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## NARRATIVE ART IN "BLEAK HOUSE"

"Bleak House", as a social-political novel, forms a thematic and artistic whole with "Little Dorrit"<sup>1</sup>; in "Bleak House" the administration of justice - or rather injustice - is the object of satire; in "Little Dorrit" the machinery of government is attacked in the activity, or rather inactivity, of Circumlocution Office. Both novels show the interconnections between the system of government and different social and political circles, and in each bureaucracy, muddleheadedness and deliberate opposition to constructive initiative or to the aspirations of the individual contribute to the consolidation of the system of oppression. It is not surprising that "Bleak House" has been compared to Kafka's<sup>2</sup> work. The comparison with "The Trial" comes naturally to the mind of a 20th century reader: in the novel of both writers the trial drags on, the sinister farce warps people morally or drives them to insanity. In this context Dickens's originality is all the more striking: in "Bleak House" he introduces the theme which will continually recur in twentieth century fiction - that of the individual oppressed, ignored and

<sup>1</sup> In his study "The Dickens Theatre", Oxford 1967, Robert Garis discusses three novels in the chapter called "The World of System": "Bleak House", "Little Dorrit" and "Hard Times".

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Spilka, "Dickens and Kafka", Bloomington, Ind. 1963, also references by J. Killham in his essay "Pickwick: Dickens and the Art of Fiction", [in:] Dickens and the Twentieth Century, ed. J. Gross, G. Pearson, Toronto 1962; W. Allen in his essay: "The Comedy of Dickens", [in:] Dickens 1970, ed. M. Slater, London 1970, and others.

eventually destroyed by a powerful system. In one of the last meetings between John Jarndyce and Conversation Kenge the latter says:

We are a prosperous community, Mr. Jarndyce, a very prosperous community. We are a great country, Mr. Jarndyce, a very great country. This is a great system, Mr. Jarndyce, and would you wish a great country to have little system? Now, really, really<sup>3</sup>.

The machinery under which the Jarndyce case is possible, is indeed powerful. On the surface it seems that the whole matter is evidence of the inefficiency of the law. In effect the delaying tactics in legal proceedings enslave people and "do business" for the servants of the law, which is illustrated by the main plot with its numerous ramifications.

The system of law works on several levels: at the top there is the Lord Chancellor, almost a symbolic figure; he represents the magnificence and the inaccessibility of authority. On the lower level there are men like Kenge, Vholes and Tulkinghorn; each of them holds the destinies of his clients in his power, although each in a different way. The rhetoric of Kenge illustrates best the gap between what is and what seems; he is fully aware of the power of the word and his flowery speech is used to evade or distort the truth. Vholes is a demonic figure who ensnares his naive client with vague promises and brings him to disaster. Tulkinghorn, under his impenetrable mask, conceals an aspiration to power through the knowledge of the secrets of his aristocratic clients. All three of them have followers of a much lower degree, such as Guppy, Weevle and Smallweed, who can be used for legal and illegal practices. On another level there is Inspector Bucket, and in contrast to the muddle, obscurity and absurdity of legal proceedings, his action is extremely efficient. The police force becomes a powerful branch of the system, but there are two aspects of its activity: although it helps to discover the murderer, satisfying our demand for justice and order, Inspector Bucket's relentless pursuit of the individual, which is particularly striking in the case of Jo

<sup>3</sup> C. D i c k e n s, *Bleak House*, A Norton Critical Edition Edited by George Ford, Sylvere Monod, New York 1977, p. 741. All further quotations are from this edition.



and George, introduces the theme of man-hunt into the novel.

The system presented in "Bleak House" is maintained by close cooperation between different institutions, social groups and individuals. The Law Courts are supported by Parliament with its party rivalry between the Buffies and Duffies and the Boodles and Doodles. The aristocracy represented by Sir Leicester Dedlock is the most dedicated supporter of the system. The ordinary people frequently support it by their indolence and indifference. There are misguided philanthropists like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, or parasites like Turveydrop or Harold Skimpole whose immorality is typical of a large part of society indifferent to the situation of the poor and to the pressing health problems of the day<sup>4</sup>. The irony of the social situation in this supremely ironic novel consists, among others, in the fact that those who support the system or imagine themselves to be among its powerful protectors are in fact helpless, pitiful figures whose fate depends on the people they seem to protect. Thus Sir Leicester Dedlock, blinded by his aristocratic pride, is completely ignorant of the role Mr. Tulkinghorn plays in his house. The lawyer is a man he trusts absolutely, but it is he who brings about the downfall of his family.

In this society generous people like John Jarndyce are helpless against the evil of their times. They can stand aside, remain uninvolved in the immoral practices of the law and do good on a small scale, thus carrying out a kind of "minimum programme" within the span of their lives<sup>5</sup>. Honest but naive and vulnerable people like George and the Bagnets become easy victims of powerful and ruthless agents like Tulkinghorn; a comic figure like Snagsby, well-meaning but limited, is easily intimidated; inferior legal officials, grotesque characters like Guppy and Weevle, are in danger of falling into the routine of office which will turn them into puppets like the officials

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Butt, K. T. L. L. o. t. s. o. n, The Topicality of Bleak House, [in:] Dickens. Bleak House. A Casebook, ed. A. E. D. y. s. o. n, London 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. S. m. i. t. h's analysis of the complexity of John Jarndyce's character, in: Charles Dickens. Bleak House, London 1974.

in the famous opening Court scene; the Smallweed family are the dregs of society, exploited by and serving the system, ready to sell themselves to the stronger or blackmail the weaker.

Dickens's art in "Bleak House" - in particular his narrative method and imagery - as a means of conveying his moral vision has been studied by outstanding British and American scholars<sup>6</sup>. While acknowledging my debt to them I should like to concentrate in this essay on the dynamic, imagistic presentation, the "camera work" of the omniscient narrator, and to contrast it with Dickens's interesting psychological experiment in Esther's subjective narration.

