



Victorian Female Identity Construction Under the Gaze: A Case of Esther in *Bleak House*

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Abstract

The gaze of desire is prevalent throughout *Bleak House*, most visibly manifested on the heroine Esther. When gazed by “the Other”, she is suspicious of her identity and existence, which causes her psychological conflicts step by step. Supported by Lacan’s gaze theory, the paper intends to analyze Esther’s psychological actions through the gazes from various aspects—obedience to the elder’s authority, oppression by the patriarchal society, and the anti-gaze of awakening female recognition—to reveal social surveillance of women and to present the female’s aesthetics of existence and the development of social ethos in the modern age.

Key words: Esther; Lacanian gaze; Female; Identity construction

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In September 1853, Dickens completed his work on *Bleak House*, the longest novel in his writing career. As one of the most representative novels of the Victorian Age, *Bleak House* portrays a vivid panorama of British society. Caroline Levine lauds that “the expansive length of *Bleak House* makes the nineteenth-century novel more successful than any recent film at capturing the

complexity and power of networked social experience.” (Caroline, p.517) The epic work revolves around the gradual unraveling by others of the mystery of the heroine Esther Summerson’s parentage. The intricate plot spins a massive web in which each character’s fate is inextricably linked.

According to research data, most studies on *Bleak House* have focused on the Victorian moral values it contained, its double narrative technique, the biblical metaphor, or the mechanism of the plot and characters etc. I find that the gaze on Esther for her identity construction is a breakthrough of the study. Therefore, by analyzing Esther’s identity construction through the lens of Lacanian gaze, I hope to unveil women’s passive and male-attached social circumstances and their psychological conflicts in the modern age.

ORPHAN GIRL’S DISGRACED FATE: THE OBEDIENCE TO THE ELDER’S AUTHORITY

Esther is an orphan girl who has been raised by her godmother. Under the gaze of the elder’s authority, Esther never doubts her identity as an unfortunate existence. Particularly, in the first part of her narration, she admits that “I knew I was not clever. I always knew that” (Dickens, p.23). On the one hand, Esther is confined to a limited life, devoid of social interaction, in which she can only converse with a lifeless doll. “My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else.” (Dickens, pp.23-24) She imagines her doll staring at her as if she were staring at the doll. According to Lacan’s account, it is the phenomenon of the mirror stage when an infant realizes himself through narcissistic imagination in front of a mirror—the moment the subject produces the self-identification in the imaginary world.

Correspondingly, the doll is the very field of illusion wherein Esther defines herself through the childish deception. Furthermore, Marcus states that “the doll mirrors the girl’s subordination to maternal omnipotence” (Marcus, p.162).

Hence, on the other hand, Esther is afraid to rebel and be timid and obedient as a result of her godmother’s rigorous education. We know from the beginning of the text that Esther was born to be separated from her mother. The absence of mother triggers her strong desire for maternal love or a mother-daughter relationship. Meanwhile, her godmother, who teaches and lives with her, becomes the substitute. Subsequently, the pleasure of obtaining maternal love drives Esther to want more—to please godmother to receive positive feedback in return. In order to be recognized by godmother, Esther obeys, respects even fears her, and thence she unconsciously treats godmother as her “God” and regards her words as dogmas. Here is a representative episode that Esther is told by her godmother that her biological mother is her shame and vice versa, and that “submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it” (Dickens, p.26). Out of complete faith in her godmother, Esther accepts these “facts”. It is found that Esther overly concerns about the evaluation of this elder, as a result of which she places herself in a Lacanian gaze. Lacanian gaze, like Foucauldian panopticon, is that “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked from all sides” (Lacan, p.72). There is a platonic seer, who is everywhere but invisible; while the seer is fictitious, it symbolizes the absolute authority in the real world. Esther must make some changes to her body while under godmother’s “surveillance”, as if a child must do something right in order to receive compliments from his parents. In this process, the subject presupposes a pre-existence of a gaze for self, borrowing the eyes of others—the Other in the symbolic world—to see himself. Similarly, the elder’s authority to Esther is her Other and she constantly adjusts her body to shorten the distance between herself to herself ideal. Thereupon, Esther is labeled as “unfortunate girl” (Dickens, p.26), and believes that “she could to repair the fault by growing up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted and do some good to someone, and win some love to herself if she could” (Dickens, p.27). In this stage, Esther’s identity is distorted as a result of the unprovoked sin, which haunts her in the shadow of misfortune.

