

**‘every door might be Death’s Door’:  
Narrating Mortality in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853)**

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**Abstract**

*This essay examines the revealing intersection of death, architecture, and narration in Charles Dickens’s novel *Bleak House* and attempts to address the question of why a novel preoccupied with the human condition as mortal takes shape in architectural terms. To realise his realist exploration of human mortality, it is vital that Dickens employ a first-person narrator, a participant in this inevitability who must experience, process, and write about a life experience dominated by the knowledge of impending death. Consequently, Esther frequently narrates life and death in tandem via the material conduit of an architectural register of imagery. Yet Esther’s particular way of seeing, understanding, and writing about architecture has largely gone unremarked. Like Persephone descending to the Underworld, Esther enters, observes, and re-emerges from various death houses to write about her experience with her death-inflected architect’s eye. While the reading of Esther as gratefully cheerful, naïve, and uninteresting remains critically recurrent, this essay argues that Esther is in fact a dark figure, a harbinger of death who takes it upon herself to remind her readers incessantly of their own inescapable mortality.*

**Introduction**

Three years before the publication of his novel *Bleak House* (1853), Charles Dickens was given a *Report on a General Scheme for Extramural Sepulture* by his brother-in-law, Henry Austin. On receipt, he wrote to Austin in a letter dated 27 February 1850: ‘Many thanks for the Report, which is extraordinarily interesting. I began to read it last night in bed – and dreamed of putrefaction generally’.<sup>1</sup> Three months later, Dickens wrote again to Austin, excusing himself from direct involvement with the burial reform cause: ‘If I get fierce and antagonistic about burials, I can’t go back to Copperfield for hours and hours. This is really the sort of condition on which I hold my inventive powers; and I

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<sup>1</sup> K.J. Fielding and A.W. Brice, ‘*Bleak House* and the Graveyard’, in *Dickens the Craftsman: Strategies of Presentation*, ed. by Robert B. Partlow, Jr. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), pp. 115-139 (p. 124). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

can't get rid of it' (p. 124).<sup>2</sup> In addition to the *Report on a General Scheme for Extramural Sepulture*, the catalogue of Dickens's Gadshill library lists J.D. Parry's 1847 pamphlet, *Urban Burial: the London Churchyards, with Suggestions for joint Parochial Cemeteries in Town and Country* and G.A. Walker's *Lectures on the Condition of Metropolitan Grave Yards, four series*.<sup>3</sup> Dickens, while well-read on the topic of burial reform, found the subject distinctly disruptive to his writing.

A key figure in the debate concerning London's urgent need for burial reform was the sanitary reformer G.A. Walker. In his 1839 report, *Gatherings from Graveyards*, Walker surveys numerous churchyards and burying grounds and provides a scathing report on their condition. Walker calls for the 'ENTIRE REMOVAL OF THE DEAD FROM THE IMMEDIATE PROXIMITY OF THE LIVING'.<sup>4</sup> Walker's primary concerns are the desecration of interred bodies and the spread of diseases emanating from the burial ground:

Our best affections are involved, and call upon us to secure, by every contrivance, the peaceful repose of the departed; and, at the same time, to remove as far as possible from the living, THE PESTIFEROUS EXHALATIONS OF THE DEAD. (p. vii)<sup>5</sup>

This is a disturbing visual, suggesting the dead as active agents with the power to negatively impact the living. Walker proceeds to document, in horrific detail, the disastrous condition of London's overflowing burying grounds and churchyards. Frequently, the living and the dead quite literally cohabit, as illustrated by Walker's description of the burying ground in Portugal Street:

The effluvia from this ground, at certain periods, are so offensive, that persons living in the back of Clement's Lane are compelled to keep their windows closed; the walls even of the ground which adjoins the yards of those houses, are frequently seen reeking with fluid, which diffuses a most offensive smell. Who can wonder, then, that fever is here so prevalent and so triumphant? (p. 152)

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<sup>2</sup> 12 May 1850.

<sup>3</sup> J.H. Stonehouse, ed. *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> G.A. Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards* (London: Messrs. Longman and Company, 1839), p. 11. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Dickens later uses the word 'pestiferous' in *Bleak House* when describing the 'hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene' (p. 165).

In this passage and numerous others, Walker emphasises the vulnerability and permeability of the adjacent domestic residences. He includes first-hand accounts of sweating walls, atrocious smells, and spoiled food – the consequences of living near an active and poorly maintained burying ground. Walker also catalogues gruesome desecrations, including corpses being robbed of jewellery, the use of coffins as firewood, the selling of second hand ‘coffin furniture’ such as coffin nails (p. 199), and the gravedigger’s ‘management’ practices, which include breaking down coffins and removing partially decomposed bodies to make room for new internments (p. 198).<sup>6</sup> Thus, when Walker queries, ‘Whence this rude invasion of the tomb?’ (p. 189), he is concerned not only with the dead bodies saturating the ground and pressing in on domestic residences, but also the intentional unearthing of, and interference with, the dead by the living.