### 1. Imagery

One of the most striking features of Dickens's art in "Bleak House" is his imagistic presentation, in which the narrative and the descriptive are closely interconnected. There are certain image patterns which run throughout the novel, and I propose to discuss here those which occur in both streams of narration. Thus the fog and mud imagery has been widely interpreted by numerous critics; to this may be added the waste paper image; the innumerable legal documents in Chancery, "piles of costly nonsense"; Krook's rag and bottle shop; and the monster and animal imagery which expresses the degradation of man and the dehumanization of legal officials.

The waste paper image opens and closes the Jarndyce case. In the first chapter we see "the various solicitors [...] [with] mountains of costly nonsense piled before them" (p. 6). In chapter 65, when the case is over, we watch a kind of dumb show, a dynamic scene without words in which "several young councillors in wigs and whiskers [...] quite doubled themselves with laughter" when bundles of paper began to be carried out (p. 758). It is a grim farce played out before a crowd of sensa-

<sup>6</sup> See especially: W. J. H a r v e y, *Chance and Design in "Bleak House," [in:] Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. J. G r o s s, G. P e a r s o n, Toronto 1962; i d e m, *Bleak House - The Double Narrative, [in:] Dickens, Bleak House. A Casebook*; H. P. S u c k s m i t h, *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens*, Oxford 1970, and others.



tion-seeking spectators while Richard Carstone, the last victim of the celebrated case, is dying of tuberculosis and broken heart.

Krook's shop as a caricature of the Court of Chancery, contains, apart from waste paper and rags, the more macabre image of sacks of bones and women's hair. The system which left in its wake piles of human hair and bones became a reality in twentieth century Europe, but Dickens was certainly far from anticipating such horror in the satiric chapter "A Morning Adventure". Again it is the modern reader who can fully appreciate Dickens's prophetic vision. There is a particularly macabre touch in the scene when Krook, struck by the beauty of Ada's hair, extends his hand to stroke it. His gesture anticipates, in a symbolic way, the future disaster of Ada and Richard.

Imagery serves the narrator as commentary on the social and moral evil of contemporary England. There are repulsive images of dirt and vermin which contribute to the general atmosphere created by the initial image of fog and mud. The slums of Tom-all-Alone's are shown in the metaphor of a diseased human body:

As on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence which crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and comes and goes fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle and the Duke of Foodle and all the fine gentlemen in office down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years - though born expressly to do it (p. 197).

The animal and monster imagery is repeatedly stressed in the presentation of Krook's shop - there is the famous cat, Lady Jane, watching Miss Flite's birds with a hungry look, ready to devour them; and there is the owner himself "short, cadaverous and withered", with his "breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth, as if he were on fire within" (p. 49). Two more persons - Jo and Wholes - are presented with animal associations each in a characteristic way. The fate of an illiterate, abandoned child of the slums is the most drastic evidence of social indifference of the times. Jo is compared to an ox, cruelly exploited by men, and contrasted with a dog which is intelligent and trained, far better cared for than the human child:

It is a market day. The blinded oxen, overgoaded, overdri-

ven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out; and plunge red-eyed and foaming, at stone walls, and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like. [...] A band of music comes and plays. Jo listens to it. So does a dog - a drover's dog waiting for his master outside a butcher's shop. A thoroughly vagabond dog, accustomed to low company and public houses; a terrific dog to sheep, ready at a whistle to scamper over their backs, and tear out mouthfuls of their wool; but an educated, improved dog, who has been taught his duties and knows how to discharge them. He and Jo listen to music, probably with much the same amount of animal satisfaction; likewise as to awakened association, aspiration or regret, melancholy or joyful reference to things beyond the senses, they are probably upon a par. But otherwise, how far above the human listener is the brute! (p. 199).

Yet Jo, the ignorant and primitive victim of an indifferent society, is human in his feelings of gratitude, his capacity for appreciating kindness. Mr. Vholes, on the contrary, is an intelligent human being who perverts his humanity, the evidence of which is his behaviour as a professional. He is presented with satanic associations, a black figure, buttoned up, a tempter watching his victim with "a charmed gaze", and a devouring look; he is a serpent and a cat watching his mouse patiently and this image is used throughout the whole scene of the conversation between Attorney and Client (ch. 39). Whenever he appears with Richard his manner imparts associations with death. When the narrator presents him in realistic terms he stresses his physical ugliness.

The monster imagery which is closely connected with animal associations is also developed by Dickens's a well-known use of the synecdoche. In his descriptive-narrative presentation Dickens frequently makes a part stand for the whole, usually with grotesque and satirical effects. In "Bleak House" Dickens uses this device to express the dehumanization of the officers of the Law. In the first chapter lawyers and beaules are referred to as "silk gowns" and "maces":

There is the registrar below the Judge in wig and gown; and there are two or three maces or petty bags, or privy purses, or whatever they may be in legal court suits (p. 7).

And the Lord Chancellor is shown with his "attendant wigs"



all "stuck in a fog bank". Silk gowns<sup>7</sup>, bags or maces are not monsters or monstrous objects in themselves, but if parts of garment stand for the officials themselves, and symbols of authority take the place of human faces the effect is at first grotesque, but it soon changes into horror: we see the individual uttering his desperate appeal for help to an assembly of puppets and masks:

"Several members of the bar are still to be heard, I believe?" says the Chancellor with a slight smile.

Eighteen of Mr. Tangle's learned friends, each armed with a little summary of eighteen hundred sheets, bob up like eighteen hammers in a pianoforte, make eighteen bows, and drop into eighteen places of obscurity (p. 9). [...] The Chancellor rises; the bar rises; the prisoner is brought forward in a hurry; the Man from Shropshire cries, "My Lord!" Maces, bags and purses indignantly proclaim silence and frown at the Man from Shropshire (p. 9).

Thus the helplessness of man overwhelmed by the monstrous inhumanity of the officials, and - in a wider perspective - of the system, is established as the leading theme in the opening scene of the novel. Dickens anticipates here the vision of Ionesco in his comedy of the absurd, such as "Le Maitre"<sup>8</sup>.

The symbols of authority referred to as the Mace and Seal take another significance in the commentary of Miss Flite, reported in Esther's narrative. Here they are presented as monsters which draw people on and then destroy them. It is a visual representation of a fatal power which men and women cannot resist but which in fact is in themselves: it is their greed for money which enslaves them:

<sup>7</sup> This is a device used in the early as well as in late fiction. Cf. Mr. Bumble's gold-laced coat, staff and cocked hat in "Oliver Twist". In "Hard Times" James Harthouse is referred to as "waistcoat" and "whiskers" which, in this case suggests Tom Gradgrind's fascination with appearances and Harthouse's moral hollowness.

