

# NARRATING UNCERTAINTY IN *BLEAK HOUSE* AND *EMMA*

by

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Under the Direction of Richard Menke

## ABSTRACT

Although D. A. Miller claims that there is no need to deny the novel's attempt to master the narratable, I would argue that traditional novels and their authors have aspired to nothing so lofty or total as mastery. Instead, traditional novels constitute attempts to manage narratability. Charles Dickens and Jane Austen face chance, variability, ambiguity, and uncertainty and use narrative not to control these elements but to corral them into something coherent and intelligible. In spite of the requisite beginnings and endings that must bookend these narratives, they remain open-ended, laden with unanswered questions and untold episodes. At the close of the novels, some desires go unfulfilled, some goals are unattained, and some knowledge remains shrouded in the mystery of the text. Thus, narrative is not intended to eliminate the danger inherent in want or equivocal meaning. Instead, it can offer methods for surviving in the face of that danger.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In his preface to *Narrative and Its Discontents*, D. A. Miller points out a significant consensus among critics concerned with narrative theory. He claims that thinkers from various schools of thought and ideological persuasions all rely on the assumption that the ending of a novel determines the other elements of the narrative as well as the novel's interpretive possibilities. He cites Sartre, Kristeva, Barthes, and Kermode, and says they all agree that "Everything in a narrative exists in view of the hidden necessity determined by its final configuration of event and meaning" (Miller xiii). In contrast, Miller argues that "closure never has the totalizing powers of organization that these critics claim for it" and that novels "are never fully or finally governed by [closure]" (xiv). In other words, conventional criticism holds that the meaning of a text—in its entirety and in its discrete parts—is fixed by the ending of that text. As long as the narrative movement continues, the significance of events, characters, and relations are indeterminate; a number of possible meanings exist. As the novel closes, however, critics such as Sartre and Kermode would say that the interpretive possibilities for the text are closed off, that they become no longer viable. Miller, on the other hand, argues that "the tendency of a narrative would. . . be to keep going" and that closure is always imposed, never arising out of a logical or symbolic resolution (xi). He asserts that the conflicts out of which narratives arise are never solved but are instead contained in the novelistic closure.

Miller attributes to critics and authors alike the belief that the ending of a text fixes its meaning. According to Miller, if authors feel their texts resisting their attempts at closure, they will work to correct this perceived problem and attempt to make sure that the endings of their plots are able to absorb any narrative energy. They will try to remove from their novels what Miller calls “the narratable,” elements he defines as “insufficiencies, defaults, [and] deferrals” (3). In this representation of traditional novelists, Miller paints a picture of authors scrambling to extinguish ubiquitous flare-ups of narratability in their attempts at closure. In Miller’s estimation, the results of these last minute struggles are texts with pretensions to realism and verisimilitude that deny the existence of persistent uncertainty and unfulfilled desire. While I agree with Miller’s argument that narrative’s tendency is to keep going and that closure is always arbitrarily imposed, I take issue with the notion that authors such as Dickens or Austen do not recognize the trouble that the narratable poses to a novel’s closure. I contend that they not only recognize the primary and persistent nature of the narratable, but that they exploit this element of narrative in order to create works with existential as well as artistic import.

Although Miller claims that “there is no need to deny the novel’s attempt to master the narratable” (266), I would argue that traditional novels and their authors aspire to nothing so lofty or total as mastery. Instead, traditional novels constitute attempts to manage narratability. These authors face chance, variability, and ambiguity and use narrative not to control these elements but to corral them into something coherent and instructive. In spite of the requisite beginnings and endings that must bookend these narratives, they remain open-ended, laden with unanswered questions and untold

episodes. At the close of the novels, some desires go unfulfilled, some goals are unattained, and some knowledge remains shrouded in the mystery of the text. Thus, narrative is not intended to eliminate the danger inherent in want or equivocal meaning. Instead, it can offer methods for surviving in the face of that danger.

*Emma* and *Bleak House* advocate such methods for survival through their content and their form. Both texts are, in part, pedagogical projects, attempting to instruct their audiences as to the nature of reality and to present them with effective ways of living in the face of it. These novelists use the open character of narrative, those elements of the story that resist closure, to demonstrate life's uncertainty. In the face of this uncertainty, Dickens and Austen call for epistemological humility. They promote programs for knowing characterized by a pragmatic view of knowledge, which allow the subject to recognize uncertainty while simultaneously performing duties, attaining goals, and carrying on relationships. These texts display a quiet optimism about the reader's ability to navigate terrain where meaning refuses to be fixed, where definitions shift, and where a name is incapable of encapsulating or comprehending its object. Furthermore, in *Emma* and in *Bleak House* we find models of behavior and interpretation, characters employing hermeneutical approaches that enable them to contend with ambiguity. These texts also arm us with cautionary tales and counter-examples as they sketch out the consequences of demanding certainty from the world. Thus Dickens and Austen attempt to assure their readers that they need not be paralyzed by unknowing or baffled by the complexity and ultimately unattainable nature of truth.

In the two centuries since Jane Austen wrote her novels, a number of her readers and critics have considered her the creator of a perniciously tidy world who constructed



an illusion of mannerly order in the midst of a messy, revolutionary reality. In contrast to this view, I argue that Austen's novels resist orderly closure and that the novelist intended to highlight the inability of the end of a narrative to fix the meaning of the whole. I believe this understanding of Austen provides us with a potent counter-argument to those who like to see her as a conservative writer prizing stability over volatility. Additionally, my reading problematizes the notion that Austen was ultimately only concerned with creating order out of chaos, union out of strife, and harmony out of cacophony. Identifying doubt or instability in the ending of one of Austen's novels forces us to redefine her cosmology as well as her technique.

Miller is a critic who reads Austen as a highly conservative novelist both in terms of structure and ideology, and he contends that she only invokes the disorderly and the transgressive in order to repair or redeem them. He also asserts that she endures the sully character of impropriety and the haze of confusion for the sake of their impending remediation. According to Miller, Austen makes this sacrifice because she could not tell the story of education without depicting ignorance or the story of moral instruction without portraying a lack of virtue. In his afterward to *Narrative and Its Discontents*, Miller compares the novelistic structure of Jane Austen and the Marquis de Sade. In this strange juxtaposition, he claims to find an unexpected symmetry between the two authors. He says, "Sade's pornographic narrator is no less obliged to moralize than, from the other side of the mirror, a moralist like Jane Austen is compelled to narrate the dangerous course of erotic excitement. A radical incompatibility between desire (desire for narrative) and the law (the law of closure) determines the narrative structure that, for different reasons, accommodates both novelists" (Miller 272). At first glance

this statement appears to encapsulate a compelling and elegant argument. Yet, on further reflection, we realize that Miller's notion of mirrored structures can only be accurate if Austen's portrayal of sin and ignorance is nothing more than a flimsy vehicle for her moralizing. (We must also assume that Sade's moralizing is a flimsy vehicle for his portrayal of sin.) If we read the Austen of the juvenilia and of *Lady Susan* we realize that the novelist might not be desperate to expunge morally questionable behavior from her narratives. This Austen revels in sharp wit and wicked nonsense and is not shy about portraying immorality. A familiarity with her juvenilia can help transform our notions regarding Austen's attitude toward the uncertain and transgressive middle of her texts.

In her own, sometimes quiet way, Austen celebrates the narratable elements of *Emma*. The heroine's satirical observations, even when tempered by benevolence, are wickedly clever. When Emma attempts to point out a comic flaw, her execution is elegant and her aim is true. Likewise, the flirtation between Frank and our heroine is often captivating, and we enjoy their performance as we would a stylized dance. Yet Austen does not merely offer up these narratable elements for the sake of her own or her readers' enjoyment. The author also uses Emma's love of the comic and her tendency (as well as her opportunities) to flirt to instruct her heroine and her readers about the uncertain and volatile nature of life. For these aspects of her personality place Emma in situations that demonstrate ambiguity. Austen does not send her heroine through the transgressive and uncertain middle of the narrative only to redeem and enlighten her in the end; neither does she attempt to exorcise all the elements of the narratable from her text. Instead, she insists on persistence of uncertainty and requires that her heroine

maintain and hone the narratable characteristics she is endowed with because these will facilitate Emma's mental and spiritual endurance of meaning's perpetual deferral.

I will discuss the troubled ending of this text only in order to demonstrate that Austen did not mean for uncertainty to reside strictly between the opening and close of her novel. She intended that unanswered questions, ill-defined relationships, and unfulfilled desires would linger beyond the point where the novel's action ceases. In my discussion of *Emma*, I will concentrate on the narratable aspects of the plot and Emma's character and analyze the pedagogical use Austen makes of these elements. Furthermore, I will not treat the novels in chronological order: I will present my reading of *Bleak House* first, followed by my reading of *Emma*. I believe this is a logical way to organize my argument because the novel-as-education paradigm seems more apparent in the Dickens text than in Austen. The notions of effective and ineffective knowers are laid out plainly in *Bleak House*, and the uncertainty these characters face is undeniable. Treating *Bleak House* first makes it easier to highlight similar ideas and formulations in *Emma*.

I am obviously highly indebted to the thought and writings of D. A. Miller for my understanding of narrative, and my disagreement with him has prompted me to make my own conclusions about the function of narrative and the project of the traditional novelist. I must also acknowledge my debt to Freudian criticism, especially as it is discussed in Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot*. His lucid and creative application of psychoanalytic ideas to literary criticism has influenced my reading of these texts, especially *Bleak House*, in ways I cannot entirely articulate. I am aware, however, that Brooks' explication of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* helped me answer one nagging

question. Although I was certain *Bleak House* was an excellent example of a text that left unanswered questions and unsolved mysteries in its wake as it ended, I questioned whether I could make that claim in good faith keeping in mind the novel's high morbidity rate. I wondered, how can a text be considered resistant to closure when it portrays death as frequently as *Bleak House* does? At first glance, it seemed ridiculous to say that an ending must be imposed on a novel so intent on depicting the cessation of life, the most natural of ends. Freud's notion of the competition between the life and death instincts provided me with a solution to this puzzle.

By working out the notions of the life and death drives, Freud can account for the decrease of individuals and the seemingly perpetual existence of the species. In spite of the fact that life is tending toward death, it also perpetuates itself, most obviously through reproduction. In this way, moribund humanity gives the appearance of immortality. Even as individuals pass away, the race lives on without a sure beginning or a discernible stopping point. With this notion in mind, I was able to discern that the portrayal of death in *Bleak House* does not refute the notion that closure must be imposed. In the novel, as in reality, the individual must die, and every epoch must come to an end. Yet humanity continues, and the progress of time does not cease. The tensions between the life and death instincts are reflected in the portrayal of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The whole aim of the case is to resolve itself, yet the proliferation of documents and the addition of parties to the suit are pictures of the tenacious life instinct. Like Freud's germ cells, the Chancery case works at producing the appearance of immortality. When one individual dies, the case attaches itself to another, giving rise to a new suitor. It does not matter if this Jarndyce or that Jarndyce is alive to carry on the cause; it just matters that someone

will. As the narrator says, “Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it” (*Bleak House* 4).