Walker depicts an untenable situation, a dual encroachment resulting from an unnatural proximity. He describes the ground beneath London as potent with activity, ‘overcharged with death’ (p. 148) and ‘literally overcharged with death’ (p. 170). The ground of Ewer St. Chapel is ‘literally surcharged with dead’ (p. 178), and nearby Deadman’s Place is ‘equally surcharged with dead’ (p. 178). Walker’s anxiety is palpable as he describes the ground level rising higher and higher around domestic habitations, at times even obscuring the view from kitchen windows. Many churchyards were filled to capacity and ‘The raising of the ground above its natural level often meant that accommodation for the living was separated from masses of decomposing corpses by damp and crumbling walls’.<sup>7</sup> Haewon Hwang suggests that in the nineteenth century, ‘the image of the underground as a resting place for the dead, separate from the living world above, was supplanted by a more porous image of pestilence and pollution’.<sup>8</sup> As we have seen from Walker, the ‘underground’ was too charged with activity to be considered a viable ‘resting place’. Instead, underground space was routinely unearthed and intruded upon. The tension between the living and the dead has also been noted by Samantha Matthews, who writes of the years following Walker’s report, ‘London’s population explosion necessarily extended to the

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<sup>6</sup> See also G. A. Walker’s follow-up work, *Burial-Ground Incendiarism* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1846), pp. 21-22 for an extended description of the chaotic burial ground ‘management’ practices as described by a working gravedigger.

<sup>7</sup> James Stevens Curl, *A Celebration of Death: An introduction to some of the buildings, monuments, and settings of funerary architecture in the Western European tradition* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1993), p. 286.

<sup>8</sup> Haewon Hwang, *London’s Underground Spaces: Representing the Victorian City, 1840-1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 121.

dead as well as the living, so that the two communities must hereafter compete for space, literally and psychically'.<sup>9</sup> The living now vied with the dead for real estate, and this was a struggle with an accompanying psychological impact, as the living were forced to confront the uncomfortable idea of being edged out by the dead.

Significantly, in formulating his argument against intramural burial, Walker relies on the language of habitation to delineate the realms of both the living and the dead. He writes of his regret that, in England, 'the putrefaction process emanating from those who have gone to their last homes is allowed to accumulate in the very midst of the habitations of the living' (p. 90). Walker is deeply disturbed that 'in a moral and Christian country, the abode of the dead is openly violated – its deposits are sacrilegiously disturbed, and ejected' (p. 188-9). For Walker, the dead remain residents of sorts, although he is clearly anxious to have them well-housed apart from the living. Despite being written a decade earlier, it is this aspect of Walker's report, the idea of death as a state of habitation and one that is vulnerable to intrusion, that resonates with Dickens's *Bleak House*. Dickens infuses *Bleak House* with both material and metaphorical architectural structures in tandem with materially dead bodies and imagery of metaphorical decay. He writes into being a London where death is always present, always pressing in on the characters and their built environment.<sup>10</sup> While the houses adjacent to cemeteries or burying grounds are permeated by the effluvia of death in a manner that mirrors the concerns vocalised by contemporary burial reformers, the language of death, decay, and organic disintegration also appears in Dickens's representation of domestic habitations removed from the cemetery. While Walker represents a dual domestic invasion – the living violating the dead and the dead violating the living – Dickens merges the states into one, through his metaphorical representation of tomb-like habitations for the living. Through the built-environment-as-tomb emphasis, Dickens takes the overflow and permeability danger illustrated by Walker to its metaphoric limit. Dickens blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead and, in doing so, emphasises the unavoidable reality of human mortality and the inevitability of enclosure within

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<sup>9</sup> Samantha Matthews, 'The London Necropolis: Suburban Cemeteries and the Necropolitan Imaginary' in *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London*, ed. by Lawrence Philips (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 257-281 (p. 270).

<sup>10</sup> Scholars have thoroughly addressed the various manifestations of death and decay in both Dickens's overall cannon and, most frequently, *Bleak House*. See Robert Alter, Haewon Hwang, Andrew Sanders, and Garrett Stewart.

some form of burial architecture. Architecture and the idea of habitation, then, are a key component of Dickens's realist representation of human mortality.

To fully realise his realist exploration of human mortality, it is vital that Dickens employ a first-person narrator, a mortal participant in this inevitability who must experience, process, and write about a life experience dominated by the knowledge of impending death. As an intimate participant in the life to death trajectory, Esther frequently narrates life and death in tandem via the material conduit of an architectural register of imagery. In doing so, Dickens reveals how significant architecture is to the human experience – an experience coloured by our mortal condition that takes shape in the novel through architecture and its association with the tomb. A focused reading of Esther's treatment of architecture reveals Dickens' intent in utilising a first-person narrator who is also the dexterous author of her own account: Esther has both an awareness of her own mortality and a sophisticated understanding of architecture as a powerful narrative vehicle for expressing her own subjectivity and psychological profile. Yet Esther's particular way of seeing, understanding, and writing about architecture has largely gone unremarked. Consequently, this essay focuses on the half of the novel narrated by Esther, arguing that Dickens deploys a heroine with a death-inflected architect's eye. While the historical context of the condition of London's burying grounds has certainly informed this essay, I will look particularly at Esther's role in representing this death-saturated built environment landscape and the extent to which Esther colours her life experience surrounded by architecture with imagery of death.

