

THE FAMILY AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN CHARLES DICKENS' *BLEAK HOUSE*

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The problem of selfhood in the context of family, especially as regards self-identification according to one's unique position in a family, seems to be present in almost everything that Dickens wrote – either as a central theme or as a peripheral motif. *Bleak House* is no exception, with its plethora of characters whose identities are affected by the presence, or absence, of family. In this paper I aim at examining the connection between identity and family on the example of Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, thus hoping, in addition, to unveil the author's specific perception of childhood.

Key words: Dickens, identity, family, memory, childhood, hermeneutics

The stories Dickens tells, from *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* to *Great Expectations*, often start with the members of a family, even if some of them are missing. By doing so, Dickens creates an unavoidable premise for comprehending the narrative as character-driven, since one has to know the past to understand the present. Yet, why does he choose the family as one of his building blocks of a character's identity and why is it so important, especially in the beginning? It is of the essence because the notion of family is the first thing one realizes in one's life and existence – be it literally, when parents shape their children's sense of identity or metaphorically, when parental absence or a peculiar situation in the family plays a significant part in one's identity growth. To avoid limiting the scope of the present paper solely to the literary aspect of identity, I will have recourse to modern European hermeneutics, which will assist in achieving the socio-philosophical goals I have set myself. One of Mikhail Bakhtin's arguments in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* is that “it is in her [the mother's] emotional-volitional tones that the child's personality is demarcated and upbuilt, and it is in her love that his first movement, his first posture in the world, is formed” (Bakhtin 1990: 50). Since in that

essay Bakhtin is trying to ascertain a better way of understanding the hero in literature, the fact that he names the mother, and by extension the family as the first constituent of the child's identity, makes it a more valid argument when it comes to the role of the family in identity building. Man's identity is deeply rooted in the family, sometimes in ways we cannot reliably grasp— a feature touched upon by William J. Richardson in *Heidegger and Psychoanalysis*: "...these laws...are not abstractions but are inscribed in human culture itself and determine the subject¹ through signifying chains by one's ancestral past, family history, social milieu..." (Richardson 2003: 17). Dickens was always able to display this in his novels and in his characters. In *Great Expectations* Pip's journey to attain an identity of his own and his family's role in the process is a major theme in the novel. Analogously, in *David Copperfield*, it is the titular character's life that displays the effects of the family in the identity building procedure. *Bleak House* is no exception, since most of the central characters are in desperate need of "finding" themselves and the path to this is a journey back through and towards one's familial bonds. The narrative of the novel becomes a narrative of identity building. For this theory Ricoeur had opened a door in *Oneself as Another* by arguing that "...there is no ethically neutral narrative. Literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgments of approval and condemnation..." (Ricoeur 1994: 115).

The Authority of the Family and the Past

No doubt a clear illustration of the above-stated thesis is Esther Summerson, the protagonist of *Bleak House*, who wishes to discover her own identity by the means of family during the course of the story. Her desire to attain an identity is one of the major plotlines of the novel and its nature as a search for identity within the family has also been recognized by Carolyn Dever in her study on Dickens and familial origins: "[Esther's] quest for identity is structured through her desire to reunite with her missing, mysterious mother" (Dever 1998: 81). When the reader meets Esther for the first time Esther is a child whose mind is shaped by the presence and absence of two family members – the presence of her aunt and the absence of her mother. The fact that her bitter aunt raised Esther as a stranger's child and not as a child of her own is visible from the very first words Esther utters in the novel: "for I know I am not clever" (Dickens

¹ "Subject" here being used in place of man.

2001: 14). Such an introduction is very useful, since we immediately understand from this self-portrait of Esther how she sees herself. This becomes even clearer by some of the things her aunt inspires her to believe: “It would have been far better...that you had never been born” (Dickens 2001: 30). Her narration of her own childhood makes it apparent how the missing mother and the distance between her guardian and herself have made Esther believe that she is an unwanted child; not worthy in the sense that there is something wrong with her, since in her mind her mother abandoned her and her childhood guardian does not really want her: “Though she desires love and affection, she began at an early age to remind herself that she didn’t deserve it” (Cain 2009: 5). And one cannot mention Esther and her family without also bringing up Lady Dedlock – her own mother. The situation fits a pattern since after some inspection it is apparent that Lady Dedlock has been affected by the past as well. At first she seems like a perfectly happy woman – bored, but happy. However, over the course of the novel we see that this first impression quickly fades away: “To the world, she is powerful, but to herself, she is timid and cowardly” (Azam 2014: 94). This is important to consider, since the argument here is that the family shapes the identity of a person, even if that family is missing.

