor in her "castle on the hill, a round tower on a mound, two wards with walls and towers round them, all for power and prestige" (Sapper), was also set

apart as the future Queen of England. Even though she was set apart as special, Esther lived a meager lifestyle during her childhood, although unknown to her, Lady Dedlock, a rich baroness, was her biological mother and her secret link to aristocracy. After her aunt died, “her means die[d] with her” (Dickens 33) leaving Esther in a very poor position until she accepted Mr. Jarndyce’s offer to “place her at a first-rate establishment; where her education shall be completed, where her comfort shall be secured, where her reasonable wants shall be anticipated” (Dickens 35). Her fate, comfort, and living expenses were now in the hands of a benevolent man, albeit a stranger.

Esther’s childhood economic situation parallels Princess Victoria’s: even though she was a member of the royal family, she was relatively poor. Like Esther, she lived a humble lifestyle because Parliament controlled her annual salary and only provided her with a meager income. In 1920 when Victoria was yet an infant, her father died leaving her mother, the Duchess of Kent, without property and “very little money to live on” (Charlot 39). Victoria’s uncle, Prince Leopold, offered the little princess and her mother six percent of his income from Parliament, thus giving the House of Commons a reason to withhold monetary support for the future queen and her mother (Charlot 39). This income, barely enough to support Victoria’s education, forced the Duchess to “beg a home in Kensington Palace from the King” (Charlot 40), leaving the Duchess and Princess Victoria in a precarious social position.

Because they were set apart, the young Esther and Victoria encountered a great deal of loneliness. The young princess often talked about her childhood in London as being “dull and sad” (Longford 26) because she “suffered from too few of what she called ‘holly days’” (Longford 31). Esther also lacked “holly days,” especially birthdays,

causing her to vow to herself that she would earn love. Both young girls tried to counteract their loneliness with dolls. After Victoria was old enough to enter into her care, Baroness Lezhen, who the young princess viewed as a “mother figure and her saviour” (Charlot 87), started the princess’s “famous collection of dolls” (Longford 30). They were her only childhood friends among the adults that surrounded her on a daily basis (Longford 30). Esther also had a doll that became her solitary friend during her isolated childhood. In her narrative Esther writes:

My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and I never dared to open my heart to anybody else. It almost makes me cry to think what a relief it used to be to me...to run upstairs to my room, and say, ‘O you dear faithful Dolly, I knew you would be expecting me!’ (Dickens 28).

The company of dolls however, was no match for what the young girls really wanted—a father-figure. As young girls, both searched for a friend whom they found in their dolls; as young women, both lacked a father-figure—a person who, unlike a friend, could not be as easily replaced by a childhood toy. Both longed for a father-figure to supplement the care, or lack-there-of, that they received from their mother-figures.

Esther grew up without a father, and after her aunt died, she became a ward of the state. Princess Victoria also became a ward of the state after her father died, but in a much different way. She was a ward of the state because the State of England determined most of her day-to-day life, guardianship, living arrangements, and income. Without having male influence in their young lives, Esther and Victoria adhered to the first male figures that took them under their care and guidance. Both young women adopted a male guardian to look up to and rely upon to provide for their essentials. Esther’s male warden came right to her in her need, but Victoria “spent much of her life

looking for father-figures” (Longford 26). After Esther became an orphan, Mr. Jarndyce took her under his wing, and she lovingly called him her Guardian. He provided her with companions, an education, a home, and an occupation. Esther relied heavily on Mr. Jarndyce, and he made sure that she was always “beloved, useful, and happy” (Dickens 276). In return, Esther looked up to and respected “the guardian who is a Father to her” (Dickens 277). Princess Victoria also adopted a father-figure in the form of her Uncle Leopold, the King of Belgium.

In her journal, Princess Victoria described King Leopold as being her “*segundo padre* or rather *solo padre!* for [sic] he is indeed like my real father as I have none!” (Charlot 79, original notation). King Leopold’s role in Princess Victoria’s life resembled Mr. Jarndyce’s relationship to Esther. He provided for her monetarily, and they had a very close bond, so much so, that Victoria “never took lightly any recommendation, any piece of advice, any counsel coming from her uncle” (Charlot 44). They often would “pour out their hearts to one another...much as father and daughter might do” (Charlot 44). Esther and Jarndyce would do much the same late at night in Jarndyce’s Growlery.