Esther has intimate knowledge of the ease in which our living architectural enclosures could become our dying ones. As she well knows, contagion is a powerful and relentless force, capable of permeating the homes of rich and poor alike. After hearing that the poor streetsweeper Jo has fallen ill, Esther and Charley bring him from the brickmaker's cottage back to Bleak House and attempt to nurse him back to health. Eventually, Jo absconds, and Charley falls ill. Esther indicates that once Charley is out of danger, 'I began to think the contagion of her illness was upon me'.<sup>11</sup> While Dickens does not name the disease Esther battles, the implication is that it is smallpox. Esther survives her brush with death, yet emerges from her illness with the marks of her ordeal visible on her face: she lives, but is forever outwardly changed. Her experience with contagious

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 463. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

disease marks both her appearance and her outlook as a narrator. Esther has looked into the abyss and seen the ultimate conclusion of every human life and, while she herself survives in this instance, she is fully cognisant of the fact that death cannot be outrun. As Jo says ““They dies everywhere. . . They dies more than they lives, according to what *I* see”” (p. 453).

Through Esther’s portion of the novel, Dickens explores the author’s role in experiencing loss and writing about death. Esther gives shape to her dark outlook through her accounts of contact with the built environment world of *Bleak House*, providing solidity to her representation of subjectivity. While scholars have increasingly discussed Dickens in terms of psychological realism (see Stolte, Pratt-Smith), Esther’s psychologically-revealing preoccupation with death, her defining characteristic, has yet to be fully explored. In this essay I argue for a reassessment of Esther and her role as narrator and first-time author based largely on the psychological profile Esther self-constructs in her description of the houses she encounters and her use of revealing architectural metaphors. Her death-inflected vision becomes an overriding feature of her character and, consequently, this essay provides new insight into Esther: while the understanding of Esther as gratingly cheerful, naïve, and uninteresting remains critically recurrent, I will offer a reading of Esther’s dark outlook and drive to document architectural structures as enclosures for the dead that stems from her knowledge of traumatic events to come. Far from vacuous and trite, Esther is a dark figure, a harbinger of death who takes it upon herself to remind her readers of their own inescapable mortality at every turn.

### **Esther’s Authorship and Narration**

Readers of *Bleak House* cannot fail to note the dizzying number of architectural interiors Dickens represents in his novel. The novel is architecturally profuse, and the built environment landscape is a mass of houses, businesses, doors to enter, and characters to encounter and leave behind. We follow Esther and the third-person narrator in and out of domestic residences and businesses, up grand staircases, and down into subterranean dwellings. Dickens constructs fifty-eight unique architectural interiors in *Bleak House*. Some of these structures are described by both Esther and the third-person narrator, but there are also views presented by one narrator alone. On my count, the third-person narrator describes seventeen interiors unseen by Esther, while Esther describes twenty-seven interiors unremarked by the third-person narrator. The reader is entirely

dependent on Esther's vision for an understanding of these twenty-seven architectural interiors, structures that include, significantly, both Bleak House and the new Bleak House introduced at the novel's close. These numbers indicate that Esther is responsible for describing roughly half of the novel's built environment. Despite this fact, even recent criticism continues to perpetuate the distinction between the two narrators in terms of expansive openness and domestic enclosure. Caroline Levine writes that '*Bleak House* is unusual in switching back and forth between an impersonal, detached, ironic, mobile, and knowledgeable narrator who speaks in the perpetual present tense and Esther Summerson's situated, immersed, naïve, past-tense account'.<sup>12</sup> In actuality, Dickens gives his readers an unusually mobile heroine with an eye for detail and an interest in writing architecture. Esther's architect's eye is a significant and overlooked aspect of her character: she meticulously describes the architectural structures she encounters, and her architectural reporting enhances the novel's realism as she foregrounds her direct experience of the novel's built environment.

Over the years, scholars have discussed the dual narration of *Bleak House*, expressing various views on Esther's role as partial narrator of the novel from frustration with her obfuscations to a more recent acknowledgement of Esther's significance and narrative contribution.<sup>13</sup> Yet focusing exclusively on the fact that the novel has two narrators can distract from the specific work that Esther accomplishes as a narrator and the unexpected literary skill that Dickens intentionally affords a self-avowed first-time author. I sympathise with Joseph Sawicki who expresses frustration that 'When Esther exhibits some narrative sophistication, critics have almost universally viewed it as a slip on Dickens's part'.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this dismissive treatment, Esther's writing has not always been taken seriously. For example, despite his generally positive reading of Esther's abilities as a narrator, Alex Zwerdling nevertheless suggests, 'We are asked to look very much *at* Esther rather than *through* her, to observe her actions, her fantasies, even her verbal mannerisms with great attention'.<sup>15</sup> But we should

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<sup>12</sup> Caroline Levine, 'Victorian Realism', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 84-106 (p. 100).

<sup>13</sup> Most recently, Tyson Stolte examines Esther's first-person narration in his 2022 book *Dickens and Victorian Psychology: Introspection, First-Person Narration, and the Mind*. See also Leonard W. Deen, Doris Stringham Delespinasse, John P. Frazee, M.E. Grenander, and Ellen Serlen.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Sawicki, "'The Mere Truth Won't Do": Esther as Narrator in *Bleak House*', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 17 (1987), 209-224 (p. 211).