<sup>8</sup> In Ionesco's one-act play "The Leader" ("Le Maitre") the celebrity appears in the last scene as a monstrous puppet, a "man-in-an-overcoat-with-a-hat-without-a-head". One of the girl-admirers asks: "But... but... the leader hasn't got a head!" To which the Announcer answers: "What's he need a head for when he's got genius!" The dehumanization is complete.

"There's a cruel attraction in the place. You can't leave it. And you must expect. [...] It's the Mace and Seal upon the table.

What could they do, did she think? I mildly asked her. "Draw", returned Miss Flite. "Draw people on, my dear, Draw peace out of them. Sense out of them. Good looks out of them. Good qualities out of them. I have felt them even drawing my rest away in the night. Cold and glittering devils!" (p. 440).

The motif of Fate thus suggested runs throughout the novel, whether as the political power which rules men's lives or as social convention which enslaves individuals. Thus Lady Dedlock, affraid of public censure, is blackmailed by Mr. Tulkinghorn. The lawyer gradually becomes an agent of Fate which ultimately destroys Esther's mother. Like many other characters in Dickens's novels he is presented in a realistic and a metaphorical way, as a rusty-looking figure, respectable, silent, well-mannered, with a weakness for tobacco and port, and, at a later stage of action, as a shadowy form following Lady Dedlock. This shadow image has again a double function: it suggests a constant menace to Lady Dedlock and it perfectly renders the obsessive state of her mind:

Interposed between her and the fading light of day in the now quiet street, his shadow falls upon her, and he darkens all before her. Even so does he darken her life. (p. 575).  
[...] Therefore there is not much that Lady Dedlock, seated in her chair, could wish to see through the window in which Mr. Tulkinghorn stands. And yet - and yet - she sends a look in that direction, as if it were her heart's desire to have that figure moved out of the way (ibid.).

The Fate motif is developed by the narrator in an interesting and complex way. Thus on the lower level there is Mr. Tulkinghorn as a threatening figure; to Lady Dedlock her aristocratic mansion becomes "a house of suffocation" whenever he appears. But at the moment of his apparent victory over Lady Dedlock the narrator introduces the image of the clock which measures out the last minutes of Mr. Tulkinghorn's life, of which the lawyer is completely unaware. Thus the narrator achieves a heightening of suspense and a widening of perspective. The lawyer goes home with a sense of success and power, but the reader knows that his fate is already sealed. The commentary is intensely ironic, not so much in the melodramatic warning "don't go home!" which is expressed by the narrator, as in the detail of Mr. Tulkinghorn's



watch being two minutes wrong. Despite his reproof - "Two minutes wrong? At this rate you won't last my time!" - in fact the minutes of his life have already been counted and it is the watch which will last longer. Together with the ticking of the clock the Roman Allegory on the ceiling in the lawyer's room completes the image cluster announcing his death.

A further intensification of ironic meaning follows with the image of the starry sky on a moonlit night in which the narrator creates a vision of an indifferent universe above both the victim, Lady Dedlock, and the pursuer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, doomed to be a victim shortly. Dickens anticipates here Hardy's ironic projection of cosmic indifference in juxtaposition to human strivings and endeavours. The stars are traditionally symbolic of Fate above man, and in "Bleak House" the serene sky, the huge metropolis quiet at night, a glimpse of a distant harbour with a ship sailing out, perfectly convey the sense of life going on undisturbed by the intrigues of people and by the disappearance of individuals:

A fine night, and a bright large moon, and multitudes of stars. Mr. Tulkinghorn, in repairing to his cellar, and in opening and shutting those resounding doors, has to cross a little prisonlike yard. He looks casually, thinking what a fine night, what a bright large moon, what multitudes of stars. A quiet night, too.

A very quiet night. When the moon shines very brilliantly a solitude and stillness seem to proceed from her, that influence even crowded places full of life. Not only is it a still night on dusty high roads and on hill summits, whence a wide expanse of country may be seen in repose, quieter and quieter as it spreads away into a fringe of trees against the sky with the grey ghost of a bloom upon them; [...] not only is it a still night on the deep, and on the shore where the watcher stands to see the ship with her spread wings cross the path of light that appears to be presented to only him; but even on this stranger's wilderness of London there is some rest. Its steeples and towers, and its one great dome, grow more ethereal; its smoky house tops lose their grossness, in the pale effulgence; the noises that arise from the streets are fewer and are softened, and the footsteps on the pavements pass more tranquilly away (p. 583-584).

The juxtaposition between the serenity of the night and Mr. Tulkinghorn's sense of security as he walks to his death, is one of Dickens's masterstrokes of irony. It is achieved by imagery and by his handling of the omniscient point of view.

## 2. Dickens's "ever-varying presentation" - the omniscient narrator

The third person narrator - commentator in "Bleak House" may be often identified with the implied author, to use Wayne C. Booth's terminology, but he tells the story from different perspectives, shifting his vision like a film operator, using a variety of styles.

He is omniscient in the sense that he knows everything, or almost everything, about his characters, but he imparts his knowledge to or withholds it from the reader as far as it suits his purpose. In this way he discloses the secret of Lady Dedlock bit by bit; the antecedents are revealed as the story progresses and they are often implied rather than directly stated (e.g. the story that Esther hears from her aunt) until we reach the moment when Lady Dedlock's secret is revealed publicly by Mr. Tulkinghorn, which revelation is followed by Inspector Bucket's report to Sir Leicester and rounded off by the additional information from George. The narrator is omniscient in the first chapter, which contains a panoramic view of England, as a background to the Jarndyce case, and a survey of generations of people destroyed by the machinery of Law, but, as E. M. Forster says in "Aspects of the Novel"<sup>9</sup>, he knows less about Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn is a mystery to him. Sometimes the narrator confines his vision to one of the characters to intensify the dramatic effect, as in the narrative of Krook's death. This event is seen by Guppy and Weevle; it begins in the third person and then, in the critical moment, there is a sudden shift to "we" as if Guppy himself were telling his experience. Thus the sense of mystery and sensation is heightened since Guppy and Weevle are ignorant of what is really going on in Krook's shop; they are kept in suspense together with the reader; the narrator identifies himself with the clerks and the discovery of truth culminates in the horror of this truly gothic scene:

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<sup>9</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Penguin Books 1974, p. 86.