Two seemingly contradictory notions of time and event are prominent in the novel, and, taken together, they broadly represent the novel’s views on closure, in addition to mirroring Freud’s notions on life and death. In different sections of the text, two characters give voice to these opposing ideas. John Jarndyce laments, “through years and years...nothing ever ends” (*Bleak House* 88). In his turn, Richard claims that “everything has an end” (*Bleak House* 636). The novel’s high mortality rate affirms Richard’s claim while the protracted Chancery cases support the assertion of John Jarndyce. It is clear, however, that the notion of perpetuity wins out; individual deaths are certain but humanity endures. The cessation of Chancery court cases are long awaited though sure, but confusion remains in their wake.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRAZY FOR BELIEVING: *BLEAK HOUSE* AND THE PASSION FOR THE END

As the author of *Bleak House*, Dickens is aware of the conventional tendency of readers to look to the close of a novel for the revelation of its truth. He acknowledges, through his use of detective and courthouse plots, that the search for meaning is often also the search for the end. Detective and courthouse plots lend themselves quite well to the interpretive model that sees the whole through the prism of the ending because their endings offer ostensibly accurate and complete definitions. Through the resolution of a mystery or a court case, correct names are given to people and things because their true natures are purportedly revealed. The killer is no longer referred to merely as “Hortense” or “the French maid”; rather, at the end of the detective plot she is known by her proper designation—murderer—because her once secret acts are discovered. Likewise with a court case: by its end, a suitor in Chancery should be known either as the rightful and sole heir to the fortune or as the disinherited fool. While this hermeneutical paradigm is certainly alluded to through the plotting of the novel, Dickens refuses to uphold it. Instead, he refutes it, disallowing satisfying closure and refusing to grant to the end of *Bleak House* the power to illuminate the mystery and confusion that characterize the text. The Chancery suitors are ever thwarted in their quest for final judgments, and the novel’s most successful detective is able to answer only a limited number of questions, leaving much of the novel’s action, as well as the motivations of its characters, shrouded in mystery.

There is a tacit agreement between the author and his characters that fixed meaning is impossible in the middle of a story. All realize that uncertainty is a necessary component of the now. In the opening chapter, one of the narrators gives us a model for the novel's relation to knowledge in the present. He describes the Chancery court as a well and parenthetically comments that "you might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it" (*Bleak House* 2). This image is characteristic of the novel's portrayal of the search for truth by characters in that tenuous position between an immemorable beginning and the hoped-for end. The well image both posits the existence of truth and illustrates its inaccessibility. In contrast to the consensus regarding the elusive nature of knowledge in the present, there is deep disagreement between Dickens and some of his characters about the determining power of the end. Many Chancery suitors and characters involved in the novel's other mysteries look to the end of the cause or the end of the case for certainty. They believe that these partial endings will provide them with the unequivocal knowledge they are searching for. Dickens says no. The endings he constructs fail to bring fixed meaning within the reach of human understanding. The only ending capable of eradicating uncertainty is an apocalyptic one, the kind of ending Miss Flite looks forward to. As crazy as she is, Flite realizes that only a "Final Judgment" will dispel the semantic haze in which human life is shrouded. Instead of this certainty providing apocalypse, the text offers partial endings, endings which open up into new beginnings and refuse to halt the "drift of the sign" or the "drift of desire" (Miller xi). The narrative exhibits and obeys a biological principle of cessation, claiming that dust is "the universal article into which. . .all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving" (*Bleak*

*House* 280). In this novel, the things of earth expire, combust, and are consumed, but they never resolve into anything but an undifferentiated, fruitless mass.

It is paradoxical then, that a novel which insists on the contingent, parenthetical, and transitory nature of human existence is one that also affirms the necessity of duty, charity, and altruism. We can make sense of these apparently competing claims, however, when we realize that anticipating a certainty-providing-future often seduces characters and readers alike into overlooking the duty of the present. The novel asserts the unsatisfying nature of ends as a caution, and the text insists we understand that the ambiguity of the now will not be replaced by fixed meaning in the future. The novel does affirm a kind of truth in action; it acknowledges characters' need for a certain level of understanding in order to function in the world, but also demands that any perceived truth be checked against the unceasing stream of human experience. Therefore, knowledge must be provisional and characters must be willing to endure uncertainty and equivocation.

Chancery suitors poignantly depict interpreters of history and readers of texts caught up in what Roland Barthes calls "the passion for the end." Both readers and suitors seek "those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and middle" (Brooks 19). In spite of the desires of many of its characters (and possibly its readers), the novel refuses to function within the interpretive scheme Brooks mentions. Instead, the stories of the various Chancery suitors function as cautionary tales, discouraging and discrediting the practice of using the end as the interpretive key to the events at the beginning and middle. The text severely punishes characters who put their faith in the



coming resolutions of their cases. As they wait for the judgment of the court, we see them lose themselves to rage, madness, or despair. Yet the novel does not condemn the suitors for their interpretive choices without explanation or cause. The text proves its case against these characters by depicting the deeply dissatisfying endings of their suits, endings that refuse to participate in any kind of rational closure and instead seem to obey an tendency toward cessation akin to biological death.

The story of the man from Shropshire presents the reader with one such dissatisfying ending. Gridley's history does not conclude with an illuminating judgment from the courts. Even at the end, all the questions he and his family brought to Chancery are left unanswered. Gridley's story does not end because some verdict is rendered or some issue is decided. Instead, it ends because he is old and sick and weak—the organism merely expires. Even this disappointment is not the real tragedy of Gridley's story. By the time we meet this self-described “standing joke” he has given up on the idea that any meaningful judgment will arise out of his suit. Instead, he hopes that his involvement with the Chancery court will reveal the system and its executors as “the mockery they [are]” (*Bleak House* 323). In the scene of his death, he appeals to those around him, imploring them to see the end of his story in this light. He says, “you know I made a fight for it, you know I stood up with my single hand against them all, you know I told them the truth to the last, and told them what they were, and what they had done to me” (*Bleak House* 323). Gridley also hopes that the end of his history will prove him to be a man whom Chancery could not break. He says, “I thought, boastfully, that they never could break my heart, Mr. Jarndyce. I was resolved that they should not” (*Bleak House* 323). Even here, Gridley is thwarted in his desire for a determining end. In spite

of his years of thrashing against the soul-stealing power of the Chancery system, the court will continue its fruitless proliferation of documents and costs and proceed with its distorted parody of justice. While Gridley's end throws no illumination on Chancery, neither does it clearly define him as a character. At his death, we are unsure whether to commend him as a courageous soul who defied the pernicious court "consistently and perseveringly" for many years or to pity him as a broken wreck like the poor, mad woman in whose presence he dies. Miss Flite, oracular figure that she is, exclaims at her friend's parting, "Oh no, Gridley, not without my blessing!" (*Bleak House* 325). Like the reader, Miss Flite realizes that Gridley has gone out of this life bereft, without that final benediction which would have fixed the meaning of his tortured existence.

The court case at the heart of *Bleak House* is, of course, Jarndyce and Jarndyce. This "monument to Chancery practice" provides the reader with the most elaborately described and most deeply disappointing ending. At the beginning of the novel, the camera-eye narrator describes the extent of the confusion surrounding this particular cause. He says, "no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least; but it has been observed that no two Chancery lawyers can talk about it for five minutes, without coming to a total disagreement as to all the premises" (*Bleak House* 4). These lines demonstrate the fact that Jarndyce and Jarndyce is shrouded in just the kind of semantic haze that a revelation should dispel. When a mysterious paper emerges from Krook's store at the end of the novel, such a revelatory ending seems momentarily possible. The document which Mr. Smallweed digs out from among "vast lots of waste paper" turns out to be a will with a bearing on the Chancery case. According to Mr. Kenge, "it is a will of later date than any in the suit. . . a perfect instrument!" that should

hold within it the possibility of illuminating the pervasive confusion of Jarndyce and Jarndyce (*Bleak House* 775). In spite of the fervent expectations of its suitors, however, the revelatory ending of Jarndyce and Jarndyce never arrives. Instead, “the suit lapses and melts away” (*Bleak House* 797).

Dickens describes the end of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in a scene whose details resemble the death of a living thing. People stream out of the courtroom like the lifeblood of the case, “flushed and hot” (*Bleak House* 796). Soon after, stacks of paper, the very entrails of the suit, appear on the lawn surrounding the Chancery court. Esther says, “great bundles of paper began to be carried out—bundles in bags, bundles too large to be got into any bags, immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes, which the bearers staggered under” (*Bleak House* 796). Even the smell of death is represented; as the elements of the case pour out of the building they bring “a quality of bad air with them” (*Bleak House* 796). The death of the case thwarts the quest of the suitors and lawyers for judgment. Kenge admits, “We have been checked—brought up suddenly. I would say—upon the—shall I term it threshold?” (*Bleak House* 796). Even at the end of the case, things are left unfinished. This ending, this cessation akin to death, opens up onto the threshold of a new beginning so that meaning remains unfixed. The end of the cause is not a determining end because it is not an apocalyptic one. The round of life-making and meaning-making will go on even after Jarndyce and Jarndyce has surceased.

The novel insists that uncertainty is a necessary and perpetual component of the now. It denies the power to eliminate uncertainty to every ending through which a character might live. Characters must not look forward to some future governed by time or culture in which meaning will be fixed. Instead, they must endure equivocation; the

inability to do so is the inability to live. Once the reality of irrational cessation is recognized, the problem of the end ceases to be an epistemological problem and becomes an existential one. The interpretive scheme employed by the individual characters either facilitates or hinders their attempts to love, to be joyful, to care for their fellow human beings, to think, and to create. The hermeneutical approach characters bring to events impacts their humanity.

Richard's story functions as the text's most compelling argument against surrendering to a passion for the end. By the close of the novel, Richard collapses under the weight of his expectations. He loses everything in his quest for a meaningful resolution to Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and those losses are due to the interpretive principle which governs his understanding of the world. As J. Hillis Miller says in his essay on *Bleak House*, Richard is in a state of "perpetual deferring or postponement" (27). Meaning is always expected, looked for as a future good. Because Richard is a character who demands certainty, he is constantly waiting for a future revelation. Throughout the novel, Richard believes that the end of Jarndyce and Jarndyce will illuminate all the mysteries born out of that monument to confusion. In fact, he wagers his youth, his fortune, and his health on that prospect. In spite of warnings to the contrary in the novel's opening chapters, Richard begins "on no other foundation [than faith in Chancery] to build as many castles in the air as would man the Great Wall of China" (*Bleak House* 168). In an exchange about the Chancery case with Allan Woodcourt near the end of the novel, Richard proclaims, "We shall see!" (*Bleak House* 636). In that short declaration, Richard acknowledges both the lack of clarity he experiences at the time and the faith he has in the enlightenment to come. His trust in the illuminating power of

endings is further demonstrated when he discusses the actions of his cousin Jarndyce with Esther. Richard says, “I may find out, when it’s over, that I have been mistaken in John Jarndyce. . .Very well. Then I shall acknowledge it” (*Bleak House* 483). In his current unsettled state, Richard is unable to definitively interpret his cousin’s actions, so he looks to the end and awaits the certainty that he believes must come. Wise Esther laments this tendency in her young friend: she says, “Everything postponed to that imaginary time! Everything held in confusion and indecision until then!” (*Bleak House* 483).

Richard is a user of language and an interpreter of history who does not understand that meaning will not be pinned down. He refuses to see that, even in the end, signs and symbols equivocate, and events retain their opaque quality. He says, “I was born into this unfinished contention with all its chances and changes, and it began to unsettle me before I quite knew the difference between a suit of law and a suit of clothes” (*Bleak House* 296). This is true, of course. Richard is no more responsible for the Chancery case and the semantic muddle it represents than he is for his Englishness or his familial ties. What Richard fails to recognize, however, is that his own unsettled state is actually an attendant feature of humanity, not just a consequence of being named in a suit. In or out of Chancery, people must live in a world of partial meanings and equivocal signs. If Richard’s unsettled state is common to all, it cannot be the source of his particular woes. Rather, it is Richard’s reaction to his situation that prevents him from settling into a profession or flourishing in his marriage. Richard refuses to walk out onto shaky epistemological ground. He won’t begin to act, begin to live, until all the confusion that surrounds him is sorted out.