<sup>15</sup> Alex Zwerdling, 'Esther Summerson Rehabilitated', *PMLA*, 88 (1973), 429-439 (p. 429).

not discount the idea of looking through Esther, particularly in terms of her detailed architectural reporting. This narrative feature substantially contributes to the realism of the novel's built environment. Esther details the architecture she encounters with both confidence and precision while also employing architectural metaphors to narrate her past: Esther leads her reader through the tangible architecture of the novel while also utilising architecture to its fullest metaphoric potential. She conceptualises her subjectivity in architectural terms and generates psychological realism through the act of writing. Thus, Esther reveals herself to the reader through the act of writing and, in particular, writing about architecture. At the same time, she accomplishes notable artistic work in her half of the novel, namely, employing architecture as a way to guide her reader through the novel's built environment as well as through the story she narrates, to convey character, introduce foreshadowing, describe intimate moments from her past, and illustrate her commitment to writing the human experience as a parade of enclosures tending to the grave.

Esther prioritises architectural realism in her narrative. Not only does she describe the rooms of Bleak House, she attempts to replicate their architectural layout, asking her readers to walk with her through this house precisely as she remembers it. To do so, she writes with confidence and architectural precision, meticulously documenting the number of steps up and down between rooms: 'Out of this room you went down two steps [...] Out of this you went up three steps' (p. 78). By providing such details as the exact number of stairs to go up and down to enter each room, Esther reveals her desire to convey Bleak House's three-dimensionality, making that structure navigable and knowable to her readers. Esther's authorial dedication to architectural realism is complicated by her additional goal of expressing her subjective experience within that architectural space. For example, when Esther describes Bleak House she walks her reader through the architectural blueprint of the house while simultaneously striving to recreate the initial feeling of disorientation she experienced upon her arrival: 'It was 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' (p. 78).<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Esther often reaches for architecture when detailing the pivotal moments of her life. When contagion infiltrates Bleak House and she falls gravely ill, Esther recalls that in her delirium:

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<sup>16</sup> Dickens uses the phrase 'pleasantly irregular' to describe Gad's Hill Place (Douglas-Fairhurst note 7).



‘I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again’ (p. 513). Esther describes her illness through the image of an insurmountable staircase as she architecturalises the otherwise hard-to-pin-down experience of being delirious.

Throughout the novel, architecture and narration are intimately bound. In his article ‘The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*’, Allan Prichard indicates that Dickens’s preoccupation with houses and architecture infiltrates even minute passing descriptions: ‘None of his other novels is so filled with images and symbols of houses as this one: in *Bleak House* a character cannot even gesture or a child play a game without some reference to houses’.<sup>17</sup> Here, Prichard refers to a moment when Esther recalls unsuccessfully searching for Peepy Jellyby: ‘The oyster shells he had been building a house with, were still in the passage, but he was nowhere discoverable’.<sup>18</sup> This scene represents architectural manipulation on a minute level, highlighting the human compulsion to design and construct architectural structures over which they have control. It is useful here to recall Peter Brooks and his idea of likening the efforts of Victorian realist authors to the delight in architectural play with scale models. Dickens compounds this idea by not only creating the architecturally realistic built environment world of *Bleak House* but also allowing his heroine to participate in this ‘form of play’ through her materially and metaphorically rich accounts of architecture in her written account.<sup>19</sup>

For Esther, this ‘form of play’ involves using architecture as a vehicle for representing an author’s subjectivity as well as a narrator’s darker preoccupations with death and loss. Writing years after the events she describes, and with full knowledge of events to come, including discovering her mother’s dead body, Esther purposefully infuses her architectural descriptions with imagery of death.<sup>20</sup> Esther’s death-inflected vision is an overriding feature of her character but one that has gone largely unremarked. Death surrounds Esther in a material sense with the overflowing cemeteries and the dead bodies she herself encounters, but it is also how Esther sees and navigates the world: Esther predominantly views houses as containers for the dead. *Bleak House* is certainty, as Tyson Stolte states, ‘a

<sup>17</sup> Allan Prichard, ‘The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45 (1991), 432-452 (p. 434).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 199.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p 3.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Esther’s use of foreshadowing see John O. Jordan and Doris Stringham Delespinasse.

novel relentlessly peering into the grave’, and a great deal of that peering is accomplished by Esther.<sup>21</sup> While scholarship tends to consider Esther a positive figure, ‘a paragon of all the virtues’<sup>22</sup> and a ‘specific locus’<sup>23</sup> for good in contrast to the third-person narrator, Esther has a darker side and carries death with her. Most notably, in the midst of writing about her life, Esther cannot ignore the fact that death hangs over each character, as well as herself. Consequently, death infiltrates her representation of almost every single architectural structure in her narrative.

### Narrating Mortality

From the very beginning of her narrative, Esther reveals her belief that architecture is intimately linked to the task of writing. Her architect’s eye assesses the material architecture of her built environment and understands how to digest and then refigure that architecture as a compelling literary device to tell her story. Esther also uses architecture as an emotional vehicle, writing her anxiety, grief, and frustration into the structures she narrates. By doing so, she reveals precisely how architecture lends itself to a form of psychological realist writing: Esther projects her knowledge of the events to come onto the architectural spaces she details for the reader. In this section I will explore Esther’s encounter with the pauper burying ground, as well as her Persephone-like role in entering, exiting, and narrating metaphoric house-tombs. I argue that Esther is at the centre of the psychological realist form depicted through architecture. She is a narrative force and a self-generating psychological portrait. Her psychology is death-inflected and her representation of the world around her is accordingly affected by her internal preoccupation with death and mortality. As a result, her psychological fixation with death is writ large on the built environment world of the novel she documents: her death vision unites with architecture and results in house-tombs. Writing architecture in this way is not just a reflection of death in the material world but about *how* Esther sees and *what* that particular way of seeing tells us about how she processes the events of her past.