They advance slowly, looking at all these things. The cat remains where they found her, still snarling at something on the ground, before the fire and between the two chairs. What is it? Hold up the light.

Here is a small burnt patch of flooring: here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper, but not so light as usual seeming to be steeped in something; and here is - is it the cinder ashes, or is it coal? O Horror, he IS here! and this from which we<sup>10</sup> run away, striking out the light and overturning one another in the street, is all that represents him.

Help, help, help! come into the house for Heaven's sake! (p. 403).

There is an intensely dramatic effect achieved by this sudden identification of the narrator with the two clerks who are beside themselves with fear.

The narrator frequently addresses the reader with his ironic commentary as in the first Chancery scene, or in the chapter where Jo is compared to a dog and an ox; he addresses the public at large in the scene of Jo's death and his sarcastic tone relieves the melodramatic character of the chapter. But another, very interesting kind of commentary in this novel is Dickens's imagistic presentation which involves his particular "camera work".

Film directors like Griffith and Eisenstein have pointed to Dickens as a forerunner of the technique of film montage and recent critics have again stressed this aspect of his work<sup>11</sup>. "Bleak House" is particularly rich in examples of the long shot, medium shot, close-up and dissolve, which function as a method of telling the story or as a commentary. The famous beginning of "Bleak House" is an excellent illustration of the long shot with its panorama of London and England in November fog. The camera travels all over the city and its outskirts, preparing the scene, in its concrete and symbolic meaning, for the action of the novel. The descriptive-narrative part is in fact like a text

<sup>10</sup> Underscoring mine.

<sup>11</sup> S. E i s e n s t e i n, Wybór pism, Warszawa 1959; essay: "Dickens, Griffith i my". Also D. P o w e l l, in: The Dickensian. Centenary Number; J. R a b a n, The Technique of Modern Fiction, London 1972, p. 114. The author analyzes the scene of Steerforth's death, i.e. the moment when David finds him on the beach, in terms of film technique and stresses film qualities of description in Dickens's novels which anticipate Dos Passos.

in a screen play, phrases without finite verbs reveal image after image:

London [...] implacable November weather [...] Fog everywhere. Fog up the river [...] Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights [...] Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog with fog all around them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds. Gas looming through the fog in diverse places in the streets.

Then follows the "medium shot". The camera travels to Lincoln's Inn, we are inside the Court of Chancery and the close-up shows Lord Chancellor sitting with "his attendant wigs" in the "very heart of the fog". W. J. Harvey<sup>12</sup> in his excellent essay speaks of the "pulsation effect" of Dickens's narration which is achieved by a continual shift from panorama to a confined vision. To this must be added that the "camera work" or Dickens's "film technique", is often used with a strongly ironic effect. The "long shot" scenes are carefully planned and the shifting from the panorama to a close-up usually serves as an indirect commentary. Thus after the night scene between Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn the vast view of the early morning in England and in London - simultaneous images of people engaged in their daily activities, officials going to work, streetsweepers, squares, falling leaves - gives the impression of life going on around and in spite of the conflicts between actors in individual drama. The point of the scene, however, is in the final close-up: the flag rising above Sir Leicester's mansion, a symbol of the pride of a great family whose fall is imminent. Similarly there is a deeply ironic meaning in the panoramic view of London at the end of chapter 19 which culminates in the close-up of the "great Cross at the summit of St. Paul's Cathedral". To Jo, the vagabond of Tom-all-Alone's, it is only "the crowning confusion of the great confused city", but to the reader, the cross "glittering above the red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke" is a symbol of Christianity ignored in this rich and pagan city. The loneliness of an abandoned child contrasted with the indifference of the inhabitants of the metropolis is particularly stressed in this symbolic detail and with it Dick-

<sup>12</sup> H a r v e y, op. cit.



ens anticipates the theme of man's alienation in the modern urban jungle which runs through twentieth century literature.

Dickens's "close-up" technique deserves a special attention apart from its alternation with the panoramic views. The close-up works as a commentary in its own right. Thus in chapter "Attorney and Client" there are two images continually juxtaposed; Mr. Vholes talking to Richard and the "official" cat watching a mouse-hole. A cat and mouse image is not new; what is original is Dickens's visual technique which contains a factual narration of a business talk and an anticipation, on the symbolic level, of Richard's ultimate destruction. Similarly the Mace and Seal shown in a close-up are a symbolic image of the fatal power which destroys people. One of the most interesting examples of Dickens's use of symbolic detail in close-up is the well-known description of Lady Dedlock's portrait with a "broad bend - sinister of light that strikes down crookedly into the hearth and seems to rend it" (p. 138). By his imagistic technique Dickens achieves an artistic foreshortening, a poetic concentration: the heraldic detail, sign of illegitimate birth, suggests Lady Dedlock's secret and announces the downfall of the house of Dedlock ("strikes crookedly into the hearth and seems to rend it"). Thus the whole image works as condensed narrative and anticipation.

Sometimes the juxtaposition of scenes taking place simultaneously, shown by the narrator's camera, is comic or grotesque, as in the case of the Jellyby household. Here the meetings with Mrs. Jellyby, who with her "transparent eyes" sees Negro children in Borioboola Gha, are contrasted with scenes like those when Peepy is falling down the stairs, or moments when Esther is trying to make some order in the house while Mr. Jellyby is sitting in silent despair with his head against the wall.

In his essay titled "Dickens, Griffith and we" Eisenstein says that what film is to the twentieth century public Dickens's novels were to the Victorian readers. He stresses the extraordinary visual power and dynamic presentation of the author of "Bleak House" and analyzes some scenes of "Oliver Twist" as a ready made scenario with its technique of montage, "cutback" and close-up, later used in a masterly way by Griffith. Examples of such scenarios are to be found in all Dickens's novels, but

the narrative in "Bleak House" has a particularly "cinematic" quality which gives it a very special rhythm, or "pulsation" effect, as W. J. Harvey put it. Among Dickens's later novels "A Tale of Two Cities" deserves attention as another "film-like" novel; here Dickens made a very interesting use of the "dissolve" technique both in the visual and auditory effects, but the discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of the present paper.