As he consciously awaits fixed meaning in the future, the present is overlooked, its profound importance denied in favor of what is to come. Or, more precisely, the present is treated as a prelude, a dress rehearsal in which errors are tolerated and omissions forgiven because they are sure to be rectified once real life begins. As Richard says, “There is no now for us suitors” (*Bleak House* 590). Like other characters caught up in the round of Chancery, Richard is unable to participate in meaningful, beneficial activity. He is prevented by his futile and frenetic dance with the court system from making a contribution to his family or his community. In fact, he is the unwitting agent of destruction in the lives of the characters around him. Richard wastes the money and patience of John Jarndyce in his fruitless quest for a profession. He marries his wife to poverty and misery, and through his death, he deprives his child of a father. Near the end of the novel, Richard realizes the faults born out of his passion for the end. He tells Allan Woodcourt, “You must know that I have done no good this long time. I have not intended to do much harm, but I seem to have been capable of nothing else” (*Bleak House* 635). Richard’s story is tragic because he confuses the end with the beginning and takes the middle for nothing at all. Through Richard’s interpretive and existential failings, the novel demonstrates that one must not demand certainty as a precondition for living. Instead, characters and readers alike must realize that the kind of half-sight and half-knowledge available in or out of Chancery is firm enough ground to build a life on. Yet insight may be gained from Richard’s confusion. Through it readers are able to discern the novel’s contention that every ending is a commencement of something different, and that the only way to step outside of the round of perpetual beginnings and endings is death or the end of the world.

Richard admits to Esther his inability to act in the face of an uncertain present when he says, “as to doing anything very definite *now*, that’s not easy. In short, it can’t be done; *I* can’t do it at least” (*Bleak House* 580). Richard is right to qualify that last statement because the novel makes it clear that characters with a proper epistemological outlook are capable of acting in spite of uncertainty, especially in attendance to duty. In contrast to Richard, Esther is a model interpreter—one who is able to maneuver across the ever-shifting semantic terrain, one who recognizes the necessity of contending with ambiguities. The uncertainty of Esther’s situation is demonstrated in a variety of ways, the most obvious of which is her status in the household of John Jarndyce. When Esther comes to Bleak House, she is given the housekeeping keys, the symbol of her domestic duties. Esther is expected to manage the budget, maintain the order and cleanliness of the home, and oversee the servants. It is unclear, however, in what capacity Esther is expected to perform these duties, and the extent of this uncertainty can be understood in terms of the conventional housekeeper role. In the nineteenth-century, housekeepers were servants, relations, or wives, but the lines between these three relationships were often blurred. A sister might be treated more like an employee, or a lover might live under a less intimate title.

Esther’s status as housekeeper opens up yet another way of understanding her uncertainty. Because of Esther’s position, there is a close symbolic connection between Esther and the house itself. The confusing passageways and illogical design of its interior spaces can be read as a metonymy for Esther’s relational existence. When she describes her first inspection of her new home, she calls it:

one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages, and where you find still older cottage-rooms in unexpected places with lattice windows and green growth pressing through them. (*Bleak House* 60)

Esther's stumbling into a succession of unexpected rooms prefigures her later stumblings into a succession of possible identities.

The amorphous nature of the housekeeper role is characteristic of Esther's situation at Bleak House. As a woman unrelated to the master of the house, Esther resembles an upper servant or an employee who works for her room and board. Yet there are clear ties of affection between Esther and the other members of the household; these seem to grant her a status that would be better defined as an adopted daughter or ward. Jarndyce's long-term interest in Esther's well-being also lends itself to this interpretation. He is the man who establishes young Esther at the Greenleaf school, who comforts her during her lonely journey toward that new home, and who finally welcomes her as an essential part of his makeshift family. Upon her arrival at Bleak House, Esther thinks of John Jarndyce as a kind of beneficent father figure, "the one who had been [her] benefactor and sole earthly dependence through so many years" (*Bleak House* 56).

John Jarndyce certainly is the closest thing to a father that Esther knows. For quite some time, Esther believes herself to be an orphan, and, although this is a misapprehension on her part, her situation at the novel's opening is certainly as desolate as that of any truly orphaned child. Although Captain Hawdon lives until Esther's



adulthood, he does not exert any paternal authority, and Esther is bereft of any benefit of the beneficial ordering work that type of authority might accomplish. As with the other youthful characters of the nineteenth-century novel, Esther's initiation into the cultural network surrounding her is neither governed nor guided by a biological authority. Part of Peter Brooks's description of the nineteenth-century orphan may be easily applied to Esther's situation:

the young protagonist of the nineteenth-century novel discovers [her] choices of interpretation and action in relation to a number of older figures of wisdom and authority who are rarely biological fathers--a situation that the novel often ensures by making the [daughter] an orphan, or by killing off or otherwise occulting the biological father before the text brings to maturity its dominant alternatives. (Brooks 63)

Like Julien Sorel of *Le Rouge et le noir*, Pip of *Great Expectations*, or Stephen Dedalus of *Ulysses*, Esther "has a choice among possible fathers from whom to inherit, and in the choosing—which may entail a succession of selections and rejections—[she] plays out [her] career of initiation into a society and into history" (Brooks 64). While this orphan-status has the ability to empower Esther and the male heroes Brooks cites, it also denies them any certain foundation on which to build their identities and from which they can interact with the world. A lack of paternal authority certainly provides Esther with a great deal of autonomy in her choices regarding interpretation and action, but the lack of a paternal model also increases the uncertainty with which she must contend.

*Amor matris*, that love for and knowledge of a mother which Joyce claims might be "the only true thing in life," is also unavailable to Esther (qtd in Brooks 63).

Throughout her childhood, Esther is never told about her mother, is never shown a grave, and is never permitted to mourn her loss. When she finally receives information about her begetting she is told to forget the mother who is her shame. She lacks the illuminating knowledge that the organic starting point of birth can provide. She is a woman without a birthday, without any beginning to situate her.

The uncertain nature of Esther's position deepens as her relationship with Jarndyce grows more complex. In spite of her youth and his "silvered head," Jarndyce asks Esther to be his wife. This proposal and its subsequent acceptance do not have the customary effect, however, of clarifying the intentions of the two people involved. They do not negate past understandings of their relationship or unveil secret significances behind certain gestures or words. Rather, the letter expressing Jarndyce's request is fraught with ambiguities. Esther says that the proposal missive "was not a love letter though it expressed so much love" (*Bleak House* 560). Instead, she says that it was "written throughout with a justice and a dignity, as if he were indeed my responsible guardian, impartially representing the proposal of a friend against whom in his integrity had stated the full case" (*Bleak House* 561). And although Esther maintains that the letter was impressive in its love for her, Jarndyce writes that she would "gain nothing by such a proposal, and lose nothing by rejecting it; for no new relation could enhance the tenderness in which he held [her]" (*Bleak House* 560). Even Jarndyce's motivations for making the proposal are unclear. Esther says, "He had often thought of our future; and foreseeing that the time must come, and fearing that it might come soon, when Ada (now very nearly of age) would leave us, and when our present mode of life must be broken up, he had been accustomed to reflect on this proposal. Thus he made it" (*Bleak House* 560).

There seem to be at least two possible interpretations of these lines. The first would simply say that Jarndyce loves Esther as a man loves a woman and that Ada's impending departure functioned only as a reminder that he should act in order to reveal and possibly bring his affection to fruition. The other interpretation would say that Jarndyce wanted to protect Esther, to retain her friendship and her good company. It would say that he was so enamored of her in her position as housekeeper he would marry her in order to ensure her remaining in it.

After accepting Jarndyce, Esther talks about the future in which she will bear the appellation "Mistress of Bleak House." This new designation functions in the same way the numerous other names for Esther function in the novel: they demonstrate her willingness to endure uncertainty even in her self-understanding. She is alternately called "Dame Durden," "Dame Trot," "little woman," and "Mother Hubbard." By Miss Flite she is known as Fitz-Jarndyce. "The Mistress of Bleak House," however, is probably the most loaded and ambivalent name Esther recognizes as designating herself. This name, which seems to bear with it the ability to secure Esther in an unambiguous position in her home and society, opens up to a dual significance in the novel's final chapters. With the naming of the second Bleak House and its bestowal on the young doctor, Esther's designation as mistress now bears with it the role of wife of Allan Woodcourt. And this sign does not cease to drift after Esther is married. It continues to signify both her status as wife and a relationship with Jarndyce which cannot be encompassed by the terms father and daughter or guardian and ward. In spite of Jarndyce's wish that Esther "forgive [her] old guardian, in restoring him to his old place in [her] affections" and blot their engagement out of her memory, she does not seem to be able to do so. At the close

of the novel, when the narrated action catches up to the point of narration seven years later, Esther says, “I have never lost my old names, nor has he lost his; nor do I ever, when he is with us, sit in any other place than in my old chair at his side” (*Bleak House* 807). To Esther, Jarndyce is “what he has ever been, and what name can I give to that?” (*BH* 807). What name indeed could be given to a relationship that persistently resists definition, which slips out from under any attempt to restrict it or fix its boundaries?

In order to live amidst the profound and pervasive uncertainty that characterizes her situation, Esther adopts a provisional interpretive system, a framework that calls for tentative judgments rather than final ones and that facilitates the performance of her duties. Esther is undismayed by her many names. She is not rendered useless by her ambiguous status in Jarndyce’s household or her fraught relationship with the man himself. Though she remains undefeated by it, Esther is not insensible to the nature of her situation. One cannot help feeling that Esther’s cheerfulness is sometimes forced and that the precariousness of her place weighs on her. Her jingling housekeeping keys are not always a result of contentment; at times they are an exhortation to it.

Harold Skimpole insists that Esther is a woman “intent upon the perfect working order of the whole little orderly system of which [she is] the center” (*Bleak House* 487). Furthermore, J. Hillis Miller calls this fact a “disquieting detail” and attributes to Esther a desire for certainty resembling that of a Chancery suitor. I would argue, however, that Esther’s system of order is employed pragmatically to accomplish certain ends. Esther’s system of order is flexible enough to withstand a host of changes and equivocation, and its malleability allows her to move through time rather than paralyzing her in the strange sort of prelude that Richard inhabits and in which he wastes away. The novel seems to

uphold the notion that people must assign names, discern relationships, and form categories in order to exist on a meaningful level. Thus, Esther's hermeneutic pretensions and aspirations do not preclude her from living her life. Instead, her interpretive scheme facilitates her participation in the kind of Christian humanism that Dickens saw as the only way to heal the moribund English society of the nineteenth-century. She is a model of "engagement in duty and industrious work, in spontaneous charity toward those immediately within [her] circle" (Miller 31).

*Bleak House* cautions against a passion for certainty that precipitates a passion for the end. It insists that the endings available to history or to the novel are governed by a principle of cessation resembling biological death. The judgment at the close of a court case, the marriage at the close of a love story: the novel refutes the notion that endings such as these can fix meaning, and exhorts its readers to make that truth a part of their epistemological schemes. The novel does posit the existence of truth, but places it both beyond the reach of the finite human mind and outside the bounds of temporality. While certainty cannot be attained through the partial endings that open up into life's new beginnings, the novel does seem to leave open the possibility of a true apocalypse in which secrets are revealed and in which those who saw in a glass darkly will then see face to face. In Richard's death scene, the text points us toward the only place in which final, definitive meaning can be fruitfully sought—"the world that sets this one right" (*Bleak House* 801). When Richard tells his cousin Jarndyce that he must begin this world, we seem to see Richard once again confusing endings with beginnings. In a sense, however, he is correct to conceive of his death in this way. This true ending opens up into a new place and a new temporal situation that will finally allow Richard to step

outside of the round of meaning's deferral. Richard will no longer be an interpreter of signs because knowledge will be complete and immediate. The barrier between the human mind and the truth will be removed.

For one of the characters of *Bleak House*, there seems to be no barrier between the mind and the truth. This character is, of course, Inspector Bucket. Unlike any of the novel's other characters, he is able to see through the haze of mystery. He locates the hidden Gridley, he reveals Tulkinghorn's murderer, he unravels the mystery of Lady Dedlock's and Jenny's identity swap, and he discovers Smallweed in possession of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce will. In spite of appearances, however, Mr. Bucket's ability to uncover truth does not contradict the novel's understanding of the human relationship to knowledge. At the beginning of the novel, the anonymous narrator uses the image of a well to describe humanity's relation to truth, and he implies that any attempt to find truth would start at the bottom of that well. And who better to descend into it than a character named Bucket? Mr. Bucket functions within the *Bleak House* paradigm because his detective abilities allow him to transcend natural human limitations. As the anonymous narrator says, "Time and place cannot bind Mr. Bucket. Like man in the abstract, he is here to-day and gone to-morrow—but, very unlike man indeed, he is here again the next day" (*Bleak House* 654). Bucket's detective powers effect the epistemological unveiling the novel's other characters must not expect until after their own deaths or the end of the world. Bucket, on the other hand, need not depart this life in order to halt meaning's perpetual deferral because the revelation required to fix meaning has already occurred within him.