One way of gaining a better understanding of the problem of identity is to refer to hermeneutics since it establishes an historical-ethical connection between events and individuals. To elaborate more, Emmanuel Levinas suggests that everyone is “always enclosed within existence” and that there is “no escape” (Levinas 1999: 157). Surely consequences, which are part of “existence” as well, are also ineluctable. Even if one’s sin, in this case Lady Dedlock’s, passes unnoticed – which is not possible since the I² would always know – the sin still exists. In the same manner, if a good deed passes unnoticed – which, again, is not possible for the same reason – the good deed does not disappear. The identity of the characters is shaped not just by everything that happens to or around the characters, but also by what the characters do themselves – noticed or unnoticed. This would suggest that Lady Dedlock’s identity, in spite of her unrevealed past, is still being affected by her wrongdoing in the past. In this chapter, Dickens develops Lady Dedlock’s character systematically and skilfully without giving the reader even one hint of her past. By being consistent with this observation, Esther displays similar outlines in her identity as well. In the Jarndyce house she is not the orphan, but just Esther. However,

² I have hereby employed this term to denote one’s consciousness, awareness.

her past remains the same; in other words, she is still the orphan. Certainly, other people's attitudes and reactions affect this phenomenon, since they contribute to the process of self-formation. Esther and any character in general need to face other people. The importance of embracing and resisting, at the same time, the impact of other people on identity is a step everyone needs to take in order to discover their true self. Esther never escapes that part of her identity, since she cannot escape her past. Since maintaining her self-image as an unwanted orphan has forged her identity in crucial ways, the Dickensian narrator attaches great importance to the notion of family in the identity- building process.

However, it is not just Esther and the main characters who portray the problem of identity building through family in *Bleak House*. Many secondary characters may be said to emblemize the instrumental role of the family in one's self-building and self-perception and in how others view the same self. Two very good examples are Caddy Jellyby and Prince Turveydrop. Both seem limited in the expansion of their own identities through a parent-figure in their life. Prince Turveydrop, a dance teacher, is restricted to his profession, not because of his love for it but through his father's almost infantile character. He sees himself as nothing but a teacher, until he meets Caddy. Caddy Jellyby has her own "demon" to fight as well, since her mother, Mrs. Jellyby, takes up her whole life just to satisfy her own selfish needs to save an African tribe. Mrs. Jellyby concentrates so much on this "mission" of hers that she ignores her own family, thus pushing Caddy into the role of the mother. As Martin Heidegger observes, "Dasein³ is essentially Being⁴ with Others⁵" (Heidegger 1996: 281). Briefly, Heidegger's view suggests that one exists because one interacts with other people and their surroundings, which forms one's identity. Without the Other there is no identity because every encounter, or its lack of, is an essential part of it. The presence of any person in one's life contributes to the totality of one's whole identity. As this presence commonly originates in the family, this effect becomes even stronger, since the family is a bond for life and is ever-present. This effect of the family is also referenced in Fred Dallmayr's *Heidegger and Freud*:

³ Dasein is a German word which literally means "being there" and "existence," though Heidegger uses it to refer to the experience of "being" and as a synonym to the "human entity" – which is to describe man as a mortal being, a being in time, with an awareness of that.

⁴ Being is used by Heidegger as a close synonym of Dasein.

⁵ Other is used by Heidegger to describe everything outside of the I, one's own self.

“In imitating the mother, we read, the child blends with the mother’s behavior or shares “the mother’s being-in-the-world” (Dallmayr 1993: 239-40). Yet sometimes, a child does not imitate the parent, but rather reacts to them. This is to argue that both Caddy and Prince are influenced by their family to the greatest extent. Prince becomes the devoted son because of the infliction of his father, whereas Caddy becomes a resentful daughter because of her mother’s abandonment of maternal responsibilities.

The “Failed” Mother

In general, the theme of maternal neglect is visible in almost every family in *Bleak House*. Carolyn Dever, for example, argues that, despite there being many adults in *Bleak House* lacking a perception of responsibility and maturity, the mothers seem to be a major target of criticism in the story (Dever 1998: 82). Dever’s argument is persuasive, but it would be also wise to consider why the mothers are being targeted, aside from the fact that Dickens had a difficult relationship with his own mother. In the Victorian era women with children were always first considered as wives and mothers and then as individuals. Professional and social identities were practically out of the question and so only the role of the wife and mother remained. A father who ignored his children in order to concentrate on his job or favourite pastime did a passable imitation of a parent. In contrast, mothers did not enjoy such freedom. Whether or not Dickens’ treatment of women was intentional, it is important to consider it critically because it restricts women’s possibility of self-definition and unduly enhances the role of the family in their identity.⁶