### 3. Esther's narrative

Esther's story, as the second stream of narration, brings further variety. She represents a diametrically opposed point of view to that of the impersonal narrator: though essentially limited in comparison with his panoramic vision, she is also good-hearted and naive, at least at the beginning, while he is ironic, often sarcastic. Consequently her narration brings a relief in tone and sets off the value of the omniscient ironic commentary. Thus Dickens applies the classical principle of contrast, so highly appreciated by Fielding and Henry James<sup>13</sup>, with a well-calculated artistic effect.

However, Esther, as narrator and character, has been criticised by different critics as unconvincing and insipid<sup>14</sup>. It has been also pointed out that Dickens is inconsistent in the use of the convention he imposed upon himself, and that sometimes he makes Esther express ideas and paint images which are beyond her or out of character. We may quote here<sup>15</sup> her remarks about Mr. Wholes's "lingering look" when he watches Richard, or her comment on Mr. Kenge's praise of the system:

He said this at the stair-head, gently moving his right hand as if it were a silver trowel, with which to spread

<sup>13</sup> H. Fielding, in: Tom Jones, Book V, chapt. 1, vol. I, "Of the Serious in Writing"; H. James in the "Preface" to "Lady Barberina", vol. XIV, New York 1961: "On the interest of contrasted things any painter of life and manners inevitably much depends".

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Garis, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Harvey, op. cit., p. 147.



cement of his words on the structure of the system and consolidate it for a thousand ages (p. 741).

Though at this stage of action Esther is already much more experienced and critical she is by nature not ironic and the above remark is much too sophisticated for her. It is also true that there is an idealization of Esther's character and she may be irritating with her continual exhortations to duty and her self-effacement. This, however, is very much in keeping with the Victorian demand for feminine goodness in fiction and in agreement with Dickens's vision of the feminine ideal; it is also in agreement with Esther's sense of inferiority which is psychologically quite convincing. On the other hand several critics have pointed out that Esther represents a moral force in the novel and there are some recent studies in which Esther's character is discussed as evidence of Dickens's psychological awareness<sup>16</sup>. My purpose is to present Esther's narrative as one of interesting experiments in psychological study.

In the vast compositional pattern of "Bleak House" certain characters and milieus are introduced in both streams of narration, while others appear only in one, and this is a matter of careful calculation. Thus the Court of Chancery and the lawyers, and their counterpart Krook with his rag and bottle shop are shown by both narrators; so is Miss Flite, but Mrs. Jellyby's household, Mr. Turveydrop and, above all, Mr. Skimpole, are shown in Esther's narrative. On the other hand the aristocratic world of the Dedlocks, their residence with its melancholy atmosphere, the Ironmaster and his world are shown mainly by the omniscient narrator, although Esther comes into contact with Lady Dedlock and Sir Leicester and shows us glimpses of this world from her point of view. The juxtaposition of these two opposed angles of vision has an excellent artistic effect. After the introduction of the world of Chancery by the omniscient narrator with his sinister and grotesque puppet show and his shrewd commentary we see the lawyers and Lord Chancellor in chapter three

<sup>16</sup> See the essays by M. R o s s o, Dickens and Esther, The Dickensian 1969, and L. F r a n k, 'Through a Glass Darkly', Esther Summerson and "Bleak House", Dickens Studies Annual, vol. 4, 1975; also S u c k s m i t h, op. cit.

through Esther's eyes. Her innocence and lack of experience are evident in her feeling of awe mixed with surprise and reverence when she watches the lawyers, and the Lord Chancellor, divested of his robes, is a distinguished figure but more human than in his first appearance. Esther has a long way to go until her reverential attitude undergoes a change, i.e. until she becomes aware of the corrupted ways of Chancery. In her contact with London she experiences astonishment and awe - since it is a new world - but surprise changes into horror when she visits Krook's shop, while astonishment and compassion are the two feelings she experiences in her contact with the Jellyby household. It is here that Esther becomes active - she teaches Caddy what a family life may be like. Compassion, kindness (as in her attitude to Miss Flite), a positive reaction to chaos, wrongheadedness and stupidity (as in her relations with the Jellybys) are natural and spontaneous on Esther's part.

With all her limitations, connected with her sex and education, Esther is intelligent; she has also a sense of beauty and a gift of observation. This is her equipment as a narrator. So when she gives a poetic description of her environment, striking in its visual quality, we can accept it without quarrelling with the author, although we would rather expect it from a professional writer. This is how Esther presents dawn and early morning after her arrival in Bleak House:

It was interesting when I dressed before daylight, to peep out of window where my candles were reflected in the black panes like two beacons, and, finding all beyond still enshrouded in the indistinctness of last night, to watch how it turned out when the day came on. As the prospect gradually revealed itself, and disclosed the scene over which the wind wandered in the dark, like my memory over my life, I had a pleasure in discovering the unknown objects that had been around me in my sleep. At first they were faintly discernible in the mist, and above them the later stars still glimmered. That pale interval over, the picture began to enlarge and fill up so fast, that, at every new peep, I could have found enough to look at for an hour... (p. 85).

This is a poetic description in which the contrast of light and darkness perfectly renders the atmosphere of dawn and Dickens's "camera work" with its "dissolve" technique is skilfully used to convey the dreamlike quality of Esther's vision.

The most interesting function of Esther's narrative is in the



presentation of different characters from her point of view, i.e. when Esther is used as a kind of "filter", to use James's term, an "intelligence" through whom different characters are shown (toutes proportions gardées); and in her own love-story which involves her self-revelation.