In addition to having father-like figures that helped guide and alter their course in life, Esther and Princess Victoria both suffered from an appearance altering illness. Esther suffered from smallpox. Ill for many weeks, she confined herself to her room. Although the sickness spared her life, it did not spare her from the scars it left behind. After tempting the reader with hints of her disfigurement and sheltering Esther from her altered appearance for days after her illness, Dickens finally allows Esther to acquaint herself with her new reflection in a mirror:

My hair had not been cut off, though it had been in danger more than once. It was long and thick. I let it down, and went up to the glass upon the dressing

table... Then I pulled 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 (Dickens 572).

Fortunately, Princess Victoria was the first royal family member to have received the smallpox vaccine (Longford 22); however, that particular vaccine could not stop her from contracting typhoid in 1835 which confined her for nearly five weeks. Using entries from Princess Victoria's journal, Lady Longford describes one of the Princess's encounters with a mirror after her illness:

She was thin and had lost so much hair that she was 'litterally [sic] growing *bald*.' As a last desperate measure, Lehzen cut off most of what hair remained, leaving just enough to make a small puff. It was once so thick, sighed Princess Victoria plaintively, that Lehzen could hardly grasp it in her hand. Towards the middle of November she felt strong enough to draw herself in the mirror. Pinched cheeks, sharp chin—what a sad spectacle. The face in the mirror looked extraordinarily young, but it had the anxious eyes of an old woman (Longford 49, original emphasis and notation).

According to feminist social historians, "For Victorian leisure class women, illness could serve as a means of control" (Michie 199). With their household and familial duties put on hold, the women have to come to terms with who they are. Illness allowed their bodies to become a physical presence because the body "could be articulated in and through the discourse of medicine" (Michie 199). According to Helena Michie in her article "'Who Is This in Pain?': Scarring, Disfigurement, and Female Identity in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*," Dickens uses pain in his female characters to build "the character's construction of self" (199). She argues that "The female self, like Dickens' female characters, comes into being through illness, scarring, and deformity" (199). This corresponds with Esther and Victoria's moral growth and

personal sense of duty after their illnesses left them without a trace of physical beauty. As intimates of pain and want, neither Victoria nor Esther later held onto an attitude of entitlement, but rather took on the moral duty to serve others.

In his Preface of *Bleak House*, Terry Eagleton writes that Dickens faced the “familiar problem of how to make virtue artistically attractive” (vii). In the case of *Bleak House*, Dickens found the answer to this problem by developing the moral heroine through deformity and the absence of physical beauty. Before their illnesses, both women were described as plain, or in the words of Esther, “I had never been a beauty” (Dickens 572). Being of humble appearance to begin with, the young women now had to come to terms with their altered looks. Both encounters with the mirror describe first the women’s reaction to their hair and then to their faces. Because Esther’s hair had been spared, she was able to use it to hide her face and cover any of her blemishes that she could not bear to examine. Victoria’s hair, however, had been cut off in an attempt to help her during her illness. She did not have a way to hide any of her physical faults as she looked into the mirror, a fitting difference because of a queen’s inability to hide herself from her subjects and the need to truthfully examine herself both inside and out for the sake of her people.

The women’s eyes also tell a lot about them as they looked into the mirror. Other characters often describe Esther “as ‘Dame Durden’ and the ‘Old Woman who lived in a shoe’” (Michie 204) testifying to her mature and caring nature—despite her young age. Trusted to have a “face which one can depend on not to alter” (Michie 204), Esther put all of her energy into becoming more industrious and caring to make up for her loss of beauty. Her renewed and strengthened sense of moral duty was reflected in her eyes,

allowing them to look placidly at her new reflection, while Victoria's eyes looked anxious like the eyes of an older woman. Her old-woman eyes betray her apprehension; the illness and the prospect of ruling a nation made her mature faster than her time. Both demonstrate a maturity level and a moral gravity beyond the women's years. It took courage to bravely face their new appearance; Victoria even chose to immortalize it in a self-portrait.