The novel uses several methods to make clear the fact that Bucket's detective powers are beyond the pale of human ability. The most obvious of these is the language with which his perceptive faculties are described. Dickens situates Bucket's capacity for clear-sightedness in one of his forefingers. The narrator calls the digit a "familiar demon," and while this characterization does not preclude a materialist view of Bucket's perception, it certainly opens the way to a supernatural understanding of his epistemological power. This understanding is only supported by the description of the ways in which the forefinger assists Bucket. The narrator tells us that the finger mysteriously whispers information to the detective, sharpens his scent, and charms guilty men to destruction (*Bleak House* 654). The scene in which Bucket reveals Hortense's guilt also lends credence to the notion that Bucket is in possession of superhuman powers. Here, we see the inspector's keen mind penetrate the shrouded intentions of the murderer without any apparent aid from outward sign or evidence. Due to no clue that the reader can discern, the inspector discovers the murderer's impulse to harm herself. Because Bucket never gives a logical explanation for his apparently uncanny ability to read a criminal's mind, our belief in his superhuman powers is never disproved.

The nature of Mr. Bucket's perception is further illustrated through an anecdote about picking fast horses. The narrator says, "Mr. Bucket does not claim to be a scientific judge of horses; but he lays out a little money on the principle events in that line, and generally sums up to his knowledge of the subject in the remark, that when he sees a horse as can go, he knows him" (*Bleak House* 703). This short passage shows us that Bucket relies on neither empirical evidence nor clues, neither symbols nor signs; in his attempts at understanding, these ephemeral elements of the signifying system are

irrelevant. Bucket does more than recognize the characteristics of a fast horse or the indicators that point toward its agility and speed. Some innate ability allows Bucket to see the thing itself: “when he sees a horse as can go, he *knows* him.” *Bleak House* may have helped to set the stage for the mystery genre, but Bucket is certainly not the genealogical source for detectives. Bucket is no Sherlock Holmes. Holmes relies on clues and deductions arising from these clues to illuminate the dim mysteries he is confronted with. Bucket, on the other hand, relies on an almost occult knowledge of the souls of those around him. He does not merely collect information or form impressions; Bucket “pervades a vast number of houses” (*Bleak House* 654).

We find one example of Bucket’s imperviousness to clues as he relates the story of Mr. George’s arrest. He tells Sir Leicester:

I examined the place, and the body, and the papers, and everything. From the information I received (from a clerk in the same house) I took George into custody, as having been seen hanging about there, on the night, as very nigh the time, of the murder; also, as having been overheard in high words with the deceased on former occasions--even threatening him, as the witness made out. (*Bleak House* 679)

In spite of this preponderance of evidence against him, Mr. Bucket never believes in the guilt of Mr. George. He says, “If you ask me, Sir Leicester Dedlock, whether from the first I believed George to be the murderer, I tell you candidly No” (*Bleak House* 679).

The detective faculty allows Bucket to see through equivocal signs. Through Mr. Bucket, the novel reminds the reader that only one not bound by language and temporality, only “man in the abstract,” is able to achieve certainty. Through his uncanny detective



faculty, the novel reiterates its contention that those of us lacking the power to elude the restrictions of “time and place” must live in a world where meaning cannot be fixed.

Most of the episodes concerning Mr. Bucket are related by the camera-eye narrator. The epistemological scope of this narrator appears to be confined to the exterior realities of the past and the present. The disembodied narrator seems incapable of seeing into the future or probing into the hearts of the characters whose lives he documents. For example, when the narrator wishes to depict the affection that exists between Lord and Lady Dedlock he does not delve into their minds to retrieve their innermost feelings. Instead, he relies on the observations and testimony of a stranger who knows the couple only by sight. The narrator relays the woman’s observations using free indirect discourse: “one can see at a glance that they love each other. One observes my Lord with his white hair, standing, hat in hand, to help my Lady to and from the carriage. One observes my Lady, how recognisant of my Lord’s politeness” (*Bleak House* 142). The camera-eye narrator’s ostensible limitations are also demonstrated through the scene in which Tulkinghorn details the fate of Captain Hawdon, known at this point in the narrative merely as a mysterious law scrivener. The extent of Lady Dedlock’s interest and the depth of Tulkinghorn’s suspicion are imparted through the narrator’s minute description of their words and manner. At one point he observes, “During the utterance of every word of this short dialog, Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn, without any other alteration in their customary deportment, have looked very steadily at one another—as was natural, perhaps, in the discussion of so unusual a subject” (*Bleak House* 152). As the chapter closes, he says, even more evocatively:

But whether each evermore watches and suspects the other, evermore mistrustful of some great reservation; whether each is evermore prepared at all points for the other, and never to be taken unawares; what each would give to know how much the other knows—all this is hidden, for the time, in their own hearts? (*Bleak House* 153)

The camera-eye narrator's supposed limitations are also alluded to in his habits of speech. Unlike Esther, who writes from a distance of seven years into the future, this narrator constantly speaks in the present tense, and we assume he does so because he details the events as he experiences or witnesses them with no significant time intervening between their passing and his composition. We believe that is narrator does not know the end of the story because he is writing from the midst of it.

It is difficult to determine whether the camera-eye narrator is actually blind to the future and unaware of the interiorities of his characters or if the peculiar brand of limited omniscience he evinces is actually just a ploy allowing this narrator to heighten the tension of the mystery. It seems possible that this narrator's strategic blindness allows him to provocatively reveal a certain amount of information or at least hint at certain conclusions while simultaneously preserving doubt and suspense. This camera-eye narrator is closely allied with the fashionable intelligence, which the narrator says, "like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future" (*Bleak House* 8). The omniscience of the fashionable intelligence is also limited in scope; the narrator tells us that the world of fashion "is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too. . .it is a very little speck" (*Bleak House* 7). Later, the narrator is more specific when he says that the "tremendous orb" of the world of fashion is "nearly

five miles round” (*Bleak House* 597). Both the camera-eye narrator and the fashionable intelligence demonstrate a sort of acquiescence to an uncertain reality and fill in the blanks in their knowledge with gossip, speculation, or hints. Unlike Richard Carstone, who tells himself lies in desperate attempts to patch up the holes in his understanding, the camera-eye narrator and the fashionable intelligence delight in mystery as a way to put forth their own opinions. The mystery that surrounds Lady Dedlock’s origins is clothed in the speculation of the fashionable intelligence. We are told that “A whisper still goes about, that she had not even family; howbeit, Sir Leicester had so much family that perhaps he had enough, and could dispense with any more” (*Bleak House* 9). Although the narrator asserts the depth of the mystery surrounding Lady Dedlock’s death and the lengths to which Sir Leicester goes to preserve that mystery, he offers up gossip. He says that Lady Dedlock’s former friends “did once occasionally say, when the World assembled together, that they wondered if the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company” (*Bleak House* 801). Gossip provides the fashionable intelligence and the camera-eye narrator with a teasingly indefinite method of both preserving mystery and gesturing toward a conclusion.

The camera-eye narrator is capable of this kind of simultaneous illumination and obfuscation even without the help of the fashionable intelligence. He uses evocative descriptions and couples them with the logical interpretations of what he observes. Take for instance Lady Dedlock’s response to Tulkinghorn’s appearance after a long absence. Volumnia says, “He has not been here once . . . since I came. I really had some thoughts of breaking my heart for the inconstant creature. I had almost made up my mind that he was dead” (*Bleak House* 523). This comment prompts the narrator to say, “It may be the

gathering gloom of evening, or it may be the darker gloom within herself, but a shade is on my Lady's face, as if she thought, 'I would he were!'" (*Bleak House* 523). Another example of this narrative method can be found in the narrator's interpretation of Sir Leicester's gesture in response to another of Volumnia's statements. The narrator says, "Sir Leicester, with a gracious inclination of his head, seems to say to himself, 'A sensible woman this, on the whole, though occasionally precipitate'" (*Bleak House* 520).

As the tension between Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn mounts, the narrator either ceases his pretensions to epistemological limitation or gains a new insight into the interiority of these two characters. Like a traditional omniscient narrator, he details his characters' thoughts. Take the following sentence, for example: "'This woman understands me,' *Mr. Tulkinghorn thinks*, as she lets her glance fall again. 'She cannot be spared. Why should she spare others?'" (*Bleak House* 606, italics mine). The narrator is not only privy to Mr. Tulkinghorn's specific thoughts; he has access to Lady Dedlock's knowledge as well. He is now confident about what she does and does not know, as we observe in the following passage. We are told that "Imperturbable and unchangeable as [Mr. Tulkinghorn] is, there is still an indefinable freedom in his manner, which is new, and which does not escape this woman's observation" (*Bleak House* 605). Perhaps we must be given access to the thoughts of those characters because of their uncanny ability to guard their individual secrets. The narrator informs us that Mr. Tulkinghorn is "surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences; of which he is known to be the silent depository" (*Bleak House* 10). The narrator goes on to creatively elicit our belief in Mr. Tulkinghorn's ability to mask his knowledge and thoughts. We are told that "There are noble Mausoleums rooted for centuries in retired glades of parks, among the growing

timber and the fern, which perhaps hold fewer noble secrets than walk abroad among men, shut up in the breast of Mr. Tulkinghorn” (*Bleak House* 10). Obviously, the solicitor is not the only one who can keep a secret. As Mr. Tulkinghorn threatens to expose Lady Dedlock, he marvels at her composure, especially when knowledge of her years of dissimulation dawns on him. He thinks to himself, “The power of this woman is astonishing. She has been acting a part the whole time” (*Bleak House* 604). Later he has a similar thought: “‘This woman,’ thinks Mr. Tulkinghorn, standing on the hearth again a dark object closing up her view, ‘is a study’” (*Bleak House* 607).

Additional analysis of the narrative continues to problematize our understanding of the camera-eye narrator’s perceptive capabilities. For example, in the final chapters the narrator evinces knowledge of the future when he foresees the death of Sir Leicester. He says,

Closed in by night with broad screens, and illumined only in that part, the light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more. A little more, in truth, and it will be all extinguished for Sir Leicester; and the damp door in the mausoleum which shuts, so tight, and looks so obdurate, will have opened and relieved him. (*Bleak House* 803)

The camera-eye narrator also foretells the death of Mr. Tulkinghorn. Chapters before the murder actually occurs, the narrator begins to hint at the solicitor’s demise. He asks, “Where are the digger and the spade, this peaceful night, destined to add the last great secret to the many secrets of the Tulkinghorn existence?” (*Bleak House* 530). Later, the narrator adds to our sense of foreboding using a subtle and allusive description of Mr.

Tulkinghorn's external state. He says, "And truly, when the stars go out and the wan day peeps into the turret-chamber, finding [Mr. Tulkinghorn] at his oldest, he looks as if the digger and the spade were both commissioned, and would soon be digging" (*Bleak House* 534). In the most blatant example of the narrator's uncharacteristic future vision, he personifies numerous objects, creating silent prophets of Mr. Tulkinghorn's doom. After Tulkinghorn consults a hall clock for the correct time, the narrator says, "If it said now 'Don't go home!' What a famous clock, hereafter, if it said tonight of all the nights that it has counted off, to this old man of all the young and old men who have ever stood before it, 'Don't go home!'" (*Bleak House* 608). When the lawyer checks his watch, our narrator exclaims, "What a watch to return good for evil, if it ticked in answer, 'Don't go home!'" (*Bleak House* 608). Even the bricks and mortar of the buildings around him are blamed for keeping the secret of Tulkinghorn's murder. The narrator says, "The high chimney-stacks telegraph family secrets to him. Yet there is not a voice in a mile of them to whisper, 'Don't go home!'" (*Bleak House* 608).