Coincidentally, wretched girls like Esther also appear in Dickens’s other works, such as Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*, all of whom assume an unnecessary moral duty at a young age. And it is discovered that all these children’s enlightenment hampered by those selfish adults; then they, short of curiosity and audacity, become sheepish and timid. Hence, without the power of discourse in front of the elders, in Dickens’s writing, these little virgins are compelled

to accept their unfortunate fate. It is a result of the Victorian social conditions—the strain of the Industrial Revolution and the overflow of utilitarianism, which pushed the administration to devote itself to economic development—that the education monitor was ignored. Until the mid-nineteenth century, primary education in Britain was mostly under the jurisdiction of the church and was a mix of philanthropy and religion—Esther had been obliged to study the Bible since she could remember. In *Hard Times*, which features the so-called educator Mr. Gradgrind, Dickens criticizes how brutal education flavored with control by adults essentially obliterates children’s creativity and curiosity about the outside world. Furthermore, in Kant’s opinion, a child, a minority condition under authority, has sufficient autonomy to enlighten himself, or rather, correct guidance is indispensable. However, in such a patriarchal society, unsurprisingly, female children, who are more like a marginal group, grasp under the authority of the elder and the male.

IDEAL WOMEN OF BEING DOCILE AND CONSIDERATE: THE OPPRESSION BY PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

After being adopted by Mr. Jarndyce, Esther is free of godmother’s supervision. In this stage, Esther’s perception of her own identity shifts to a new level. Rather of submitting to the elder’s authority as a youngster, her end is to be an ideal woman in patriarchal society—she must make a womanly docile and considerate gesture in public. After moving into Bleak House, Esther gets acquainted with more sorts of people such as Ada, Caddy, Guppy, Sir Leicester, and Jo, all of whom come from different social classes. From then on, public affirmation replaces the elder’s recognition and becomes Esther’s norm for regulating her own behavior.

Firstly, peer pressure urges Esther to perform as an “angel”. Ada, the multi-talented companion, can dance, sing, speak French, and, most importantly, do needlework. Contra Ada, Caddy has to work on a pile of writing affairs for unnecessary philanthropy of her mother, of which she is excessively disgusted. This is because, historically, women in the Victorian Age were demand to do all housework, including needlework; in addition, women were expected to be humble and submissive to their husbands, possessing all virtues, which Woolf referred to as “the angel in the house”. Undoubtedly, Ada is the “angel”—sweet, courteous, versatile, and docile—who is universally regarded as the ideal woman. Naturally, the temptation of the ideal woman exposes Caddy’s and Esther’s shame, which Esther must conceal by striving to achieve the self-ideal so as to enjoy the pleasure of being focused. Meanwhile, the moment happens when the subject is gazing at the other and the world; the stress

reaction of the subject indicates his desire to make contact with other people and the world.

Secondly, the guardian's expectations partly influence Esther's identity construction with womanly characteristics. Lack of paternal love in early age, Esther views her guardian Mr. Jarndyce as her father—the Oedipus complex stirs Esther's fatherly faith to him. He hopes Esther could "sweep the cobweb out of the sky in the course of housekeeping" (Dickens, p.110). To maintain a positive image in Jarndyce's mind, she accepts the nickname such as a little old woman and Dame Durden, willingly constructing herself in the coordinate relative to a qualified housekeeper. It can also be interpreted by means of Sartre's "being-for-others": in terms of bodily existence, the embodied me, caught in the look of others. (Sharma, p.70)

Thirdly, others' natural attitude deeply suppresses unconfident Esther. Confronted with Guppy's occasional bothering, although Esther feels uneasy, she is still in a dilemma—she does not want to accept his wooing but is not willing to ruin his expectations. To be more specific, in terms of phallogocentrism, a female who is lack of a penis is always threatened, which leads people to take female's concession for granted. Subsequently, Guppy takes advantage of Esther's hesitation and ethically kidnaps her. Consequently, Esther's dedication puts her in an embarrassing position.