In the course of the narrative Esther reveals herself as a real Christian, full of compassion and understanding for other people. At the beginning she accepts other people's strange behaviour with astonishment, sometimes naively, yet always in good faith though she may be puzzled. But in the course of the action Esther develops morally and gains experience; at the end, though she never violently condemns anybody, her disapproval of different people is quite evident. This is her attitude to Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Turveydrop, but above all to Harold Skimpole. The presentation of this character through Esther's vision is one of Dickens's devices to involve the reader in cooperation with the narrator. From the very beginning we realize that Skimpole is an irresponsible man, a parasite who exploits his friends and neglects his family, but Esther is not aware of his immorality. The reader therefore corrects and completes Esther's presentation; while Esther accepts appearances in good faith, the reader sees the full meaning of the situation. Here Esther records their first contact in "Bleak House" when Skimpole tells the young people about his life:

He was very fond of reading the papers, very fond of making fancy sketches with a pencil, very fond of nature, very fond of art. All he asked of society was to let him live. That was not much. His wants were few. Give him the papers, conversation, music, mutton, coffee, landscape, fruit in the season, a few sheets of Bristol board and a little claret and he asked no more [...].

He was quite enchanting. If I felt at all confused at that early time, in endeavouring to reconcile anything he said with anything I had thought about the duties and accountabilities of life (which I am far from sure of), I was confused by not exactly understanding why he was free of them. That he was free of them, I scarcely doubted; he was so very clear about it himself (p. 66).

Esther is writing her story as a married woman seven years after marrying Allan, and by saying "If I felt at all confused at that early time", she indicates that she has a clear opinion of Skimpole now. At her first meeting she naively believes that

Skimpole, is a "mere child" as he wants everybody to believe. Jarndyce confirms this opinion before Esther, perhaps because he wants to save the reputation of his friend, or, perhaps, because he has not yet the courage to face the truth about his friend's immorality. Yet he is shocked when he finds out that Esther and Richard have been shamelessly taken advantage of by Skimpole. The scene with Coavins is an illustration of Dickens's skillful handling of the double level of meaning which results from the narrative method. One level presents the surface meaning as accepted by the naive - Richard and Esther - while the other is the reader's point of view, i.e. the reader shares it with the main narrator and sees the whole extent of Skimpole's dishonesty.

In the course of action Esther's attitude to Skimpole gradually changes. She realizes his irresponsibility when he escapes from creditors leaving his family to face them. She discovers his cynicism and depravity in his attitude to Richard whom he put into contact with Vholes for a bribe, and to Jo, whom he gave up to the police for a bribe, though Jo was seriously ill at that time. She sees that Skimpole exploits Richard and then drops him when he ceases to be a source of revenue for him. In fact Skimpole is one of Dickens's greatest villains under a charming mask. His pretending to be a child in financial matters is a carefully planned method of behaviour which, however, is not hypocrisy. Skimpole is impervious to moral argument. He considers himself free from all moral norms and thus he is dangerous to those who come into contact with him; he can betray a friend or an innocent man when it suits his purpose. Even though Esther may not realize the full extent of his perversity she is strongly disapproving in her last meeting with him. She expresses her disapproval in very mild terms and she is quite defeated by his polite and amused behaviour when he exposes his cynical views:

I gave him to understand, in the gentlest words I could use, that his conduct seemed to involve a disregard of several moral obligations. He was much amused and interested when he heard this and said: "No, really?" - with ingenuous simplicity.

[...] "My dear Miss Summerson", he returned, with a candid hilarity that was all his own, "I can't be bribed". [...]



"I am exactly the man to be placed in a superior position, in such a case as that. I am above the rest of mankind, in such a case as that. I can act with philosophy, in such a case as that. I am as free as the air. I feel myself as far above suspicion as Ceasar's wife" (p. 885).

The contrast between Skimpole's cynical attitude and Esther's gentle criticism, which is deliberately used as understatement, brings out the horror of evil represented by individual man. In this confrontation between Esther, goodhearted and earnest, and her smiling ruthless host the reader has a similar sense of oppression as in the early scene with the Man from Shropshire, helpless against "maces, bags and purses".

Another aspect of Esther's narration is the presentation of her love for Allan Woodcourt and her relationship with John Jarndyce. Dickens is usually not considered an introspective novelist though recent criticism focusses attention on his psychological insight, too, in the stories of such characters as William Dorrit (cf. Sucksmith)<sup>17</sup> or Esther (cf. the articles by Martha Rosso in "The Dickensian" and by Lawrence Frank in "Dickens Studies Annual"); to these may be added the characters of Mr. Dombey, Miss Havisham, Mrs. Clennam and Miss Wade - the latter three being interesting studies of pathological cases. As a character Esther is not very complicated, but she has a sense of inferiority and with it an inner experience which she wants to keep a secret. Her narrative is Dickens's attempt to enter a character's mind, and - which is much more difficult - the mind of a young woman who is capable of a strong emotion and yet suppresses her feelings. In her story of Allan Woodcourt Esther's narrative is full of silences and gaps which the reader must fill out himself. Esther gives a detailed description of Mr. Jarndyce's appearance; she often speaks of his handsome and changing face - there are no inhibitions in her attitude to him. It is obvious that the distance of age and his position as guardian-father make her feel at ease with him. When she mentions Allan Woodcourt for the first time she speaks about him in an unnaturally reserved tone and this very reticence suggests that he has made a strong impression on her:

<sup>17</sup> Sucksmith, op. cit., also I. Dobrzycka, Karol Dickens, Warszawa 1972.

I have omitted to mention in its place, that there was someone else at the family dinner party. It was not a lady. It was a gentleman. It was a gentleman of a dark complexion - a young surgeon. He was rather reserved, but I thought him very sensible and agreeable. At least, Ada asked me if I did not, and I said yes (p. 163).

Esther has a sense of inferiority because of her origin and it is obvious that she does not allow herself to entertain hopes with regard to Allan, and yet in spite of herself these hopes are in her consciousness. The second mention of Allan is very significant in what is not stated. Esther deliberately leaves out what Ada says and the reader may only guess that it must have been a remark about the impression Esther made on Allan:

I have forgotten to mention - at least I have not mentioned - that Mr. Woodcourt was the same dark young surgeon whom we had met at Mr. Badger's. Or, that Mr. Jarndyce invited him to dinner that day. Or, that he had come. Or, that when they were all gone, and I said to Ada, "Now, my darling, let us have a little talk about Richard!", Ada laughed and said - But, I don't think it matters what my darling said. She was always merry (p. 182).