After reading the above passages closely, it becomes apparent that this narrator's presentation of events is actually an elaborate, stylistic ploy intended to heighten the suspense of the mystery surrounding Lady Dedlock's past and Tulkinghorn's murder. When we see this narrator getting inside the minds of his characters and predicting future events we must assume that he is not actually limited by any lack of omniscience. We realize that he uses the present tense and restricts his portrayal of the internal states of his characters in order to withhold information that might spoil the surprises to come. As the narrator reveals his cloaked omniscience in the novel's final chapters, his perceptive capabilities begin to resemble those with which Mr. Bucket is endowed. Like Bucket, the

narrator is not bound by the limits of human consciousness, which separate one mind from another. Neither is he limited by temporality. Instead, he is a disembodied perceiver able to ascertain the thoughts, motivations, and destinies of his characters. From his god's-eye-view the narrator is able to attain certainty and to comprehend the real truth about his characters. Gradually, he reveals some measure of that truth to his audience. The camera-eye-narrator (who should, in fact, be called the omniscient narrator) provides the text with a conception of unfettered knowledge and brings the limits of embodiment into sharp relief. He demonstrates what human beings cannot accomplish as knowers tied to corporeal forms. Furthermore, the narrator's omniscience allows the novelist to once again postulate truth while still positioning it beyond the pale of human perceptive ability.

As a text enmeshed in a temporal, signifying system, *Bleak House* itself resists definitive interpretations. Any attempt to fix the meaning of the text will ultimately fail due to what D. A. Miller calls the "drift of the sign." As readers, we can say something about the text, however. We can make tentative judgments and draw conclusions as long as we remind ourselves that they must remain provisional. With that in mind, we conclude that fixed meaning is unattainable within language or culture and that truth resides beyond the grasp of human interpreters. We see that endings are not precipitated by a realization of the truth, nor do they bring about the kind of rational closure that readers of novels and interpreters of history so desperately want. Rather, narrative endings merely mime the biological imperative seemingly obeyed by every living thing—that which is living must eventually die. And we understand that, only the supernatural can discern the proper signified behind the signifier. These are the lessons of *Bleak House*.

### CHAPTER 3

#### LEARNING UNCERTAINTY: THE EDUCATION OF EMMA

Intent on acquainting her heroine with the uncertain nature of reality, the author of *Emma* requires the title character to acknowledge ambiguity, equivocation, and the truth of incompatible ideas. Throughout the novel, Emma is confronted by confusion and suspense, and she must resist the temptation to jump to conclusions or bury her head in the sand of fancy. She is also forced to acknowledge seemingly contradictory truths and hold them in tension. By presenting her heroine with situations whose meanings are indeterminate rather than fixed, varying rather than static, or ambiguous rather than definite, the author of this text exposes Emma to the joys and the dangers of an uncertain world. She also provides her with the mental and spiritual fortitude to traffic in irony and humor, as well as flirtation and wordplay. The novel shows Emma developing into a character who nurtures a healthy doubt about her ability to perceive truth and who evinces an ability to withstand the perpetual deferral of meaning. The novel's movement is one from epistemological hubris to humility and from a desire for fixed meaning to an embracing of possibility and uncertainty.

As most critics claim, this is a novel of education. Yet, in some ways, it is a novel of education upended. For the plot does not produce a heroine confident in her powers to perceive and understand. Instead, Emma emerges from the story chastened by interpretive errors, with a healthy doubt about her ability to perceive her world. She ends the novel doubting whether meaning can be fixed at all or if truth can be simple and clear. The novel often reveals to Emma the difficulties inherent in the search for knowledge and



the obstacles blocking its progress. Thus, the flaw that the novel diligently attempts to free Emma from is not ignorance but the unshakable conviction that she is right. In order to flourish in the world of this novel, one must be willing to doubt one's own interpretations and endure uncertainty. The Emma of the novel's inception wants to live in a world devoid of doubt, and at times she convinces herself that she does. This desire and false conviction are demonstrated when, in the novel's third volume, Emma puzzles over Mr. Knightley's renewed approval, the rudeness of the Eltons, and Harriet's ever-changing love life. After spending the morning hours of one day devoted to reflection, she believes that she has "arranged all these matters, looked through them, and put them all to rights" (*Emma* 217). The words of the narrator reveal Emma's over-confidence about her ability to perceive and understand and her belief that knowledge about the world can be tidy, transparent, and certain.

The plot of *Emma* also troubles the form of the novel of education by reinforcing rather than disciplining some of our heroine's traits. Peculiarities that we might expect a pedagogical text to suppress or exorcise, such as Emma's imaginist tendencies, her humor (or what I will call her comic vision), or her flirtatiousness, are often sanctioned by the voice of the narrator and legitimized the story's events. The novelist does not demand that Emma curb her flirtatiousness or abandon her fanciful imaginings. Furthermore, Emma's humor, especially when it is tempered with benevolence, is supported by the satirical voice of the narrator. When contrasted with Highbury's provincial dullness, Emma's alluring playfulness, her imagination, and her comic vision appear brilliant. The reader, as well as the heroine and the other characters, enjoy these facets of Emma's personality, and the novel seems to celebrate them. It is not just the

level of interest or delight that these characteristics produce that keep the novelist from correcting them, however. They also have the potential to enhance Emma's capacity for dealing with uncertainty. Her imaginist tendencies, when employed correctly, can open up a wealth of possibilities for action and interpretation, her comic vision can provide her with new ways of understanding characters, and her penchant for flirtation can equip her to participate in relationships that defy definition. The development of certain aspects of Emma's personality helps further the project of the novel, which is exposing Emma to life's uncertainty and equipping her to deal with such.

The text does require some alteration of Emma's behavior in regard to the employment of the above-mentioned attributes, because our heroine's weaknesses, as well as her strengths, derive from these gifts. Emma's propensities for humor, flirtation, and fancy have the potential to lead her into a belief that truth can be simple rather than multifaceted, and they sometimes propel her into a denial of uncertainty. For instance, her love of the comic can tempt Emma into perceiving people in a simplistic, one-dimensional manner, but a well developed comic vision allows her to interpret those around her in various ways simultaneously. Furthermore, Emma's desire for playful interactions with members of the opposite sex can cause her to believe that she is in love. If Emma is not vigilant, she can mistake flirtation, a set of actions with many possible interpretations, for courtship, which has only one meaning and one goal. Finally, Emma's imaginist tendencies threaten her ability to endure uncertainty. At times, Emma is guilty of putting too much faith in the fanciful tales she constructs about her neighbors. When she begins to believe in her own stories, they blind her to ambiguity. These narratives grow out of Emma's creativity and vitality as a heroine, but when she allows

herself to be convinced by them she becomes dogmatic rather than open-minded and rigid rather than receptive to new ideas. As long as Emma realizes that the stories she constructs her are imaginative potentialities, they conform to the ethic of the novel, which prizes possibility over certainty. But when she allows her explanatory tales to relieve her from doubt, they become specious attempts to provide herself with fixed meaning. Thus, the novel does not attempt to disallow Emma's imaginism. Instead, it attempts to instruct her about how to use this gift effectively.

Austen does not purge the text of narratable events nor does she suppress Emma's comic vision, her flirtation, and her imagination. These aspects of Emma's personality are narratable traits, which propel and maintain the movement of the story. Austen affixes an arbitrary, though necessary, ending to her narrative, and, in doing so, she acknowledges both the tendency of narrative to keep going and the perpetual drift of the sign that is the source of that tendency. Even in her portrayal of Knightley, the author does not diverge from this plan for her novel. A prevalent critical conception sees Mr. Knightley as a monitoring and mentoring figure. Some critics read him as the story's embodiment of knowledge who moulds Emma's interpretive practices and who helps her achieve clear moral vision. A. Walton Litz calls him the representative of "native good sense" and as the "critical guardian of Emma's ambitious imagination" (374-5). And John Hagen writes, "it has been almost universally assumed that Mr. Knightley's chief function in the novel is to serve as the moral norm, the *raisonneur*, the more or less infallible embodiment of those very qualities of reason, good sense, moderation, prudence, clarity of vision, and so forth, which Emma so conspicuously lacks at the beginning" of the novel (546). This Knightley has the ability to absorb Emma's

imaginative and transgressive energies, and this understanding of the character has the potential to threaten my interpretive paradigm.

This interpretation of Knightley would, in fact, prove to be a potent counter-argument to my thesis if it were correct. If, as Marilyn Butler and other critics believe, Knightley's influence allowed Emma to achieve clarity of vision, then the text's preparing her to live with uncertainty is all for naught. Yet this notion of Knightley as an instructor, eventually enabling Emma to transcend ambiguity and arrive at fixed meaning, is erroneous. For Knightley is a co-learner with Emma, a fellow student of uncertainty. Like our heroine, he must live in a world of equivocation, partial knowledge, and opaque characters. In order to be an active part of his community he too must make judgments based on incomplete evidence, and at times he judges incorrectly. Some of Knightley's perceptive errors arise out of his growing love for Emma, which is made apparent through his jealousy of Frank Churchill. Knightley's poor interpretations of some events and his prejudice against Frank allow the text to explore emotion and desire as a limitation of human knowledge. Unlike Mr. Bucket and the omniscient narrator of my last chapter, Knightley is an embodied character who is denied access to perfect knowledge by his particular affections and biases. In some instances Knightley serves as a model knower in the text who is willing to suspend judgment and endure ambiguity in the quest for understanding, but the portrayal of Knightley also allows the text to expand its conception of uncertainty by presenting love as a barrier to human knowledge.

Throughout the novel we are struck by Emma's ability to perceive the flaws in her acquaintances and find humor in them. The Victorian novelist Margaret Oliphant calls this ability comic vision and describes this trait as "the faculty of seeing [one's] brother

clearly all round as if he were a statue, identifying all his absurdities” (qtd. in Polhemus 29). Oliphant attributes this perceptive faculty to Jane Austen alone, yet I would contend that comic vision is one of Emma’s defining characteristics and a habit of mind that facilitates the novel’s educational project. Emma regularly demonstrates the ability as well as the inclination to see more than that “best face” her neighbors put forth. When Frank Churchill makes his first appearance, for example, Emma’s comic vision is immediately provoked at his professing to have had an intense interest in Highbury and a great curiosity to see the place. The narrator comments, “That he should never have been able to indulge so amiable a feeling before, passed suspiciously through Emma’s brain; but still if it were a falsehood, it was a pleasant one, and pleasantly handled” (*Emma* 123). Our heroine maintains polite silence in the face of Frank’s little bit of disingenuousness, yet her acknowledgment and internal derision of it are testimony to her ability to see a friend’s faults and to find humor in them. Another important aspect of comic vision is demonstrated in this scene through Emma’s generous evaluation of Frank’s manner, which immediately succeeds her more sarcastic thoughts. She reflects that Frank’s address “had no air of study or exaggeration about it” and that “He did really look and speak as if in a state of no common enjoyment” (*Emma* 123). The narration of these thoughts reveals that Emma’s good opinion of and burgeoning affection for Frank are not marred by her diversion at his faults. She can enjoy what is ridiculous and admire what is worthy in the same individual. Comic vision enables Emma and all of its other practitioners to recognize vice without completely obscuring virtue.

Comic vision allows Emma to perceive incompatible truths and to accept the notion that an individual’s character can rarely be described without the use of

contradictory terms. The growth and maturation of Emma's comic vision is an aspect of her education in uncertainty, and this perceptive faculty helps her recognize the complexity of truth. If our heroine does not grasp this lesson, she will live either as a blind or a dogmatic character, lacking discernment or charity. If Emma is unable to maintain the kind of clarity of vision she displays at the novel's opening, she will end up like Highbury's other women who are "disposed to commend, or not in the habit of judging" (*Emma* 183). Or, as is more likely, if Emma is unable remember a character's worth in the face of his or her folly, she will become a cynic with no more regard for the feelings of others than she displays on Box Hill. For in order to comprehend her acquaintances in Highbury Emma must hold opposites in tension and allow room in her understanding for the sublime and the ridiculous.