Finally, the upper class's arrogance "sobers" Esther up to her humble origin. When Esther first meets Lady Dedlock, she is astounded by her extraordinary loftiness and haughtiness; she refers to Lady Dedlock the "fashionable lady", in contrast to her inferior identity. Despite the fact that Esther is certain this lady's face is familiar, she is afraid to recognize Lady Dedlock as her biological mother on account of the social divide. Esther's sensitive recognition of the class of identity is caused by her early self-abasement—she never identifies her humble self with this exalted lady.

In sum, a female's concern for public affirmation limits her freedom of discourse. According to Mulvey's interpretation of Freud, the female is defined as castration, standing in patriarchal culture as the signifier for the masculine other (Mulvey, p.7); she has to receive the signifier of desire by giving birth, and in turn her offspring will become a part of patriarchal authority to enslave female. In such circumstances, the female, deprived of both physical and mental liberty, transforms into a reproductive machine and sex-satisfied bearer. Hence, there comes Beauvoir's famous adage: women are formed, not born (Beauvoir, p.21). The ruler of the society imposes female discipline, intending to turn the woman to the way they satisfy. John Berger accesses that

"One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The

surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight." (Berger, p.47)

Owing to men's libido, women are radically objectified, their bodies being shown as a spectacle. Naturally, the visualization of women's bodies is analogous to McLuhan's perspective on media: The camera is a brothel without walls. Then definitely, women's bodies become the field where men wield power to acquire pleasure; correspondingly, women under the patriarchal system are disciplined to adjust their bodies to present better posture—as they "enter light and receive the effects of the gaze, making themselves photographed" (Lacan, p.106). Because, only by recognizing the patriarchal law embodying the symbolic order and accepting the position allocated to him by the symbolic order, will the subject be able to obtain an appropriate expression in language, even if it is an alienated desire. In *Bleak House*, to gain public affirmation, Esther enforces herself to meet the society's moral standard—being an ideal Victorian woman. In this way, she appears to others to be gentle and dignified, reasonable and trustworthy. This temporary stitching in symbolic world gives Esther the pleasure of satisfaction. In this stage, the gaze from all sides of society is Esther's the Name of the Father. The established rules in the patriarchal society push Esther to be the "angel in the house".

UNCONVENTIONAL "ANGEL": AWAKENING FEMALE RECOGNITION FROM ANTI-GAZE

Under the surveillance of patriarchal society, Esther is inevitably spectated by all sides of others. More significantly, the visibility of gaze on bodies evinces the ruler's complacency about being able to wield power. As Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*: It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the discipline individual in his subjection. (Foucault, p.187) The spectacle of Esther's body also implies a collective nature—instead of serving her own interests, her body is the property of the society, and it appears that Esther in patriarchal society is doomed to dedicate her entire life to living for others. Gaze, however, is not an autonomous and unidirectional process; it involves intersubjectivity: the subject is gazed by the Other, and then he recognizes the process and gazes the Other in return. Hence, Other's affirmation mirrors the subject's transient gratification of desire; once the balance is broken, anxiety and uneasiness ensue. In *Bleak House*, a sudden illness causes Esther's disfigurement, and she loses her womanly comeliness on appearance, which Esther describes "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. (Dickens, p.533)" Accordingly, because

of her vastly different appearance, Esther feels ashamed and is unwilling to reveal herself to the public, thus Esther experiences a huge fall for the distance between her ideal self and self-ideal—body alienation results in her psychological anxiety. To alleviate this anxiety, she avoids being seen in public and isolates herself in private.

During the period of avoiding being gazed by others, Esther's fundamental psychological issue, which is the gaze inside the subject, is occupied by constant reflection. Esther realizes, via the process of "seeing oneself seeing oneself" (Lacan, p.74), that no matter how her appearance changes, people who love her will not change their minds. This anti-gaze makes Esther start to consider her own position and priorities; it is an expression of self-concerning. The issue of self-existence strikes her that it is futile to escape one's own destiny, thus everybody ought to be brave enough to fight oneself against challenges instead. Subsequently, Esther undertakes efforts psychologically:

"I had not yet looked in the glass and had never asked to have my own restored to me. I knew this to be a weakness which must be overcome, but I had always said to myself that I would begin afresh when I got to where I now was." (Dickens, p.532)