The first statement is corrected by the second: Esther did not forget to mention, and when she does mention it, it seems as if the information were drawn from her bit by bit; and yet it is evident that Esther is pleased and Ada's unrecorded statement must have been flattering to her. On another occasion, during the dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Badger, Allan Woodcourt is mentioned only once, in a casual way. The whole conversation is centered round Richard's career since it becomes obvious that he is not suited for the profession of a physician. Mrs. Badger says: "Young men like Mr. Allan Woodcourt [...] will find some reward in it through a great deal of work for a very little money, and through years of considerable endurance and disappointment" (p. 206). Nobody takes notice of it except Esther who then feels depressed and sleepless though she does not want to admit the reason for this even to herself:

I was wakeful and rather low-spirited. I don't know why. At least I don't think I know why. At least perhaps I do, but I don't think it matters (p. 211).

It is during the same night that her guardian is wakeful, too, because - as the reader may guess from what is only im-



plied - he thinks of his growing love for Esther. He discloses to her more about her past and their relationship and it is here that Esther is puzzled by his reaction to her gratitude for his fatherly love:

"I saw my ward oftener than she saw me", he added, cheerily making light of it, "and I always knew she was beloved, useful and happy. She repays me twenty-thousand-fold, and twenty more to that, every hour in every day!"

"And oftener still", said I, "she blesses her Guardian who is a Father to her".

At the word Father, I saw his former trouble come into his face. He subdued it as before, and it was gone in an instant, but it had been there, and it had come so swiftly upon my words that I felt as if they had given him a shock. I again inwardly repeated wondering. "That I could readily understand. None that I could readily understand!" No, it was true. I did not understand it. Not for many and many a day (p. 214).

Thus in a counterpoint technique Dickens makes the two love relationships, Esther-Allan, Jarndyce-Esther, interact and combine into one compositional pattern. The reader is drawn into cooperation with the main narrator who suggests the feelings of his characters in a way, no doubt, more transparent than Henry James does in his complex moral and psychological dramas, and yet he clearly wants the reader to "write" the story with him. A similar situation takes place when Allan Woodcourt and his mother pay a visit to Mr. Jarndyce before Allan's going to India. Esther usually writes about him in a stiff and laconic way, and while she indulges in her sense of the comic about Mrs. Badger she is rather gentle with Mrs. Woodcourt who is also a fine comic creation. Her emphasis on Allan's descent, which rules out a marriage with a person who is not his equal in origin, is painfully felt by Esther as an indirect warning against her having any hopes of ever marrying him. This, however, is never plainly stated only implied. The final incident in which the flowers for Esther are left with Caddy, confirms what has been suggested throughout, that Allan is in love with Esther, though she does not dare to believe it, or even to admit it to herself; that he brought his mother to see her and that the mother does not approve of his choice, because she has higher aspirations for him, which was evident in the dinner scene and which is stressed again in her later conversation with Esther.

Esther is very careful not to pronounce Allan's name when he is most intensely in her thoughts and feelings. Her guardian's proposal is received with a full sense of gratitude and an outburst of tears when she is alone - a sincere manifestation of her regret and disappointment. The thought of Mrs. Woodcourt, who had once suggested that Esther ought to marry her guardian, is the nearest approach to the forbidden ground; the memory of the flowers implies a confession about hopes entertained but suppressed. This flux of thoughts is a fine example of interior monologue in Dickens:

"Don't you remember, my plain dear", I asked looking at the glass, "What Mrs. Woodcourt said before these scars were there, about your marrying-".

Perhaps the name brought them to my remembrance. The dried remains of the flowers. It would be better not to keep them now. They had only been preserved in memory of something wholly past and gone, but it would be better not to keep them now (p. 539).

Since her illness Esther is obsessed with the thought about what she calls her disfigurement, and the very obsessiveness of the idea testifies to what she does not say - she cannot hope to be attractive to Allan any more. She appreciates her guardian's generosity - and she does not fully realize how much he loves her - but she bursts into tears when she decides to accept his proposal because she has to give up Allan.

The way Dickens manages the triangle Jarndyce-Esther-Allan is a consistent development of his narrative experiment. With her sense of duty and her inferiority complex now confirmed by her illness Esther becomes in some moments unreliable in her comments on the events and the reader must draw conclusions different from hers, not only to fill out the gaps. Thus when she meets Allan after his return from India she misinterprets his reaction to her unexpected appearance as pity, which is humiliating for her, while the reader understands that Allan is shocked by the traces of illness and suffering she had undergone in his absence. While Esther schools herself to be indifferent to what she thinks is pity she is unaware that one allusion to "change" is enough to upset her artificial self-control by touching what is most deeply and painfully hidden in her consciousness. It works like a signal releasing a natural reaction,



a conditional reflex, which is beyond control. These are examples of deep psychological insight not only in Dickens's novels but in nineteenth century fiction in general, before Freud. Here is the scene when Esther and Allan speak about Richard:

"I saw you observe him rather closely", said I. "Do you think him so changed?"

"He is changed", he returned shaking his head. I felt the blood rush into my face for the first time, but it was only an instantaneous emotion. I turned my head aside, and it was gone (p. 550).

With all her self-effacement Esther continually thinks of her lost beauty, she deceives herself, she pretends to be reconciled to her fate while she is not. During Caddy's illness she mentions Allan's visits apparently without emotion, self-disciplined, pretending to be happy and calm and then the artificiality of her behaviour betrays her:

So I went about the house, humming all the tunes I knew; and I sat working and working in a desperate manner, and I talked and talked, morning, noon, and night (p. 605).