Harriet Smith is possibly the best example of a character who has both Emma's affection and her laughing censure. Emma is aware and appreciative of Harriet's good qualities; in fact, only Robert Martin may think more highly of Harriet than our heroine does. Yet Emma's good opinion does not prevent her from ascertaining and enjoying Harriet's frequent lapses into absurdity. For example, after informing her little friend of Mr. Elton's engagement, Emma is treated to a display of romantic seesawing in which Harriet laments the slighted Robert Martin until she remembers the vicar, whom she in turn laments until her mind is once again diverted. The narrator tells us, "had there been no pain to her friend, or reproach to herself, in the waverings of Harriet's mind, Emma would have been amused by its variations" (*Emma* 119). Emma's care for and interest in Harriet are obvious here (especially in her determination not to be entertained by Harriet's silliness), yet her devotion does not prevent Emma from perceiving both the

vacillations of Harriet's feelings and the comic potential inherent within them. For comic vision is a kind of double vision through which the viewer can see flaws in others without closing her eyes to their worth. It is a faculty that allows the mind to say "both/and" rather than "either/or" because it enables the subject to attest to seemingly incongruous truths simultaneously. Take for example the situations given above. Comic vision allows Emma to realize that Frank Churchill is *both* a teller of convenient and pleasant falsehoods *and* a good-hearted young man. She is able to recognize *both* Harriet's good qualities (strong principles, faithful heart) *and* her ridiculous propensity to "be always in love" (*Emma* 118-119).

In spite of the fact that Emma is one of the novel's most gifted practitioners of comic vision, hers is, at times, sadly limited. Emma's comic vision can easily reveal to her her object's secret flaws, but sometimes she cannot recall or once again perceive the object's beauty. The keenness of Emma's perception in regard to the absurdity of her neighbors is never in question (except, perhaps in the first part of her acquaintance with Mr. Elton). She is rarely dull, but sometimes she lacks generosity; sometimes she overlooks the good for the laughably bad. Our heroine has faith in the notion that absurdity lurks within even the most dignified characters; however, she doubts that real worth can be found in personalities dominated by the ridiculous. The text attempts to cure Emma of her prejudice by requiring that she see the virtue in Miss Bates.

Although Miss Bates' indefatigable loquacity and her absurd non sequiturs make her a target of Emma's stunted comic vision, she is a character whose goodness, decency, and worth are continually pointed out by the narrator as well as the other citizens of Highbury. When the narrator introduces her, she is called "a woman who no one named

without good-will” (*Emma* 12), and later the narrator explains that “It was [Miss Bates’] own universal good-will and contented temper” that recommended her so forcefully to her acquaintances (*Emma* 12). In spite of the fact that Emma pays lip service to Miss Bates’ goodness and doesn’t often disagree when people speak well of her, she is in essence blind to the good qualities of the older woman. Emma’s comic vision allows her to see Miss Bates’ faults and find a good deal of humor in them, but she does so without employing charity or mercy to work in concert with her sharp perception. Thereby, Emma overlooks her neighbor’s worth. For instance, when Mrs. Weston wonders aloud whether Mr. Knightley might be in love with Jane Fairfax, Emma’s envy is stirred against Jane, and her stunted comic vision is provoked against Miss Bates. Incredulous at Mrs. Weston’s suggestion, Emma paints a picture of Miss Bates as a resident of Mr. Knightley’s elegant home. She says:

To have her haunting the Abbey, and thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane?—‘So very kind and obliging!—But he had always been such a very kind neighbor!’ And then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother’s old petticoat. ‘Not that it was such a very old petticoat either—for still it would last a great while—and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong.’ (*Emma* 146)

Even Mrs. Weston, one of Emma’s most indulgent friends, reprimands our heroine for this harshly comic representation of Miss Bates. The response of her former governess is unsurprising when we recognize that everyone but Emma appears able to keep Miss Bates’ good qualities in mind in spite of their recognition of her faults. Even Frank



Churchill realizes that although Miss Bates' faults might be enjoyed, her goodness should not be forgotten. He says, "She is a woman that one may, that one *must* laugh at; but that one would not wish to slight" (*Emma* 169). When Emma asserts that "what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in [Miss Bates]," Mr. Knightley acknowledges the truth of her statement. Yet Mr. Knightley is also the character who valiantly defends Miss Bates' dignity when Emma abuses it on Box Hill.

Emma's apparent inability to laugh at herself throughout most of the text is a similarly grave limitation of her comic vision. Until the final chapters, Emma's self-understanding is humorless and rigid. In spite of her ability to find absurdity in others, she is loath to admit its existence in herself. For example, when Emma meets Mrs. Elton the narrator relates that Emma disapproves of her new acquaintance, in part, because "all her notions were drawn from one set of people, and one style of living" (*Emma* 176). While provinciality of mind is certainly a character flaw, it is not one we would expect to see earnestly censured by our heroine, who has never traveled more than fifty miles from her home. We cannot fault Emma for quickly apprehending the narrowness of Mrs. Elton's understanding. We can, however, fault her for censuring the cause of that narrowness without a wry glance at herself, acknowledging her own similar shortcoming. For we must wonder how our heroine can perceive a difference between herself and Mrs. Elton on this point, Emma having always lived in Highbury, ensconced in one small, closed circle of acquaintance. A lack of reflexive comic vision is part and parcel of another flaw that we, and the narrator, must attribute to Emma: that flaw is, of course, "a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (*Emma* 1). Emma's ego blinds her to her faults and the humor inherent in their absurdity. Yet Emma's inability to manifest

reflexive comic vision is more than just the result of an inflated ego. It is symptomatic of her inability to embrace contradictory ideas. In order to believe that she is worthy of respect or admiration Emma must suppress any suspicion that she is also foolish. There is no room, in Emma's narrow view of herself, for dignity and silliness to coexist.

In one of the novel's pivotal scenes, Miss Bates is held up as a model of self-reflexive comic vision. When Frank proclaims Emma's "demand" for something entertaining from each of her companions on Box Hill, Miss Bates responds with self-effacing humor. In offering up "Three things very dull indeed" she has a bit of fun at her own expense and acknowledges her loquacity. At the same time, she relies on the kindness and friendship of her neighbors as she asserts her worth by claiming a role in the contest. In this scene, we see Miss Bates doing what Emma cannot. Miss Bates displays a self-understanding that allows for the easy coexistence of pride and modesty. It makes room for dignity and foolishness. Thus, Emma's outburst on Box Hill is not only cruel. Through it she demonstrates a rejection of openness and an intolerance for self-effacing humor. When Miss Bates displays such, Emma reacts with ungenerous impatience and derision.

At the close of the novel we find evidence that our heroine is beginning to develop self-reflexive comic vision. As she contemplates her future with Mr. Knightley the narrator says:

It is remarkable, that Emma, in the many, very many, points of view in which she was now beginning to consider Donwell Abbey, was never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded. Think she must of

the possible difference to the poor little boy; and yet she only gave herself a saucy conscious smile about it, and found amusement in detecting the real cause of that violent dislike of Mr. Knightley's marrying Jane Fairfax, or any body else, which at the time she had wholly imputed to the amiable solicitude of the sister and the aunt. (*Emma* 295)

That "saucy conscious smile" is indicative of Emma's increasing ability to hold dissimilar notions in tension and to believe in the truth of two seemingly incompatible propositions. Here, we see Emma acknowledging her foolishness and her capacity for self-deception without relinquishing any claims on dignity or worth. Comic vision is a sort of three-dimensional perception that resists definitions and easy characterizations. Because comic vision prevents any single name from encompassing all the aspects of a character, it is a narratable trait and has the potential to teach our heroine about knowing her world.

Emma's friendship with Frank Churchill is another element of the text that requires Emma to be alive to the reality uncertainty. His constant use of irony, humor, and ambiguous language requires that Emma increase her fluency in these methods of communication, and his flattery, playfulness and frequent insincerities provoke the same in our heroine. His conversation excites her to say less or more than she should, and she often skirts the truth of the topic of their conversation, the truth that would, inevitably, consign it to silence. More importantly, however, Frank's double-dealing and secretiveness slowly expose Emma to the notion that the heart of another is sometimes impenetrable (especially when its truths are guarded by duplicity) and that to avoid making enormous interpretive errors we must abide in the uncertainty necessitated by other minds.

When Frank arrives in Highbury Emma makes her first foray into flirtation. The playfulness she engages in teaches her to make provisional judgments about the nature and significance of her relationship with the Frank and to act in spite of continuing uncertainty. The fact that Emma begins the novel in need of such training is apparent in the first chapters of volume two, where we see Emma resisting the idea of a flirtatious friendship without an erotic resolution. She imagines that Frank is in love with her and fancies that she returns his love. The narrator tells us that Emma forms “a thousand amusing schemes for the progress and close of their attachment” including “interesting dialogues” and “elegant letters” (*Emma* 171). We are quickly assured, however, that neither in Emma’s imaginings nor in real life will this relationship resolve into matrimony. The narrator attests to the fact that “the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was that she *refused him*” (*Emma* 171). Thus, this is a relationship that is destined, even in Emma’s imagination, to “subside into friendship” (*Emma* 171). Neither fulfillment nor consummation is possible for the Frank/Emma relationship. This notion is confirmed when Emma thinks, “[Frank’s] feelings are warm, but I can imagine them rather changeable.—Every consideration of the subject, in short, makes me thankful that my happiness is not more deeply involved.—I shall do very well again after a little while—and then, it will be a good thing over” (*Emma* 172). Here we see our heroine honestly and resolutely renouncing any idea of love for Frank Churchill.

Emma’s realization that she has no romantic desire for Frank does not diffuse the chemistry between the two characters, however. Neither does it eliminate Emma’s ability or desire to participate in the flirtation. In fact, their joking and play-acting increase in intensity after Emma renounces the young man. The Emma of Box Hill is, in one way at

least, a new creature demonstrating her increasing capacity to deal with uncertainty as well as her growing ability to abide by the text's ethic, which advocates an embracing of ambiguity and possibility. She does so by giving up any attempt to ascribe a particular meaning to her dalliance with Frank. At this point in the novel, we must acknowledge that Emma is better able to rest in the indeterminacy of her friendship with Frank and in the pleasure of their flirtation. Admittedly, Emma does create a love story pairing Frank with Harriet in order to relieve some of the strain of uncertainty. Yet this love story does not close off several possibilities for defining Emma's relation to the young man. By pairing Frank with her friend, Emma only confirms the prohibition on romance between the young man and herself. In spite of the love story she concocts she remains able to see herself alternately as Frank's unrivaled paragon ["Every distinguishing attention that could be paid, was paid to her" (*Emma* 241)], his selfless benefactress ["Will you choose a wife for me?—I am sure I should like anybody fixed on by you" (*Emma* 244)], and his partner in crime ["What shall we do to rouse them? Any nonsense will serve" (*Emma* 242)].