The courage in overcoming the inner hurdle or disfigured appearance evinces Esther's resolution to confront her true self. It is apparent that in this stage for Esther the Other in the external world almost vanishes; she develops an internal self-affirmation. Furthermore, rather than being-for-others, Esther recognizes what she should obey is her own will; she is aware that each individual is equal, and entitled to what he or she deserves. The profound transformation of awareness demonstrates Esther's awakening female recognition, through which she finds out Guppy's hypocrisy, Skimpole's slyness and Vholes's contemptible nature. In short, female recognition constructs Esther's courage, firmness, and justice. In the end of *Bleak House*, Esther utters an exclamation that "they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—" (Dickens 926). Apparently, Esther firmly believes appearance or guise is too fleeting and fragile to be a woman's sign; a woman is not an object judged by others but a thoughtful individual equipped to decide her own existence and pursue own happiness. The announcement declares that she takes off the camouflage in public—the prison grab of patriarchal society. Unlike the general "angels" in Dickens's works, Esther is an unconventional angel; while she is able to do housekeeping in domestic; by her own judgement she is not blind to be obedient.

By the time she finished her narrative, Esther had grown up with her evolved spiritual realm. From this perspective, *Bleak House* is a bildungsroman. However, in other similar novels by Dickens, it is seen that the growing process of hero such as Pip and Copperfield is easier and smoother than that of a heroine like Esther—

their psychological growths, at least, are not in exchange for their loss in physical. It is unfair that for Esther, her mental metamorphosis is being exchanged for her scarred face. "Esther must enter the text through the scarring of her body; she moves from figure to body through disfigurement" (Helena, p.202). Compared with those male protagonists, Esther affords much more for growth and happiness. As a matter of fact, Dickens is not a writer who discriminates against women, but in his writings, he always intentionally or unintentionally belittles women, placing them in an inferior status than men. In *Bleak House*, all female characters are regulated in the frame that the male leads outside, the female inside: Lady Dedlock generally does not interfere in politics due to the hysterical headache; Esther prioritizes housework over other affairs; Mrs. Leicester never gets out of Chesney Wold. In terms of feminists' terminology, all these women are masqueraded; "the masquerade can be seen as a veiling of the lack, a hiding if its nothingness" (Wright, p.36). The phenomenon of derogating women has become increasingly visible with the advancement of modernization, not just in literature but also in film art. Rather than a complete entity, in movies by the zoom-in scenes women are fragmented since only partial body is shown.

Owing to the limitations of masculine nature and ingrained social values, Dickens believes women are crucial for a family's happiness; women are accountable for maintaining family harmony. Hence, although Esther develops a new self-recognition, she, ultimately, can still be described as a qualified housekeeper. Nonetheless, the significance of *Bleak House* in promoting social modernization is practically profound: firstly, Esther's psychological conflict reflects the female's progressive aesthetics of existence in the modern age like the Victorian Age. Being-for-others is not sustainable in a long run, and thence women should develop their psychological construction to improve their social identities; secondly, the dim light shining on Esther heralds the slow birth of modern independent women. Esther's transition from puberty to womanhood implies Dickens's appreciation and anticipation, through which he sympathizes with women's inferior circumstance and grants acquiesce to unconventional "angels", who can fight for the rights they deserve.

CONCLUSION

In Dickens's works, *Bleak House* is a pivotal work marking Dickens's turning writing style of being more pungent and profound when criticizing, in which the gaze is a conspicuous element running through the text to achieve the style. The Lacanian gaze with mirror effect follows Esther in each stage of her growth, in which she realizes that "it might be in a looking-glass" (Dickens, p.35). Through this imaginative gaze, Esther constructs her identity through psychological conflicts step by step. "Her

narrative is, in effect, an account of her gaze. Throughout the novel Esther is, or would seem to be, subject, not object, looker rather than looked-at” (Michie, p.203). The gaze on Esther, in a radical way, reflects women’s passive and male-attached circumstance in Victorian patriarchal society. However, unlike the traditional “angel” in literature, Esther’s dares to defend for her destiny and has the potential to be an independent woman in the new era. The aesthetics of existence embodied in Esther reflects the awakening of female recognition. After *Bleak House*, there is an increasing number of works, tinged with female spirit of resistance, emerging on the market. Ibsen, who lived later than Dickens’s era, put forward the proposition of “women’s liberation” through the heroine Nora in *Doll’s House*. Accordingly, in a sense, *Bleak House* contributes to the further awakening of female recognition and the acceleration of the feminist movement in modern society.

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