The above does not imply that women are defined just by their family and the roles they have in them – this would be an ignorant statement. This just demonstrates the significance of the family as part of the stereotypical structures of the identity-building procedure in that epoch and in general. The role of gender in the formation of identity is also analysed by Leonore Davidoff in *Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick* (1979), where the focus is placed on the suppressive situation surrounding the feminine gender: “...women are given an identity and destiny which they can only approximate and never fulfill. Above all, it is an identity cast upon them by

⁶ For a clearer idea of the situation of the woman in this era, one can look up *Daily Life in Victorian England: Second Edition* (2009) by Sally Mitchell (specifically chapter 12: Victorian Morality) or John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

the dominant group...” (Davidoff 1979: 92). And all of this is visible throughout the novel, not just in the picture of the “failed” mother, but also in the depiction of the environment of the mother. The reader takes a dislike to Mrs. Jellyby not just because of what she does but also because of how her family reacts to it. Mrs. Jellyby’s husband and their daughter Caddy grow distant and bitter. Also, Mrs. Jellyby’s remaining children are in search of a different mother-figure to replace her. Mrs. Jellyby might be doing great work for the children of the communities she helps, yet the reader cannot be diverted from seeing the abandoned family and the misery in it, caused by the heroine. The same argument applies to Lady Dedlock. She deserts Esther and is thus labeled an “unfit” mother. This pattern is singled out even more by Dickens’ use of retardation and reminiscences to reveal parts of a character’s identity piece by piece. Dickens, by having a character “revisit” their own past, delays more interesting aspects of their identity as he wants the reader to discover them step by step. The style Dickens uses and the way it actually helps the reader to invest more in the characters is also discussed by Oliver Conolly and Bashhar Haydar in their study on knowledge of and values in literature: “We enjoy the micro-insights that Dickens gives us page by page throughout a long novel” (Conolly and Haydar 2007: 116). In this way, by having a character reconstruct past events, Dickens makes a reader-character relationship more accessible— the reader would witness gradually the motives and reasons behind a character’s identity.

While considering another minor character, Mrs. Pardiggle, one also understands how one’s own perception of oneself can be quite wrong and how the status of a mother may affect that. Mrs. Pardiggle is under the delusion that she is being a good person and a good role model because she is aiding the unfortunate in the community. What she does not see, though, is the fact that she is actually not assisting anyone while also not being a good mother. The response of a person she helps – the brickmaker that Esther, Ada and Mrs. Pardiggle visit in order to “help” – is an eloquent testimony to this: “Then make it easy for her!’ growled the man upon the floor. ‘I wants [*sic*] it done, and over” (Dickens 2001: 104). These are not words of gratitude, but rather of annoyance. In addition, Mrs. Pardiggle’s family suffers under her misconception of her own self, labeling her as a “failed” mother. Her children especially despise Mrs. Pardiggle’s acts of charity in which they get unwillingly involved. The same pattern emerges when Mrs. Jellyby, who has every intention of being a good person, becomes the exact opposite of her wish and wrecks her family. And if Mrs. Pardiggle is so marginalized in the story that the reader is unsure of whether,

and to what extent, to heap blame on her for the situation, Mrs. Jellyby is not. The best evidence for this is without a doubt her daughter Caddy and her attitude towards her when she utters words like “if I ever blame myself, I still think it’s Ma’s fault” (Dickens 2001: 180). Caddy thinks she is the only means of helping her mother become what she perceives herself to be – a Good Samaritan. A daughter should feel like a daughter to her mother first and foremost, not like a tool in her mother’s hand.

Additionally, since blame is of importance, Lady Dedlock’s attitude towards her daughter about her guilt should be considered as well, seeing that she is aware of the consequences of her past actions – as a contrast to Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby. As Azmi Azam points out Lady Dedlock does not share with anyone her shady past but Esther and handles the situation by enduring her punishment on her own in secret. This makes the character of Lady Dedlock more complex and more intriguing (cf. Azam 2014: 94). Indeed Lady Dedlock differs from Mrs. Jellyby in this case, since she is not blind to what she has done. She admits it, although not in public, and punishes herself by carrying that burden by herself. This shows that she regrets to some extent what she has done and the fact that she reveals this only to Esther delivers some redemption – because she unburdened herself to her daughter. The fact that she confesses exactly to her daughter can be also interpreted in a different manner. Lady Dedlock does not intend to give Esther a better life through this confession of hers, but just a revelation about her past. It could be argued that Lady Dedlock just acts in this manner to ease her troubled mind. The fact that she once again failed to behave like a responsible parent branded her an “unfit” mother. Lady Dedlock confesses only to Esther, the only person with the right to actually judge her, and yet she does not. As Carolyn Dever explains very well, Esther becomes entrapped in this confusion of thoughts she has because of an inner conflict – the conflict between the anger and love she feels towards her mother. Furthermore, Lady Dedlock does not accept anything but denial by Esther, forcing Esther to reject her and consider her dead for a second time (cf. Dever 1998: 83). To put it differently, Lady Dedlock gives her only one choice, which then takes away the element of agency from Esther. In this way, Lady Dedlock focuses more on her own desires and ignores the needs of her daughter. She forces Esther to “kill” her mother, practically making her an orphan yet again.