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<sup>21</sup> Tyson Stolte, “‘Putrefaction Generally’: “Bleak House”, Victorian Psychology, and the Question of Bodily Matter”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 44.3 (2011), 402-423 (p. 402).

<sup>22</sup> M.E. Grenander, ‘The Mystery and the Moral: Point of View in Dickens’s *Bleak House*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 10.4 (1956), 301-305 (p. 305).

<sup>23</sup> Leonard W. Deen, ‘Style and Unity in *Bleak House*’, *Criticism*, 3.3 (1961), 206-218 (p. 214).

Raised by her godmother (her aunt), Esther grows up assuming culpability for her mother's death: "What did I do to her? How did I lose her?" (p. 26). With no information to go on, Esther sounds the depths of her memory for recollections of funerary customs: 'I had never worn a black frock . . . I had never been shown my mama's grave' (p. 25). After being told by her aunt that she should never have been born (p. 26), Esther articulates her sense of her problematic existence through architecture: '[I] felt so sensible of filling a place in her house which ought to have been empty' (p. 27). When her aunt dies, Esther (then fourteen) finally has a tangible death to locate within time and space. Shortly after her aunt's funeral, Esther buries her doll (p. 31), an act that could be read as symbolising the end of her youth and the beginning of adulthood but should also be regarded for what it is in fact – a death that she herself hastens and burial that she can control. Thus, Esther the author hints at her darker preoccupations from the very start of her account, knowing that she has many burial and death scenes to write before the close of her narrative.

Esther forcefully introduces the idea of the intimate relationship between person, architecture, and death when recalling a conversation between herself and her guardian, John Jarndyce. This conversation takes place early in the novel, in the fifth chapter narrated by Esther. During this conversation, Jarndyce describes certain houses caught up in the Chancery suit, saying,

It is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out; without a pane of glass, without so much as a window-frame, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust; the chimneys sinking in; the stone steps to every door (and every door might be Death's Door) turning stagnant green; the very crutches on which the ruins are propped, decaying. (pp. 109-110)<sup>24</sup>

By first describing these houses in terms of what they are missing, Jarndyce presents a stark portrait of houses divorced from all standard architectural features. In addition to their missing pieces, the houses appear to be dying, disintegrating, and returning to the earth. Simultaneously, the people associated with these properties waste away as they await the results of the seemingly endless lawsuit. The languishing houses powerfully convey misery and despair

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<sup>24</sup> Dickens later returns to the phrase 'Death's Door' in his essay 'Night Walks' published in *Uncommercial Traveller* (1869) when describing Newgate and 'that wicked little Debtor's Door – shutting tighter than any other door one ever saw – which has been Death's Door to so many' (p. 186).

while anticipating the unavoidable breakdown of the human bodies they enclose: the organic and the built are decaying hand in hand. As Robert Douglas-Fairhurst writes, ‘For Dickens, home is not only a physical shelter but an extension of the self, like an additional skin or an exoskeleton’. At the same time, ‘The biblical sense of “home” as a grave like the “long home” that Ecclesiastes tells us we are travelling towards, is one that often haunts Dickens’s fiction’.<sup>25</sup> So, in Douglas-Fairhurst’s understanding, domestic homes in Dickens’s novels are both ‘an extension of the self’ and a ‘grave’. Dickens capitalises on this association of bodies with houses and houses with tombs in *Bleak House*, never allowing his reader to forget about our impending death and the inevitability of removal from one ‘home’ to another. Jarndyce’s comment that ‘every door might be Death’s Door’ is multifaceted and provides an original way of thinking about our architectural surroundings. By representing the concept of death architecturally, Dickens encourages his readers to think about the experience of death as walking through a door from the realm of the living to the dead and entering a new phase of habitation. Esther finds this image so compelling that it recurs throughout her narrative as she repeatedly represents the houses she encounters over the course of the novel as metaphoric tombs. Merging the organic with the built, architecture and inhabitant, this is an early instance in the novel of Dickens’s (and Esther’s) incessant linking of architecture and death.

Dickens experiments with narrating life and death simultaneously by deploying a heroine who recounts entering and exiting death-laden architectural spaces. In fact, Esther moves seamlessly between the two realms, repeatedly walking her reader through Death’s Doors and returning to write about her experience. Her narrative choices indicate that she considers herself to be a Persephone-like-figure, inhabiting and moving through the worlds of both the living and the dead. She delves into the realm of the dead by entering numerous architectural enclosures containing the deceased or the dying (her aunt, the brickmaker’s baby, Jo, Richard) and returns unscathed to document what she has seen. Scholars have certainly noted Esther’s last name, Summerson, in the context of her bright and cheerful nature. For example, Lynn Cain writes in *Dickens, Family, Authorship: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Kinship and Creativity* (2008) that Esther’s ‘surname phonetically represents her as a maternal Persephone who will bring back summer and sunshine to the bleak, wintry

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 244.

landscape of Victorian England'.<sup>26</sup> But Esther as a Persephone figure with sustained contact with the realm of the dead has gone unremarked.<sup>27</sup> Throughout her narrative, Esther presents creative variations of the idea that 'every door could be Death's Door', repeatedly architecturalising her representation of death and consequently employing architecture as a key component of enhancing Dickens's realist representation of human mortality.

