

Kay Young, “Wounded by Mystery’: Dickens and Attachment Theory.” *English* 61 (2012): 234-247.

In this stimulating article, Kay Young explores the identity, self-awareness and psychic life of Esther Summerson in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) via Attachment Theory. For Young, Esther’s guilt, shame and crises of identity flow from the wound of having had no mother. Esther suffers a traumatising upbringing at the hands of her unloving godmother who provides her with only scanty, censoring descriptions of her origins. Young argues that Esther’s character articulates and endures the painful “*psychic experience of feeling unattached*” (237), of having forgone the primary, ideally loving attachment that secures the growth of an assured selfhood. With no introjected mother to answer the primary question, ‘Who am I?’ Esther confronts a double mystery: the identity of her lost mother and the less resolvable enigma of her unknown and unknowable self.

With its underpinnings in nineteenth-century neurophysiology, Freudian psychoanalysis foregrounds the biological and orientates psychological life around the physical drives. However, Freud also explored the psyche in terms of objects, incorporation and introjection, thus facilitating the development of overlapping theories of object relations, attachment and relationality. According to these approaches, which have largely supplanted Freud’s drive model, our earliest attachments form the basis of mental life via a complex, on-going intra-psychic mediation between the external and internal. Consequently, Attachment Theory’s primary exponents – John Bowlby, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott – shifted attention from father-son rivalry to (equally fraught) mother-infant attachment, while emphasising intersubjectivity, affect and lived experience.

Young opens with Freud’s foundational 1917 paper “Mourning and Melancholia”. Here, Freud argues that loss can instigate “a fundamental cleavage” (237) within the self with the ego, which is identified with the lost loved one, becoming a “forsaken object.” Young argues that Esther has undergone such a bifurcation and is “mourning for her *self*” (238). Bereaved infants, such as Esther, are haunted by an “absent memory” (239) and Young describes how Esther experiences a different, unthinking way of knowing her lost mother. If Esther famously, self-deprecatingly and, perhaps, disingenuously opens her narrative with “I know I am not clever,” Young posits that “what Esther knows is *beyond* clever – remarkably, she knows what she has not known” (246). Thus, although urged to forget, Esther intuitively recognises Lady Dedlock as her mother.

Young analyses Esther’s relationship with her godmother, deploying the psychotherapeutic notion of ‘malattunement’, by which the primary caregiver is unable, or unwilling, to provide the infant with a securing love. With her evangelicalism, which only envisages Esther’s origins as shameful, Esther’s godmother holds her “in a state of detachment, not just to herself as the ‘mother’ figure, but to Esther’s self as a person” (241). Young cites the analyst Robert Stolorow, who argues that, without the “affect-integrating capacity” of the soothing caregiver, painful and frightening feelings overwhelm the infant, while she develops an unconscious certainty that her rage and unfulfilled yearnings towards the deficient caregiver are manifestations of innate badness. Esther’s conviction that she is irremediably defective is sublimated into her willed embodiment of the “industrious, content, and kind” (246) angel of the home.

Dickens's coterie of orphans, mistreated children and woeful caregivers certainly seem ripe for the insights of relational psychoanalysis. For Young, *Bleak House* anticipates and confirms "the significance of the mother-child relation to identity formation" (237). However, we do not necessarily require the occasionally banal insights from relational psychoanalysis to appreciate that Esther's harsh early life has sculpted a personality marked by self-abnegation and compensatory caregiving. Furthermore, Young's analysis perhaps underappreciates that Esther is more insightful, critical and self-reflexive than her own narrative persona (consciously?) reveals. Psychoanalysing Dickens's characters also assumes a high level of mimetic realism in Dickens's work, downplaying his melodramatic representation of character and locating in his fiction universal psychological truths that 'prove' the insights of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic accounts also tend to foreground (and pathologise) the individual psyche, neglecting historical, social and cultural determinants; Esther's 'malattunement' is, arguably, densely interwoven with historically particular socio-sexual norms. Indeed, the validity of universalising applications of psychoanalytic ideas might be queried here. While psychoanalysis offers a rich, imaginative mode for understanding Dickens's characters, it may be more useful for scholars working in the field of literature and science to excavate the medico-scientific and literary-artistic contexts in which he developed his representations of the human mind. Juliet John, for example, has persuasively argued that Dickens's use of a melodramatic aesthetics precludes the sort of depth psychology that is the foundation of psychoanalysis. Dickens's work, in other words, may actually challenge and undo some of the assumptions that underpin psychoanalysis, complicating its supposed universality. Despite these ongoing critical debates, this well-crafted, intelligent and insightful article usefully expands psychoanalytic and feminist accounts of loss, attachment and identity in Dickens's novels, while making a stimulating contribution to those modes of critical analysis.

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