Sure of nothing but the fact that she is not in love with Frank, Emma carries on a flirtatious friendship with him before the eyes of everyone in her community. By doing so she demonstrates her increasing ability to contend with uncertainty. This is a relationship characterized by perpetual deferral of fulfillment and meaning, and the novelist does not attempt to eliminate it or diffuse its narratability at the close of the text. In the novel's penultimate chapter Emma is reunited with her friend for the first time since the revelation of their respective engagements. Regardless of the initial embarrassment and confusion which accompanies their meeting, the two young people

soon resume their former pursuits—they whisper to each other, indulge in private jokes, and make satirical observations. Minutes into their conversation, Frank brings up Mr. Dixon “with laughing eyes” (*Emma* 314). In spite of the narrator’s assertion that Emma “blushed, and forbade [the name’s] being pronounced in her hearing” (*Emma* 314), we tend to attribute to her some share in Churchill’s enjoyment of the old joke. For we have been witness to Emma’s teasing imperiousness, in which her forbidding signifies encouragement and her overt disapproval signals her enjoyment. Emma jibes at Churchill in the midst of his encomium on Jane’s complexion, reminding him that he did not always speak of his fiancée so highly. This prompts him to laugh “heartily” at the recollection of his strategic slights on Jane’s beauty, and we wonder how sorry he is that he behaved like an “impudent dog” (*Emma* 315). In spite of the novel’s impending conclusion, it seems possible to imagine these characters interacting in a similar manner weeks, even months hence, their heads together, indulging in witty banter while their more serious mates entertain the rest of the usual Highbury party. Emma’s ability to participate in this friendship creates a source of textual energy in the story that troubles the closure of the novel. Furthermore, Emma’s relation to Frank demonstrates the fact that she is no longer dependent on fixed formulations in her interactions with others. She can now enjoy Frank even though she knows their relationship will never be fulfilled or wholly defined.

The ending of the text does not do away with the narratable elements that comprise its middle. Emma must hold incompatible notions in tension perpetually without anticipating any point in time when unified and consistent knowledge will be made available. The significance of her relationships with characters such as Frank

Churchill is not fixed even as the novel closes, and she must continue to interact with individuals whose language and actions can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Uncertainty is never eliminated from the narrative, and truth ultimately proves itself unattainable. In contrast to what some critics may claim, the author does not bestow epistemological security on Emma by pairing her with Mr. Knightley. For certainty eludes our hero as well as our heroine. Some events in the novel do tend to unfold according to Mr. Knightley's predictions, and the text does vindicate some of his interpretations. Yet Knightley cannot be read as an allegorical figure embodying knowledge and moral clarity. A thorough analysis of the text demands that we interpret Knightley as a character bound by his humanity whose knowledge is obscured by his emotions and his prejudices and who is unable to achieve certainty. As we read *Emma*, we see Knightley acting and interpreting as a jealous lover, motivated not by sense or objectivity but by his passionate feelings for our heroine, and if we take note of Knightley's own investigative practices we see that he too is bound by his status as a limited knower.

The fact that the novel often endorses Knightley's point of view only signifies his extensive experience and broad knowledge of the world. Take for instance the intense disagreement between Emma and Knightley on the subject of Harriet Smith's marriageability. Emma has hopes that her friend will make an excellent match, while Mr. Knightley is convinced of the opposite. He proclaims:

Miss Harriet Smith may not find offers of marriage flow in so fast [as Emma expects they will], though she is a very pretty girl. Men of sense, whatever you may chuse to say, do not want silly wives. Men of family

would not be very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity—and most prudent men would be afraid of the inconvenience and disgrace they might be involved in, when the mystery of her parentage came to be revealed. (*Emma* 41)

Knightley's words are prophetic. The only offer of marriage Harriet receives subsequent to this discussion is the renewed appeal of Robert Martin. Knightley's accurate prediction regarding Harriet's fate is evidence of his long exposure to the minds of men, an advantage not open to Emma as a young, respectable woman from the upper class. His knowledge is a testament to his status as a man with the freedom to associate widely in his parish. Unlike Emma, Knightley anticipates Mr. Elton's rejection of Harriet as a possible love-interest, but as Marilyn Butler points out, Knightley is not deceived by Elton's fine speeches regarding Emma's young friend because he "knows him better in other contexts" (393). Emma's delusion that the vicar could fall in love with Harriet is due, in part, to Elton's "soft manner" with the two young ladies, which "is one of the falsehoods he assumes for the purpose of courting Emma" (Butler 393). Here again, Emma's status as a marriageable young woman handicaps her ability to perceive her world, while Knightley's status as an important and ubiquitous part of the Highbury community enhances his understanding of his environment.

On the other hand, Knightley's worldliness inhibits his ability to know. Because he has adopted the common prejudices of the time regarding class and lineage, Knightley has difficulty perceiving Harriet's worth and conceiving of the kind of man who would actually want to make her his wife. Knightley is wrong to say that Harriet is silly and that she is not worthy of a man of sense. These claims grow out of class prejudice rather



than any true knowledge. Knightley begins the novel ignorant of Harriet's good qualities, and only Emma's interest in the young lady prompts him to become acquainted with her. Until this point, he assumes that a poor parlor boarder and an illegitimate daughter could not be worth knowing. Furthermore, Knightley is incorrect to say that a prudent man or a man of family would not want to connect himself with Harriet, and he has the evidence of his own experience to contradict that assertion. Robert Martin, a character high in Knightley's estimation, has asked Harriet for her hand. Thus, we must believe that Knightley speaks out of haste and out of his own bias as he downplays Harriet's claims on a good husband. When he informs Emma of Harriet's impending marriage to Robert Martin, he admits that he was mistaken regarding the young lady's character. He says, "I am now very willing to grant you all Harriet's good qualities. . . from all my observations, I am convinced of her being an artless, amiable girl, with very good notions, very seriously good principles, and placing her happiness in the affections and utility of domestic life" (*Emma* 312).

In defense of her ambitious plans for Harriet, Emma says:

supposing her to be, as you describe her, only pretty and good-natured, let me tell you, that in the degree she possesses them, they are not trivial recommendations to the world in general, for she is, in fact, a beautiful girl, and must be thought so by ninety-nine people out of an hundred; and till it appears that men are much more philosophic on the subject of beauty than they are generally supposed; till they do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl, with such loveliness as Harriet, has a certainty of being admired and sought after. (*Emma* 40)

We must admit that Emma expresses a good deal of truth in this passage and correctly depicts the behavior of many a love-struck man. Undoubtedly, the reader could call up evidence from his or her own experience in support of Emma's argument. Moreover, we can recall cases from the Austen canon in which beauty or sexual attractiveness blinds a man to his lover's flaws, causing him to make an imprudent match. Mr. Bennet does as much in *Pride and Prejudice*, as does Thomas Bertram the elder in *Mansfield Park*. Furthermore, Catherine Morland's beloved brother is nearly lured into an unfortunate marriage by the lovely and wily Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*. Emma's argument that Harriet's beauty is a sufficient asset for attracting men to herself is so compelling that we might wonder why Knightley vehemently denies Emma's claim. I suggest that on some level Knightley acknowledges the power of a beautiful woman as well as his own desire to be blinded and overcome by that power. I contend that he rails against Emma's argument because her own charm threatens his sense and objectivity. Marilyn Butler asserts that Knightley is "balanced and analytical" in his judgments of Emma (387), but we must question the verity of such a statement when we remember Knightley's jealousy of Frank Churchill or his disappearance near the end of the novel when he believes Emma's behavior on Box Hill signals her upcoming union with Frank. In these instances we see Knightley being precipitous and emotional rather than balanced and analytical.

In fact, no other aspect of Mr. Knightley's character demonstrates the limits of his ability to perceive and understand more clearly than his passionate affection for Emma. As so often happens in lovers, Mr. Knightley's rationality is overthrown by his passion, and his objectivity is unseated by affection. For instance, we know that Knightley's

vehement disapproval of Frank Churchill does not stem from strict notions of filial piety or ideas about what it means to be resolute and responsible. Neither does he “take a dislike to [the] young man . . . only because he appeared to be of a different disposition from himself” (*Emma* 98). Instead, Mr. Knightley’s dislike for Frank is born when he sees the young man as a possible suitor for Emma, and it dies only when the possibility for a romance between the two is, in his mind, decisively closed off. In the third volume of the novel, the narrator points out the extent to which Knightley’s perceptions are tied to his passion. The narrator details the course of Knightley’s rapidly changing assessment of Frank’s character during the proposal scene: “He had found her agitated and low.—Frank Churchill was a villain.—He heard her declare that she never loved him.—Frank Churchill’s character was not desperate.—She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house; and if he could have thought of Frank Churchill then, he might have deemed him a very good sort of fellow” (*Emma* 284).

When he resolves to speak to Emma on the subject of an attachment between Frank and Jane, Knightley demonstrates his capacity for self-deception regarding matters of the heart. After an evening spent in the company of the three young people, Knightley’s suspicions are excited beyond his ability to be silent. The narrator says, “Knightley remained at Hartfield after all the rest, his thoughts full of what he had seen; so full, that when the candles came to assist his observations, he must—yes, he certainly must, as a friend—an anxious friend—give Emma some hint, ask her some question. He could not see her in a situation of such danger, without trying to preserve her. It was his duty” (*Emma* 228). In spite of (or perhaps because of) Mr. Knightley’s numerous mental assertions that he is moved to speak to Emma out of an unbiased friendship, it appears

clear that this confrontation is provoked by interested affection. His invocation of the notion of duty belies his true motive. After broaching the subject with our heroine, Knightley believes he sees signs that Emma is already enamored of Frank. Yet he persists in spite of this obstacle. As the narrator explains:

A variety of evils crossed his mind. Interference—fruitless interference. Emma’s confusion, and the acknowledged intimacy, seemed to declare her affection engaged. Yet he would speak. He owed it to her, to risk any thing that might be involved in an unwelcome interference, rather than her welfare; to encounter any thing, rather than the remembrance of neglect in such a case. (*Emma* 229)

Again, despite Knightley’s thoughts to the contrary, we are sure that he does not attempt to talk to Emma merely out of a concern for her welfare. There is latent self-interest at work.

Notwithstanding his reason’s subjection to love, Knightley often employs effective epistemological practices and exhibits an understanding of the limits of his perceptive abilities. For example, when he begins to suspect that Frank and Jane are attached, he observes them carefully, refusing to make premature conclusions. He does not allow any “ingenious and animating suspicion” to prompt him to create an elaborate, speculative tale about the couple as our heroine might (*Emma* 102). Instead, he consciously withholds judgment on the subject. After Knightley patiently observes the behavior of the two young people, the narrator tells us that he “could not persuade himself to think [certain signs] entirely void of meaning, however he might wish to escape any of Emma’s errors of imagination” (*Emma* 224). This statement is important

for two reasons. The first is the implication that Mr. Knightley attempts to persuade himself of the untruth of his speculations. Here we see him working through a deliberative process, testing the soundness of his ideas and being willing to jettison those that may be false. Secondly, this statement is significant because it demonstrates Mr. Knightley's acknowledges his capacity for making bad judgments. He has folly in sight and works to avoid it. Furthermore, when Knightley is thwarted in his attempt to gain any intelligence about Jane's feelings for Frank from a glance at her face, he demonstrates his willingness to endure the deferral of meaning. The narrator says, "There was not time for farther remark or explanation. The dream must be born with" (*Emma* 226). The "dream" referred to is, of course, the potentially unverifiable notion that Frank and Jane are in love. Here we see Knightley resigning himself to the persistence of uncertainty, yet he is not afraid to act in the face of it. He speaks to Emma in spite of his doubts because to wait would be to leave our heroine vulnerable to pain and to the wiles of Frank Churchill.

Knightley is sixteen years Emma's senior, so it seems appropriate that he demonstrate greater patience in the face of uncertainty than our heroine does. For he has spent more time coming to grips with the notion that he must endure suspense without rushing to judgment. As we read the novel we find evidence that Knightley has learned effective ways to contend with uncertainty, and we see that he is not paralyzed by the realization that he possesses partial knowledge. Like Esther Summerson of *Bleak House*, Knightley's view of knowledge is pragmatic and it allows him to act, make decisions, and develop relationships in spite of indeterminacy. But even this model knower is subject to self-deception and the power of his emotions. To deny this fact about Knightley is to

pluck him from the stream of shared experience and to place him somewhere above the common epistemological and moral plane. Unlike Mr. Bucket or the omniscient narrator of *Bleak House*, Knightley is not endowed with a perspective akin to a god's-eye-view from which he can foresee the story's outcome as well as all of Emma's missteps and errors. Instead, he is an impassioned participant in the novel's action rather than an objective observer or a moral judge. Knightley's presence in the novel does not provide the author with a way to remove or absorb the narratable elements of her text. Instead, it allows her to highlight certain limitations on knowledge, the most important of which is love.