For Esther, the domestic architecture she encounters represents anticipating tombs and unavoidable enclosures for the dead and she expresses this fact directly in her narrative. Early in the novel, Esther accompanies Mrs Pardiggle on an uncomfortable visit to the brickmaker's cottage. The angry brickmaker shouts at the obnoxious do-gooder Mrs Pardiggle, saying of his cottage 'Yes, it is dirty – its nat'rally dirty, and its nat'rally unwholesome; and we've had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides' (p. 121). Chris Brooks writes of the spread of disease at this time, 'In the single rooms occupied by working-class families, the dead were literally, not metaphorically, domesticated, and continuity between the living and dead was forged not by affection but infection'.<sup>28</sup> Esther understands that contagion has permeated this home where the living and dead now cohabitate.<sup>29</sup>

Esther skilfully utilises architecture as a vehicle for foreshadowing, including two death-tinged descriptions of the architectural enclosures inhabited by her parents prior to their death and imprinting her grief onto these structures. Esther briefly glances into the room that belonged, unbeknownst to her, to her father. Looking in, she recalls, 'A sad and desolate place it was; a gloomy, sorrowful place, that gave me a strange sensation of mournfulness and even dread' (p. 214). Without giving away the mystery surrounding her parentage, Esther expresses the sorrow of never knowing her father. Similarly, Esther infuses her lengthy description of Chesney Wold's exterior with images of tranquil peace

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<sup>26</sup> Lynn Cain, *Dickens, Family, Authorship: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Kinship and Creativity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), p. 145.

<sup>27</sup> For a look at later literary heroines with connections to Persephone, see Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Chris Brooks, *Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery* (Exeter: Wheaton Publishers Ltd., 1989), p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> For a full account of death and burial customs through the centuries, see Thomas W. Laqueur's book, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, particularly the section 'Putting the Dead in their Place: Pauper Funerals, Burials, and Reburials' in Chapter 5.

and ‘undisturbed repose’ (p. 265), words with intrinsic death associations. Esther cannot divorce her knowledge of her mother’s premature death, and the trauma of discovering her lifeless and exposed body, from her description of her mother’s home.

Esther’s use of architecture as a vehicle for foreshadowing is perhaps the most insistent when she indicates that her friend Richard’s fatal association with his lawyer has infiltrated his lodgings. When Esther and Ada visit Richard, ‘we came to Richard’s name in great white letters on a hearse-like panel’ (p. 724). Esther notes the ‘musty rotting silence of the house’ (p. 730) and recalls, ‘I put my lips to the hearse-like panel of the door’ (p. 730). Esther’s narrative method ensures that readers cannot fail to note that Esther’s foreknowledge of events colours her vision of the architecture surrounding Richard. Here, at the end of the novel, Esther deploys these death metaphors with creative confidence, utilising architecture to its fullest metaphoric potential and revealing to the reader that her portion of the narrative is intimate and psychologically revealing. Esther’s death-inflected vision, where the architecture of the past becomes mutable, highlights Dickens’s aim of psychological realism for his novel.

At the climax of the novel, Esther learns that her mother has been alive all these years but, after a wild night of frantic searching, ultimately discovers Lady Dedlock’s dead body. Esther’s experience of locating her mother’s body at the pauper burying ground results in the death-infused representation of architecture throughout her narrative. The memory of discovering Lady Dedlock’s corpse is foundational across her written account, as Esther anticipates the psychological impact of writing this moment. After tracking Lady Dedlock through the city, Esther and Inspector Bucket eventually come to the burying ground where Captain Hawdon was previously interred.<sup>30</sup> It is here that Esther discovers her mother’s dead body and she recalls, ‘She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature’ (p. 847). The surrounding houses inadequately shelter her mother’s body which, unburied, mocks the typical practice of shallow burying ground internments. Esther indicates that an unburied body jars with human feeling and activates the desire to enclose and protect.

Esther’s account of this moment of discovery is deeply personal, yet her description of the burying ground also encapsulates many of G.A. Walker’s key

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<sup>30</sup> In a 4 April 1868 letter to Miss Palfrey, Dickens indicates that the burying ground he wrote of in *Bleak House* had its origin in St. Martins-in-the-Fields: ‘I do not remember that the graveyard is accessible from the street now, but when I was a boy it was to be got at by a low covered passage under a house, and was guarded by a rusty iron gate. In that churchyard I long afterwards buried the “Nemo” of Bleak House’ (Dexter 624).

concerns. Like Walker, Esther draws attention to the unhealthy proximity of the living to the decomposing dead, writing,

The gate was closed. Beyond it, was a burial-ground – a dreadful spot in which the night was very slowly stirring; but where I could dimly see heaps of dishonored graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses, with a few dull lights in their windows, and on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease. (p. 844)<sup>31</sup>