This is very important for both characters since this gives them a sense of closure – Lady Dedlock gets the closure she wanted and Esther gets the closure she did not deserve but needed. Lady Dedlock chooses to not be forgiven and to endure this punishment she has inflicted on herself,

thinking this is what she deserves. On the other hand, what seems to Lady Dedlock as justice is injustice for Esther. She becomes a selfish mother through this scene for the second time – the first time being the abandonment at birth – because she does not take up the role of the mother. Lady Dedlock enforces a motherless life on Esther, because she is not capable of handling the situation, which is her own fault and not that of Esther. One might argue that the situation has become so complicated at that point that the existence of such a mother-daughter relationship is no longer possible, but Lady Dedlock does not even try, just leaving Esther's life for good. She could have been a mother figure for Esther "behind the curtain" – a source of help Esther could have turned to in her moments of need. And yet, Lady Dedlock repeats her mistake, which has had such a great effect on her identity. Even when Esther mentions Mr. Jarndyce, her guardian, and how he could be of help, Lady Dedlock thinks only of herself again: "Confide fully in him...but do not tell me of it. Some pride is left in me even yet" (Dickens 2001: 489). These are not the words of a mother who cares about her child; rather, they are a verbal expression of a proud, neutral, distant, nonchalant woman. Sadly, this pride seems misplaced, since it could be of more value if it were pride regarding Esther, her daughter and descendant, and not pride that stems from Lady Dedlock's reputation.

The Past is always Present

For Esther her encounter with her actual mother has a different effect. Esther attains closure as well, but it does not lift her up. On the contrary, it drags her down. The juxtaposition of Esther and Lady Dedlock is helpful for a better understanding of the problem of identity building. Esther, because of her past, knows of the pain of abandonment and rejection by family and tries to forgive her mother. Whereas Lady Dedlock has trapped herself in her guilt and fear for her reputation; yet memory and family (blessing or curse) never leave or disappear and are always there to shape one's identity. Esther is profoundly affected by her mother's absence. She is very good at caring for others, visibly so in her love for Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, but not for herself⁷. Esther resembles

⁷ In almost any criticism on Esther Summerson her nature as a good maternal figure is mentioned. (e.g. *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* by Carolyn Dever, *Bleak House's Esther Summerson: The Development and Integration of Character and Narrator* by Anna Maria Smacchi, and

Lady Dedlock in the sense that both inflict punishment on themselves. However, while Lady Dedlock performs this because of her own mistakes, Esther punishes herself for the mistakes of others. In other words, the double “death” of Lady Dedlock, if she is to be considered indeed “dead” after she leaves Esther again, does not take away from Esther her burden of the unfitting mother, but rather solidifies around her the plight of a motherless existence. The historical-ethical dependence between individuals mentioned before also creates, in hermeneutic terms, the concept of time as an ontological variable, providing the family with more influence over the identity building process. As Heidegger argued, “Yet when someone has died, his Being-no-longer-in-the-world is still a Being, but in the sense of the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more of a corporeal Thing which we encounter...And that is so because the deceased, in his kind of Being, is ‘still more’ than just an item of equipment, environmentally ready-to-hand...those who have remained behind *are with him...*”⁸ (Heidegger 1996: 281-282). One should consider this in the sense that the past, or the memory of it, is continually an attribute of identity. Dickens suggests so through the character of Esther. Esther has considered her mother dead up to the point she meets Lady Dedlock, and yet remains but an orphan. All this may be in the past but, according to what we take from Heidegger’s quote and considering the importance of family, it never leaves the present. Esther finds a new family in the novel and still does not escape orphanhood, because the family is the first and one of the most important factors of the problem of identity building.