Emma is not Knightley's pupil; both are under the tutelage of circumstance. We do see Mr. Knightley making use of more effective epistemological practices than our heroine is wont to employ, yet his status as a model knower is due merely to his long exposure to the partial knowledge, deferrals, and ambiguities of life. Emma becomes like Mr. Knightley only insofar as she adopts better methods of managing uncertainty. These methods allow Emma to practice a form of benevolent satire because they enhance her ability to hold in tension incompatible notions about herself and her neighbors. These methods also allow Emma to participate in a relationship with Frank Churchill, the meaning of which is perpetually deferred. Furthermore, Emma's education in uncertainty does not strip our heroine of her power as an imaginist, a satirist, or a flirt. Rather, her acknowledgment of ambiguity, and the complexity of truth prompts her to make use of these aspects of her character in productive rather than destructive ways. By embracing uncertainty, Emma realizes that her stories are fanciful creations, not facts or flawless perceptions of the secret inner life of those around her. Moreover, as Emma becomes

better able to endure ambiguity, her need to find one definitive formulation for each of her relationships dissipates significantly.

The narrator says, “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken” (*Emma* 283). Of course, this sentence explicitly refers to Emma’s decision to withhold the whole truth from Mr. Knightley regarding Harriet’s affection for him and her own role in engendering and sustaining that affection. I believe, however, that we can take this statement as a sort of maxim for the entire text and as a picture of the way the novelist understands her project as an author. Uncertainty abounds in this narrative world, and acquainting the heroine with this truth and preparing her to flourish in spite of it are two of the novel’s most important projects. Like *Bleak House*, *Emma* advocates a hermeneutical approach capable of functioning in absence of fixed meaning and an existential hardiness that can weather incertitude. The novel inculcates epistemological humility at the same time that it promises possibilities for further learning.

The novel does provide us with an ending, but it is of a different sort from that which Miller imagines. The ending of *Emma* is not one in which Austen attempts to extinguish all the elements of narratability that spring up at the end of the novel. Instead, Austen acknowledges uncertainty in the close of the narrative and points toward future struggles for her heroine. J. F. Burrows describes the self-knowledge that Emma attains by the end of the novel with lucidity and feeling, and I believe we can apply his words to the type of world-knowledge that Austen advocates. He says that knowledge “is not an absolute state to which a person attains in a single moment of insight,” but “is an erratic progress from one solution to a fresh problem, punctuated at best by moments of insight

but too often marked by lapses and regressions, a stumbling progress ending only when life ends” (qtd. in Hagan 548). The reality of incertitude that Burrows emphasizes requires that Emma be modest about her claims to knowledge, but it also enables her to indulge in and experiment with a multitude of interpretive options. Thus, we see that the restrictions on knowledge ratified and enforced by the text actually open up onto a world of possibilities.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

There is always something left to be told, in theses as well as in novels. In my treatment of *Emma*, considerations of the problems of narrative closure are somewhat sidelined in favor of an analysis of the narratable events and character traits that Austen uses to awaken her heroine to the uncertain nature of reality. The novel begins by depicting a protagonist who employs a poor and even delusive method for contending with ambiguity. Like Richard Carstone, Emma demands fixed meaning and transparency from her world. Unlike Richard, however, Emma does not feel the weight of the uncertainty with which she must contend. Her specious tales and her simplistic or erroneous interpretations provide her with a measure of security, while Richard is fully aware of the incertitude that pursues him. As the narrative progresses, Emma begins to employ a hermeneutical approach that allows for meaning's perpetual deferral. By the end of the novel she comes to resemble the model knower of *Bleak House*. Like Esther Summerson, Emma is able to hold contrary notions in tension and carry on relationships that defy definition.

Although Esther and Emma appear to be similar characters at the end of their respective stories, their struggles with uncertainty are quite different, and they highlight different dangers. Esther provides us with an example of what happens when a character is acted upon by circumstances and is forced to deal with persistent doubt without familial or social resources. Emma, by contrast, is a character of high social status supported by indulgent parental figures. These assets, for a time, facilitate Emma's

denial of uncertainty. For instance, her wealth, intelligence, and popularity awe Harriet Smith, and her status as a highly marriageable woman ensures that Mr. Elton will be amenable to any project or scheme shy of marrying her friend. She is also consistently able mold her father's opinions so that they are in accord with her desires. Emma is so seldom contradicted and her will is thwarted so infrequently that she actually begins the story believing that she can direct hearts and predict circumstances. The danger in Emma's case is that she will take her anxiety regarding uncertainty out on her neighbors. It is possible that the measures she employs to provide herself with security will adversely affect those around her. For example, when Emma is impatient with Jane Fairfax's opacity and reserve she imagines an illicit affair between Jane and Mr. Dixon in order to explain her reticent behavior. Emma creates a story in order to provide herself with an illusion of certainty, and in a moment of excitement she publicizes her indecent tale. Luckily (or unluckily depending on your point of view), she only shares her convictions with Jane's fiancé, who would not allow the story to become a wild rumor and tarnish Jane's reputation.

If Esther mismanaged uncertainty, the bad effects of her actions would be visited on her own head. Her status as a displaced orphan and housekeeper assures that this would be the case. The heroine of *Bleak House* would wreak havoc on herself through an inability to endure doubt. She is a central and essential part of many lives, so her poor epistemological practices would have some impact on her adoptive family. Yet the kind of impunity made available to Emma by her wealth and social standing are not open to Esther. The consequences Esther would face for demanding certainty from the world are depicted in the life of Richard Carstone. His dogged pursuit of fixed meaning enervates

him, and his family is forced to pay a high price for his choices as well. His wife loses her husband, and their child must grow up without a father. Only the vampiric Vholes benefits from Richard's destruction.

Richard's death and the metaphorical death of Jarndyce and Jarndyce occur in the final chapters of *Bleak House*. In light of this fact, one might argue that Dickens' use of death as a stopping point for his narrative contradicts the notion that closure is never the logical outgrowth of the narrative movement. The end of the Chancery suit once deemed interminable and the death of the character whose situation endowed him with the greatest potential for narratability: these seem to constitute a rational novelistic closure. This is a fallacious reading of the end of this novel, however, and representative of a poor understanding of closure in general. The novel's mysteries and unanswered questions do not die with Richard. Just as he leaves much undone at his death, the narrative leaves many things untold. For instance, we never learn John Jarndyce's real motivation for proposing marriage to Esther or who should have been awarded the estate in the Chancery case. Nor do we discover the details of Lady Dedlock's love affair with Captain Hawdon or the circumstances of Esther's birth. Thus, the novel's use of death only points out that novelistic endings, like the endings of lives, are necessary and sure.

Richard's death occurs near the end of the novel, and Esther's narrative begins as close to her own inauspicious birth as she can remember. This use of birth and death as starting and stopping points for the narrative reinforces the existential nature of Dickens' project. For *Bleak House* is, at least in part, a novel about living life and the choices one makes in order to live it well or poorly. Moreover, that the novel's structure is patterned after a human life prompts us to recognize certain similarities between the two. A life,

like a story, is a part of an unimaginably large whole made distinct in the stream of experience by its particular beginning and ending. Also, like a story's, a life's circumstances are partially determined before its inception, and its concerns and questions extend beyond its termination. As D. A. Miller explains in *Narrative and Its Discontents*, narratability arises out of lack. Ignorance, unfulfilled desire, an unattained goal: all of these circumstances propel and sustain narrative. Because the authors whose novels we have analyzed never completely purge these elements from their texts, the endings we read are expedient rather than rational. In fact, I would argue, in concert with Miller, that every ending is an expedient, that because uncertainty and unfulfilled desire are necessary parts of our lives they can not be successfully purged from our literature.

If narrative closure is an expedient, we must recognize that narrative is not a discrete whole or an entity unto itself. Rather, it is a construction, a part removed from a larger whole for a specific purpose. It is a span of time and action cordoned off from the apparently limitless expanse of human activity by a necessary though arbitrary end and an arbitrary beginning. *Bleak House* boldly highlights the requisite nature of the end of narrative and, in a similar, manner calls attention to the pragmatic nature of the beginning. Miller posits a "nonnarratable state of quiescence" which he says is "assumed by the novel before the beginning and supposedly recovered by it at the end" (ix). This peaceful state of origin contrasts with the story's narratable events that arise out of "disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency"(ix). We can be sure that Miller disputes the notion that quiescence is possible at the close of a narrative. It is not clear, however, whether he assumes that the novel is born out of a disruption in a usually placid environment. Notwithstanding Miller's notions on the subject, the scope of *Bleak House*

thwarts our ability to picture this quiescent state before the beginning. For it is ridiculous to imagine the whole of nineteenth-century London in dewy-eyed tranquillity awaiting the trouble and excitement that will descend when the story begins. By contrast, imagining this original period of tranquillity may be fairly easy as we read an Austen novel (although I would contend that Austen's beginnings are actually arbitrary constructions as well). We might see the young Miss Dashwoods of *Sense and Sensibility* living secure in the society of their parents at Norland, or we might picture the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* still innocent of the disruptions that the appearance of some "single man in possession of a good fortune" could effect in the life of a family. In a novel such as *Bleak House*, however, whose concerns are so far-reaching, whose realistic pretensions include the rendering of the imaginable Victorian cosmos, such a quiescent state is much more difficult or even impossible to conceive of. The novel's themes and very subject matter only increase this difficulty. In a novel centered on ideas of inheritance, an infinite regression of disorder, contagion, and sin is more easily conceivable than a pure and tranquil starting place.

The pairing of Emma and Knightley seems to promise happiness for these characters, although it does not create a tidy ending; instead, this marriage, which critics and reader burden with more than its share of importance, actually problematizes the novel's closure. The relationship between these two characters is vexed and remains troubled by a lack of proper definition. Keeping in mind all the elements of their interaction, it is difficult to find a coherent way to talk about their union. We might call Knightley a virtual brother turned lover when we think about his close connection to the Woodhouse family. In that same vein, we can imagine the sixteen-year-old Knightley

holding baby Emma like an older sibling. Finally, at the Highbury ball, we hear their thin assurances that they “are not really so much brother and sister” as to make dancing at all improper (*Emma* 216). As the only character in the novel to provide Emma with moral guidance or chastisement, Knightley stands in her father’s stead. Moreover, the narrator tells us that only Emma’s mother had the intellectual ability to master her daughter; and Mr. Knightley is aligned with maternal authority since he is the only other character to achieve any measure of success in pursuit of this endeavor. Thus, there is no single name that will encompass the different facets or possibilities inherent in this relationship.

Names for the various interactions between men and women abound, but all prove too exclusionary when it comes to Knightley and Emma. He is more than a mentor or friend, more than a lover or husband. This inability to define the Emma/Knightley relationship is a hindrance to the narrative’s closure. As D. A. Miller points out, naming is “the end of classical discourse” (45). The marriage of Emma and Knightley appears in the last chapter of the novel; yet it does not provide the text with closure because their relationship persists in its resistance to an appropriate name.

Few of the questions posed by *Bleak House* are answered at the novel’s conclusion; instead, they are allowed to linger even after the answers become irrelevant. Some mysteries are left unsolved as the text ends, while others are prolonged, deepened, and complicated until an inhuman perception arrives to unlock them. *Emma* is a different sort of novel. The major interpretive puzzles presented by the text are explained. The mystery of Jane Fairfax’s piano is eventually solved. The nature and the object of Frank Churchill’s attachment are made clear, and his erratic behavior is explained. Yet Austen’s text, like Dickens’, refuses to allow its characters to rest in any knowledge they

may have attained. New questions and new mysteries quickly succeed any conclusion at which the characters arrive. Although these two novels use vastly different methods to do so, both advocate fortitude, patience, and humility in the face of uncertainty.

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