For those living around the burying ground, the gate cannot block out the encroaching bodies or the constant, tangible reminder of human mortality as bodies permeate the domestic homes and the organic and the built decompose in tandem. In fact, there is a distinct futility to the gate, as it cannot protect the dead from desecration or the living from the spread of disease. Deborah Lutz discusses the movement of cemeteries into towns in *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2015), writing that ‘Gradually corpses came to inhabit areas adjacent to living spaces, as if dying might mean simply slipping into the next room’.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Dickens frames his portrait of the burying ground in *Bleak House* in corporeal rather than spiritual terms: bodies are removed from the house to the cemetery yet return to permeate the surrounding residences. Louise Henson suggests that Dickens and his *Household Words* contributors

utilized popular folk beliefs about the return of the dead and produced a new kind of ghost story in which death led to a sinister resurrection. Rising from their graves in the form of harmful miasma, the dead pollute the air, permeate the wells, and bring disease and death to the living.<sup>33</sup>

Citing a study about London residents’ exposure to poisonous gas as a result of overcrowded burial areas, Henson writes that ultimately, ‘The miasma hypothesis suggested that the physical traces of the dead were in the very air, and literally present in the buildings they were supposed to haunt’ (p. 13). Dickens embraces this disturbing concept of the dead permeating architecture. It provides a compelling way to think about human mortality as the dead ‘live on’ within

<sup>31</sup> The third person narrator has previously referred to the cemetery as ‘hemmed-in’ (p. 165).

<sup>32</sup> Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> Louise Henson, “Phantoms Arising from the Scenes of Our Too-Long Neglect”: Charles Dickens, Victorian Chemistry, and the Folklore of the Ghost’, *Victorian Review*, 26.1 (2000), 6-23 (pp. 11-12). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

architecture and assume a second residence in the architecture surrounding their burial place. Dickens illustrates the potential dangers of comingling the living with the dead and Andrew Sanders puts Dickens's novel on par with Edwin Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* (1842) for its impact on sanitary reform. Sanders writes, 'By association at least, the dark church-yard where Captain Hawdon is buried is assumed to be a breeder to the disease which Tom propagates. It serves Dickens as an equally forceful reminder of the intimate relationship between the living and the dead'.<sup>34</sup> The burying ground is surrounded with houses, 'filthy' from their unavoidable contact with the dead. Consequently, the living and the dead meet in the 'intimate' space of domestic interiors permeated by the effluvia of bodily decomposition. Dickens certainly represents the living and the dead as connected through the spread of contagion but also suggests a fluid relationship where the living and the dead connect via architecture.<sup>35</sup>

Architecture, death, subjectivity, and narration intersect as Esther describes the houses encircling the burying ground containing the interred body of her father and the exposed body of her mother. Years later, writing this scene with her confident architect's eye, Esther must think about where her parents currently reside. Are they nestled safely in the ground, or have they permeated the surrounding buildings? Will they stay where they are placed or be removed by an unknown hand? Are they in the air and inhalable? Esther exhibits the psychological impact accompanying this understanding of the dead exerting their agency as migratory figures infiltrating the air or potentially cohabitating with the living in material architecture. This is an uncomfortable reality and Esther clearly does not enjoy writing this part of her history, twice repeating the phrase 'I proceed to other passages in my narrative' (p. 847). Esther drags her mind forward, away from these upsetting memories by the act of writing. This is the psychological impact of narrating a parent's death that is only possible with a first-person narrator, as Dickens suggests that a writer makes themselves known even through their concealments and instinctive attempts to avoid pain. Esther's authorial process involves projecting and foreshadowing loss via architecture and then moving on quickly after recounting the actual death scene.

Throughout Esther's narrative, Dickens reminds the reader repeatedly of the author's prerogative to include or excise. Just as Esther uses accelerated

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 148.

<sup>35</sup> Architects and landscape designers also expressed interest in mediating this intersection of the organic and the built, the body and the monument. See J.A. Picton, 'On Cemeteries' *Architectural Magazine* (September 1837).



spacing to describe the death of her mother, she slows down and is self-reflective on happier occasions. For example, ‘Reluctantly’ describing praise from her friends, Esther states, ‘I must write it, even if I rub it out again, because it gives me so much pleasure’ (p. 448). In this passage Dickens alludes to the drafting process and the fact that an author might write countless pages that never reach the reader’s eyes. He highlights Esther’s narrative authority by making the reader wonder what else she might have ‘rubbed out’. Esther clearly takes pleasure in holding back relevant information, yet later admits her omissions, a technique that draws attention to her narrative authority while also bringing her emotional preoccupations into stark relief.

Esther describes the burying ground as a space defying barriers or boundaries, a chaotic, surging mass of disease and decay, yet the contrasting form of internment, burial in a mausoleum, also makes a prominent appearance in the novel. In fact, death and architecture meet perfectly in the built structure of the mausoleum.<sup>36</sup> It is a structure that mimics aspects of traditional domestic architecture with its doors, windows, and steps, familiar features that suggest an attempt to assert order over chaos, to provide texture and tangibility to an unknowable experience.<sup>37</sup> Dickens unites these two burial option extremes by having Lady Dedlock, in effect, experience both. In *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock’s body is removed from the burying ground and deposited in the Dedlock family mausoleum. While she had attempted to escape entirely from the architecture of Chesney Wold and join Captain Hawdon in the wild open chaos of the pauper burying ground, she is returned to her expected place. Her body will not be allowed to decompose in the soil and will instead remain a tangible object, architecturally enclosed. In his article, ‘Dickens and the Burial of the Dead’ (2005) Alan Shelston writes of the contrast between Captain Hawdon’s unmarked grave and Lady Dedlock’s mausoleum: ‘Two of the three final illustrations of *Bleak House* are of these locations: they remind us, finally and emphatically, that in their deaths the Victorians were very much divided’.<sup>38</sup> Dickens, though, has

<sup>36</sup> In his book, *Architecture and the After-Life* (1991), Howard Colvin describes the transition of prehistoric tombs from subterranean mounds to mausoleums.