It is apparent that any death, even a fictional one, has an effect on the person remaining behind and on his or her identity. Consistent with Heidegger: “...the fact that death has been thus ‘Objectively’ given must make possible an ontological delimitation of Dasein’s totality” (Heidegger 1996: 281). The passing of someone else affects the limits of the living because it is reminiscent of the limitation of one’s totality (identity) achievable upon expiration. The weight of this argument should not be dismissed lightly because it is a big part of the identity building process in *Bleak House*. In Esther’s case this is more than visible from her self-evaluation of not being “clever” to her wish of her never having been born. Lady Dedlock, by “dying”, has created this restriction for Esther. There is

The Broken Mirror: Maternal Agency and Identity in Charles Dickens's Bleak House by Sarah E. Cash, to name but a few thematically contributive references)

⁸ “Him” being the deceased.

no evidence in the novel that Esther is capable of loving and appreciating herself independently, on her own – without the love and appreciation of someone else. Esther's identity is predestined, since, without her own doing, she is forced to the position of the abandoned and motherless daughter, who has to pay for the sins of her parents, where she should have had the right to simply be the daughter.

The role Esther is put in by her absent mother and father makes Esther live in self-doubt. There is never a moment in the story where she displays affection to her own person and this is due to her ambiguous origin and position. While it is apparent and understandable that she does not perceive herself as someone's child, it is interesting to observe that she never outgrows this trauma of her childhood. Esther never really abandons the role of the unloved orphan, even when she finds herself with a family later on in the novel. Endowed with a new family, with more love than before, she is not convinced of her worth. Despite having new people around her who treat her with respect and affection, she is unable to forget the abandonment and mistreatment she suffered at the outset of her existence. To comprehend this one should consider Ricoeur's reflections on the human element which makes history phenomenal: people "have a history, are their own history" (Ricoeur 1994: 113). And is history not a part of memory? If we consider this point, things become more natural with Esther's situation; Esther never overcomes her feeling of the unwanted orphan because it is part of her history and memory. And since one is "their [one's] own history" (Ricoeur 1994: 113) Esther will always be her history, the unwanted orphan. In history, memory is a major contributor to self-formation – to the formation of identity. Once again, the absence of the family in Esther's life plays an instrumental role in her identity building procedure. What she has had to face while entering the reality of life and what she has endured for many years have scarred her for a lifetime, proving the necessity of family in identity building. Dickens could just overlook this and in the end give us an Esther who overcomes her hard beginnings, concerning family status, and the love this experience teaches. Yet Dickens gives us this bittersweet ending with the happy life Esther is living up to that point, but also with the self-doubt that has never abandoned her:

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. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake... But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that

my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen, and that they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing...

(Dickens 2001: 842-843)

This excerpt is important at this point, because it demonstrates the impact the family has on identity building and how Dickens handles this notion masterfully throughout the novel – up to the last words Esther utters. Esther never succeeds in uprooting her solitude and the feeling of being a person of no consequence. In the extract from *Bleak House* quoted above she does not compliment herself at all. She praises her husband as the reason for her acceptance in society, because she did not learn as a child to appreciate herself. She also assumes that she contributes nothing to the happiness in their lives by saying that “they can very well do without much beauty in me,” despite the fact that throughout the last chapter the gratitude and love towards Esther by the other characters is rather impressive and certainly easily recognized. This does not just enforce the theory that family is the first puzzle piece in identity growth, but it also shows the lasting effect it has on it.

Essentially, the significance of family in the problem of identity building confirms one’s lifetime as shared time where time is an ontological variable. This could be also understood as the reasoning behind the characters’ behavior, and intentionality as related to their past and present. Esther’s identity is shaped by her family’s past. Lady Dedlock moulds her identity with her own actions in the past and the present and thus becomes the “failed mother.” In keeping with Ricoeur’s words, every character has a specific perception of the past and the family (absent or present), which is a tremendous part of everyone’s history. Caddy’s identity (the daughter-employee) is influenced to a considerable extent by her family, as is Prince Turveydrop’s (the son-provider), Jo’s (the absolute orphan), and Charley’s (the adult-child). Family is one of the fundamental building blocks of identity. Not only was Dickens aware of this, but his work proves to provide in-depth expertise on integrating this theme as an important part of the narrative in the novel. The influence the family has on the problem of identity building and the consequences one’s own actions have on this process should never be underestimated. The narrative of the novel becomes a narrative of identity building. In this sense, the family may be perceived as the heart of the narrative of selfhood as a narrative in cultural-historical and in more specifically literary terms. And one cannot ignore the heart, in this case the family, in one’s attempt of accomplishing selfhood.

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