Mr. Jarndyce paid no attention to the change in Esther's appearance. He tended to her wishes during her illness and continued to provide for her. Esther was so grateful to Mr. Jarndyce for his treatment of her that in her narrative she wrote, "How could I ever be good enough, how...could I ever hope to be forgetful enough, devoted enough to him, and useful enough to others, to show him how I blessed and honoured him" (Dickens 686). Esther's desire to have a way to thank her guardian was fulfilled when Jarndyce proposed marriage to her. She decided that the best way to thank her beloved guardian was to accept his offer and become the mistress of Bleak House.

When she learned of her new prospects, she wanted to be "useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest and unpretending ways" (Dickens 693). She did not want to disappoint her guardian, but even through her claims of happiness, the prospect of being the mistress of Bleak House saddened her "as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me," and she "cried very much"(Dickens 692). Princess Victoria acted in much the same manner when she learned of the probability that she would become Queen of England. She discovered her royal prospects when she was only eleven years old because someone slipped a genealogical table into one of her textbooks. Upon realizing her destiny, the young princess "burst into tears" (Longford

32) because “the discovery made her very unhappy” (Longford 33). After the shock, the little princess was reported to have spoken her famous words, “I will be good” (Longford 32). Both women felt a profound sense of duty, becoming moral icons, even while they cried for themselves and their destiny.

After Esther and Princess Victoria had a title to look forward to, one the mistress of Bleak House and the other the Queen of England, they kept themselves very busy. At the age of sixteen Princess Victoria wrote in her diary, “I love to be employed; I hate to be idle” (Longhorn 47). She remained busy with her studies and royal functions. Esther also maintained a high level of productivity which reaches back to her childhood when she promised herself that she would be useful and loved. After Mr. Jarndyce asked her to be his housekeeper and then his wife, she was constantly shaking her keys and reminding herself of her duty. When she had finished taking care of him, she would look after someone else who needed assistance, often alongside Allan Woodcourt, a doctor. Even though Esther never faltered in her loyalty to her Guardian, Allan Woodcourt and Esther became very fond of one another.

Jarndyce kept a close eye on their relationship, as King Leopold did with Victoria and potential royal partners. After witnessing Allan and Esther together, Jarndyce took it upon himself, without consulting Esther, to decide that she should marry Allan and become the mistress of a Bleak House that Jarndyce would established for her. Woodcourt was a very practical man, making him an appropriate choice of a husband compared to Richard, the flighty yet romantic choice of Esther’s darling Ada. Jarndyce believed that Esther would be happier with Allan; his insight proved true and Esther and Allan’s marriage turned out to be a marriage of love.

Princess Victoria's father-figure also chose a husband for her. While Victoria was still a child, Leopold "came to the conclusion that a marriage between Victoria and Albert [her cousin] must be their aim" (Longford 29, original notation). Upon meeting Albert and other male companions, Victoria "particularly praised Albert to King Leopold" because she knew "what was expected of her" (Longford 53). In a letter to her uncle, Victoria wrote, "Thank you, beloved Uncle, for the prospect of great happiness you have contributed to give me in the person of dear Albert" (Charlot 78). Esther and Allan's response echoed these lines after Jarndyce told Allan to "take from me, a willing gift, the best wife that ever a man had" (Dickens 966). Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were married in 1840, three years after Victoria's coronation. Both guardians thought they were making the best decision for the women, and as with most of their guardians' opinions and wishes, Esther and Victoria readily agreed. Like Esther, Queen Victoria's marriage "turned out to be a love match after all" (Schneider 47), even though both marriages were set out before them by their respective father-figures.

Charles Dickens wrote Esther and Allan to be an example of a happily married couple. In her narrative Esther wrote, "The people even praise me as the doctor's wife. The people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed" (Dickens 988). Queen Victoria identified herself as Albert's wife, and the English people responded similarly to the royal couple as the people in the novel did with Esther and Allan. Queen Victoria and Albert were viewed by the public as "a model couple, they and their children as the model family" (Schneider 50). As a social commentator, Dickens may have fashioned a heroine who modeled Queen Victoria's family values in order to reinforce the family and moral trend that was taking place in Victoria's England.