She reveals her feelings in some small details which prove that Allan is constantly in her thoughts, e.g. when she hears his voice in a crowd at the harbour while she does not know yet that he has returned, or when she meets him accidentally during her pursuit of Lady Dedlock. She notes then: "I knew his voice very well". Her conversation with Jarndyce about Allan sheds more light on the situation between two young people who have never admitted their love to each other. It is evident that Jarndyce is sounding her and that he guesses the truth, though Esther is silent or hides her thoughts in indifferent speech. In spite of their mutual love and respect - or rather because of it - Jarndyce and Esther hide their thoughts and feelings; they do not want to hurt each other, but the tension between them grows steadily until Jarndyce gives Esther up to Allan. The reader sees much earlier than Esther that Jarndyce has given up his place to the young man. It becomes obvious in the incident when Esther returns from Richard's accompanied by Allan. Jarndyce's absence in the place where he used to meet her is a surprise to her, but not so to the reader who again has to "fill out" or complete that part of the story which has been only suggested. Thus - though we are far from Jamesian sophistication - Dickens

develops a double level of narration in Esther's memoirs, which serves well his artistic purpose, but he avoids ambiguity and in the crucial conversation between the lovers he reveals and confirms all that has been suggested to and correctly interpreted by an attentive reader.

Esther's narrative involves the reader in cooperation with the main narrator (or, in this case, implied author) both as far as her own story is concerned and as far as she is - to use James's term again - a "reflector" through whom the main theme is illustrated. There are other "reflectors" used within Esther's narrative who illuminate the central theme or express opinions about social and moral problems directly or indirectly connected with the main narrative, e.g. Caddy Jellyby with her condemnation of her mother's irresponsibility. The most interesting example, however, of this type of commentator is Miss Flite. She may be compared to Shakespeare's fools whose words are the most sensible commentary on the mad world in which the characters move. It is she who remarks on the working of the system of Law and on the hypnotic power which seems to draw people to the Court of Chancery. The author makes her also tell stories within stories<sup>18</sup> which have an important function in the main narrative, e.g. the story of the shipwreck in which Allan distinguished himself by his brave behaviour. There is also one characteristic instance when she expresses the opinion of the author himself about social distinctions in which Dickens looks far ahead to the future:

"My dear", said she, as she carefully rolled up her scarf and gloves, "my brave physician ought to have a Title bestowed upon him. And no doubt he will. You are of that opinion?"

That he well deserved one, yes. That he would ever have one, no.

"Why not, Fitz - Jarndyce?" she asked, rather sharply.

I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great; unless occasionally, when they consisted of the accumulation of some large amount of money.

"Why good gracious", said Miss Flite, "how can you say that? Surely you know, my dear, that all the greatest ornaments of England in knowledge, imagination, active humanity, and improvement of every sort, are added to its nobility! Look

<sup>18</sup> Cf. B. Hardy, *Tellers and Listeners*, London 1975.



round you, my dear, and consider. You must be rambling a little now, I think, if you don't know that this is the great reason why titles will always last in this land!"

I am afraid she believed what she said; for there were moments when she was very mad indeed (p. 442-443).

Esther uses here a Swiftian reversal of values: what the mad woman says is in sharp disagreement with the reality, but it is a useful if utopian vision of England. Esther's sober comment makes the ironic situation still more pointed.

Dickens's narrative art in "Bleak House" reveals him as a great forerunner of twentieth century masters both in theme and form. In the impersonal narration he uses the technique of film-montage, and his dynamic descriptive-narrative passages unfold as if by means of the camera work of a modern film director. In Esther's story he makes an experiment in psychological narration, he handles the point of view method in an original way involving the reader in cooperation with the narrator and, together with his further successful experimentation in the narrative method in "Little Dorrit" and "Great Expectations", he anticipates the sophisticated technique developed by Henry James. Esther's narrative has also an important function as a contrast in tone and vision to that of the first narrator. While the impersonal narrator is overtly ironic, and his irony covers a wide range of shades from biting and sarcastic to understatement, Esther's commentary is often meant as an understatement which, no less than the commentary of the omniscient narrator brings out sharply the horror inherent in the moral and social situation presented in the novel. Another important difference between the two streams of narration, which contributes to the polyphonic effect of the whole novel, is the style, or rather the variety of styles used by the first narrator, including parody and free indirect speech, and the language of Esther - but this is the subject for a separate study.

## Adela Styczyńska

## METODA NARRACJI W "SAMOTNI"

"Samotnia" uważana za jedną z najwybitniejszych powieści Dickensa przyciąga uwagę krytyków zarówno ze względu na treść, jak i oryginalną formę. Razem z "Małą Dorrit" tworzy tematyczną całość jako powieść społeczno-polityczna późniejszego okresu twórczości Dickensa. Zawiera ostrą satyrę na sądownictwo angielskie, a w szerszej perspektywie jest oskarżeniem systemu społecznego, który niszczy jednostkę dochodzącą swych praw i zamienia w marionetki tych, którzy są mu podporządkowani. Artyzm Dickensa w "Samotni" jest przedmiotem licznych prac krytyków amerykańskich i angielskich. Celem autorki jest zbadanie tych aspektów metaforyki Dickensa, które były mniej akcentowane lub pomijane, oraz metody narracji, a mianowicie "techniki filmowej" i narracji w pierwszej osobie, która jest interesującym eksperymentem psychologicznym w twórczości Dickensa. W "Samotni" Dickens zastosował podwójny tok narracji: pierwszoosobową w czasie przeszłym (Esther) i narrację w trzeciej osobie w czasie teraźniejszym (narrator bezoosobowy, wszechwiedzący). Autorka analizuje metaforykę występującą w obu nurtach narracji, następnie bada narrację w trzeciej osobie, powołuje się na artykuł S. Eisensteina o zastosowaniu "techniki montażu" przez Dickensa, oraz krytyków angielskich i rozwija analogię między metodą Dickensa a filmem. Opowiadanie w pierwszej osobie jest szczególnie interesującym eksperymentem psychologicznym. Esther Summerson jest - ćwierć wieku przed Henry Jamesem - narratorem, którego relacja nie zasługuje w pełni na zaufanie i musi być uzupełniona przez wnikliwego czytelnika. W świetle badań nad metaforyką i narracją w "Samotni" Dickens ukazuje się nie tylko jako wielki moralista zaangażowany w sprawy społeczne swoich czasów, ale jako artysta o niezwykle bogatej skali środków wyrazu, a dzięki oryginalności i nowoczesności swej metody artystycznej - jako prekursor wielkich pisarzy końca XIX i XX w. tak różnych, jak: Henry James, Dos Passos i Kafka.