<sup>37</sup> James Stevens Curl discusses the architectural history of mausolea and their increasing popularity in the nineteenth century in *A Celebration of Death* (1993). See also Curl’s book, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (1972) for a detailed look at Victorian funeral customs and Patricia Jalland’s book, *Death in the Victorian Family* (1996), for all aspects of dying in the Victorian family.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Shelston, ‘Dickens and the Burial of the Dead’, *Babylon or New Jerusalem? Perceptions of the City in Literature*, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Villani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 77-92 (p. 78).

been at pains to represent the impossibility of total division, especially in terms of the spread of disease. While I certainly agree with Shelston that the architecture of internment varied greatly according to wealth and social status, I think that it is significant that Lady Dedlock attempts to bridge the divide and cross over, seeking the death and, by extension, the burial of her own choosing: Lady Dedlock had previously taken a guided tour of the burying ground, led by the street sweeper Jo, and was fully cognisant of the horrors occurring there (p. 240). While she is overruled in death and ultimately carted back to the mausoleum, she dies on her own terms while simultaneously making a remarkable and defiant statement about the choices she has made in her life.<sup>39</sup>

Esther's portrayal of her life experience is intrinsically coloured by death expectations. She cannot write about her life without the shadow of death creeping in, even when describing her own avowed happiness with her husband and two daughters. Esther recalls her first vision of the New Bleak House, writing that it was 'a cottage, quite a rustic cottage of doll's rooms' (p. 888). At this moment the novel comes full circle around dolls as we recall Esther's confession that she buried her own doll before departing her aunt's house (p. 31). What then does this dollhouse image say about how Esther thinks about her own ending? I find that by describing the New Bleak House in these terms, Esther is writing her own death scene. She dies for the reader before her actual death, and we follow her into the New Bleak House but no further. Esther writes herself into this final space and then concludes her narrative on a tangent, abruptly severing her connection with the reader. The last words of the novel read as last words in the most definitive sense: 'they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing – ' (p. 914).

The final words of the novel also represent the death of Esther's vocation. She has answered the call to write, even though from early in the novel Esther reveals that she is unsure of her intended readership. This is an unusual position for any author and one she reiterates at the conclusion of the novel:

The few words that I have to add to what I have written, are soon penned; then I, and the unknown friend to whom I write, will part forever. Not without much dear remembrance on my side. Not without some, I hope, on his or hers. (p. 910)

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<sup>39</sup> See Fred Kaplan for a discussion of how Dickens's own burial wishes were ignored.

By mentioning the unknown gender of her reader, Esther is specific about the mystery of her imagined readership. Is this ‘unknown friend’ intended to indicate the organiser of the project or to denote any reader who later encounters her writing? Despite not knowing her readers, Esther says that she will maintain ‘much dear remembrance on my side’, a comment that by extension seems to apply more to the act of writing and the work in which she has been engaged. Esther has certainly enjoyed her task, but that task is now complete, and Esther gives no indication that writing will be a part of her life in the future. This one-time opportunity raises the stakes for Esther: she must write herself into the fabric of this narrative now or never, and this knowledge results in a distillation of her subjectivity.

Esther organises her narrative as a tour through various Death’s Doors and consequently reveals her dark vision of the architecture she encounters. From the unique structure of Bleak House to the grandeur of Chesney Wold, Nemo’s abandoned room to Vohles’s office, everything appears funereal to Esther. By building up these death-inflected architectural enclosures for her reader, Esther simultaneously expresses qualities of her own mental interior and psychological health. Dickens actively turns to architecture as a psychological intermediary and allows his heroine to construct her own psychological profile through her representation of architecture in her narrative.

### **Conclusion**

In his exploration of the psychological impact of mortality on authorship, Dickens deploys a narrator with an interest in penetrating the house of the dead: Esther enters, encounters, observes, and re-emerges from various death houses to write about her experiences. For Esther, there is something enlivening about these brushes with death, and they have a distinct creative impact on the novel. After discovering her mother’s body surrounded by houses but nevertheless exposed, Esther turns to write a narrative saturated with architectural detail. The texture and tangibility of architecture provides her with the material vehicle to describe character, represent psychological health, foreshadow, and assert narrative authority. Ultimately, though, what underlies the majority of these architectural descriptions is the sense that Esther strives to represent the inevitability of death and burial and the accompanying psychological impact of this knowledge. It is essential to Dickens’s realist portrayal of human mortality that he employs a narrator who, as a self-aware participant in this trajectory, endeavours to write

about this fact even as she represents architectural structures temporarily animated by their inhabitant. Esther links the domestic home with the tomb, the tomb with the home, and relentlessly reminds her reader that ‘every door might be Death’s Door’.

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