In addition to setting a good family example, Queen Victoria also set a good example for her people by advancing the country morally and technologically.

Socially and politically active, Dickens would have known about the moral good and technological advancement that the Queen and her husband provided for his country. He also would have been aware of her great concern for social welfare. She wrote that “she felt intensely for the sorrows & anxieties of others” (Longhorn 574) which is one of the characteristics that he attributes to Esther. As the first monarch of her kind, Queen Victoria ushered in a new era of middle class values. The royal family focused less on pomp and dress than the tradition monarchs, and their “lifestyles came nowhere near the extravagances characteristic of previous kings” (Schneider 49). Their modesty resonated through the increasingly powerful middle class who were pleased with this change. A fictional middle class version of Queen Victoria, as reflected in Esther’s morality, grace, modest looks, humbleness, and desire to benefit others, would have been a way for Dickens to represent the changing social values sweeping through England.

Dickens often reacted strongly to criticism of his social representations (Mehl 265). Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria’s Prime Minister and most influential political advisor after her ascension to the throne, criticized Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist* saying it was “very coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London’s population” (Mehl 265). It is possible that over a decade later, Dickens remembered those words and the many others like them and chose to incorporate a character that would be hard to criticize—the Queen, the head of English morality. Perhaps even more plausible, Dickens maintained his role as a covert social commentator and had something to say to his Queen.

Dickens' books entertained more of Queen Victoria's subjects than any of his contemporaries (Mehl 261), making it near impossible for Queen Victoria to ignore his work. She wished to know the author personally, but Dickens turned her down twice, once after a Wilkie Collins' production in which Dickens performed as an amateur actor and again after the Queen asked for a private performance of *A Christmas Carole*. He answered the last request by explaining that he only performed for public audiences, a performance she was more than welcomed to attend (Mehl 263). The meeting never took place, but Queen Victoria received a copy of *The Christmas Carole* with Dickens' own dedication written inside for her private collection after his death (Mehl 263). Because of the interest that she showed in his work, it is plausible to believe that she would have read his later novels. With that in mind, if she were to ever pick up a copy of *Bleak House*, Queen Victoria may have been struck by the similarities between her younger self and Esther. If Dickens created Esther in regal fiction, it is a nod to Queen Victoria and her morality, reinforcing not only the public's changing attitude, but also supporting the Queen and her lifestyle that brought about the changes. After all, Esther, in a surge of moral duty, took care of everyone from the orphan Jo to her estranged aristocratic mother. He may have expected no less from his Queen.

Queen Victoria "stamped her personality on her country" during a time in which England was "undergoing major changes in politics, social structure, economics, science and the arts" (Schneider 41). Charles Dickens left his stamp on England as well in many of those same areas. According to Von Dieter Mehl:

Für Generationen von Lesern aber, nicht nur im eigenen Land, sondern weltweit, ist das Zeitalter Königin Victorias eng mit den Romanen von Charles Dickens verbunden, ja diese Romane haben recht eigentlich ein Bild der viktorianischen

Gesellschaft geschaffen und der Nachwelt weitergereicht, jedenfalls weit mehr als wissenschaftliche Darstellungen oder andere “authentische” Zeugnisse (263).¹

It does not seem too improbable that two influential people of nineteenth century England, one the social leader and the other a social commentator, would influence each other in a reciprocal way. Charles Dickens had enough knowledge, social prowess, and reason to write his character, Esther Summerson, as a reflection of Queen Victoria; after all, Queen Victoria was influential enough to be the eponymous inspiration for the era in which Dickens wrote simultaneously as an entertainer and as a social commentator.

¹ For generations of readers...worldwide, the era of Queen Victoria is closely connected with the novels of Charles Dickens in so far as those novels have created a picture of Victorian Society, which was passed on far more than scientific representations or other ‘authentic’ witnesses.

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