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**‘What connexion can there be?’:  
The Freudian and The Environmental  
Uncanny in Dickens’s *Bleak House***

**Supervisor**

Prof. Shaul Bassi

**Assistant supervisor**

Prof. Flavio Gregori

**Graduand**

Mattia Omiccioli  
871942

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the interconnection between the psychoanalytical and environmental uncanny in the mother-and-daughter plot of *Bleak House*. The underlying theoretical framework focuses on the uncanny as theorised by Sigmund Freud (1919) and, in environmental terms, by Amitav Ghosh (2016), and also considers some notions helpful to situate this concept within the broader picture of psychoanalytical and environmental studies. This work is divided in four chapters: the first introduces the uncanny, focuses on Dickens's life around the early 1850s, and on the environmental condition of mid-nineteenth-century England. The dichotomy between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* set in Freud's essay is introduced, and the uncanny is compared to the Structural Model of the Psyche. The environmental uncanny is studied in relation to Franco Moretti's fillers, descriptions of the everyday which pervade the narrative with a pattern of regularity. Their interplay is an essential condition to understand environmental agency. Lastly, the environmental and Freudian uncanny are compared. The second chapter analyses Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson in the respective introductory chapters. This chapter is built around André Green's 'Dead Mother complex', the environmental characterisation of Lady Dedlock and Chesney Wold, Esther's childhood memories and the perception of her surroundings. The third chapter draws a common framework between environmental and Freudian uncanny in the first meeting between the two women. Moreover, it offers some insights on the role of environmental agency in Esther's disfiguration, and focuses on the uncanny significance of the mother-and-daughter reunion, most importantly by comparing Esther's scarred face to the Lady's. The fourth chapter analyses the role of moon and coldness in shaping Lady Dedlock's (un)maternal attitude, and in Esther's climatic quest for her mother.

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the relationship between the Freudian and the environmental uncanny in the mother-and-daughter plot of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, by framing them in the broader intersection between psychoanalytic and environmental studies. The third-person narrator wonders in Chapter 16:

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom [...]? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! <sup>1</sup>

The connection is multi-faceted, it can be explored in terms of social class, because that chapter is based on the Tom-All-Alone's slum, and witnesses the upper-class Lady Dedlock asking information about her lover's pauper grave to Jo, a debased human being. The connection relates to places, as in the novel the urban city, London, differs from the Dedlocks's Lincolnshire mansion, Chesney Wold. The connection that this dissertation aims to draw pertains to apparently different fields: on one hand, a psychoanalytic approach to the mother-and-daughter relation between Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson; on the other, the way this bond is shaped by the environment. Merging the two fields with each other is a challenging task, at least because of two reasons: first, *Bleak House* has been analysed for decades under a psychoanalytic lens; secondly, as Cheryl Glotfelty argued in 1996, twentieth-century criticism was enormously focused on class, race, and gender, leaving no comprehensive approach to an ecological study of literature.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, ecocritical approaches to the Victorian age are only a very recent development and, as Mazzeno and Morrison stated in 2016, this field is still being

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 197. Subsequent references to this work will appear in brackets in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Glotfelty, 'Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. xv-xxxvii (p.xv).

shaped.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a common thread underlying the maternal plot in *Bleak House* from a psychoanalytic and environmental perspective: the uncanny, as theorised by Sigmund Freud in 1919, and by Amitav Ghosh in 2016. Moreover, this originates a web of connections between these critical fields, because some approaches belonging to psychoanalysis can be related to certain environmental features, and vice versa: for instance, André Green's 'Dead Mother complex', which depicts the bond between an emotionally dead mother and her child, can be linked to the cold and still environment that permeates Lady Dedlock and Chesney Wold.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, environmental agency, for instance that arising from pollution and sanitation, or from the eerie interplay between sun and storm, creates uncanny moments in the mother-and-daughter plot. Thus, this dissertation aims to uncover 'what connexion can there be' between psychoanalytical and environmental forces that permeate the narratives of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson.

In 1919, Sigmund Freud wrote an essay entitled 'The Uncanny', where he traced the etymology of the word *unheimlich*, analysed some situations where an uncanny feeling may arise, and drew a parallel between the uncanny in real life and the one that can be experienced in fiction. Broadly speaking, the Freudian uncanny relates to the return of something already known, 'nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed', and 'something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open'<sup>5</sup>. The uncanny is part of the realm of the frightening, and in fiction it is related to the plausibility of the world the writer presents to his readers. Indeed, the nearest it is to the real world, the more likely the uncanny effect is to arise, because:

Whatever has an uncanny effect in real life has the same in literature.  
But the writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is  
feasible in normal experience; in his stories he can make things happen  
that one would never, or only rarely, experience in real life. He tricks

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<sup>3</sup> Laurence W. Mazzeno, Ronald D. Morrison, 'Introduction: Practical Ecocriticism and the Victorian Text', in *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1-12 (p.1).

<sup>4</sup> André Green, 'The Dead Mother', in André Green, *On Private Madness* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 142-159.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Uncanny*, trans. by D. McLintock, and intro. by H. Haughton (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 121-162 (p.147).

us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. [...] By the time we become aware of the trickery, it is too late: the writer has already done what he set out to do.<sup>6</sup>

*Bleak House* seems to be permeated by this concept from the start. In the Preface to the novel, Dickens underlines two important principles: the first is the realist imprint of the novel, arguing that ‘I mention here that everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true, and within the truth’ (3) and, in defending the death of Mr Krook by Spontaneous Combustion to the accusations of implausibility by George Henry Lewes, he states that ‘I have no need to observe that I do not wilfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject’ (4). However, following the defence of the realist principle of the novel, he ends his preface by writing that ‘In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things’ (4). This is just an example of the Freudian uncanny resonating in *Bleak House*: for instance, if familiarity is understood as the realist plot which was incredibly popular to nineteenth-century fiction, then, Dickens ‘tricked us’ into disguising the romantic behind a pattern of familiarity, paving the way to the uncanny tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity. At the same time, the Freudian uncanny permeates the mother-and-daughter plot: it is what Esther experiences in the various encounters with Lady Dedlock prior to the discovery of their bond, because she looks familiar to her, albeit she is a stranger. Moreover, the Lady’s past for most of the narrative is canny, in the sense of secret, concealed from others, and by the end of the novel it becomes uncanny, as it has come to the open against the Lady’s wishes, threatening her present and future.<sup>7</sup>

In the twenty-first century, Amitav Ghosh’s theorization of the environmental uncanny appears in *The Great Derangement*, and it is closely related to nineteenth-century fiction and the realm of probability: it deals with the depiction of the presence of the non-human interlocutors, and the intervention of the non-human in the thought process of the humans.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it relates to Freud’s pattern of un/familiarity

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<sup>6</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> TK Pius, ‘Climate Crisis and Fiction: a Study based on Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: the Climate Change and the Unthinkable*’, *IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science*, 22.10 (Oct. 2016), pp. 19-28 (p.19).

and to Dickens's dichotomy between the 'familiar' and the 'romantic', because of the point Ghosh develops from Franco Moretti's theorization of fillers in *The Bourgeois*. Fillers are key mechanisms in the process which led the modern novel to banish the improbable and embrace the everyday, and they

offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life [...] fillers are an attempt at rationalising the novelistic universe: turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all.<sup>9</sup>

Ghosh argues that the environment sometimes embodies the role of fillers so widespread in nineteenth-century novels, but at other times it becomes a threatening presence, and it is also in light of this ambivalence that the environmental uncanny arises.<sup>10</sup> Ghosh is sure that nineteenth-century geology and fiction assumed that Nature was moderate and orderly, and that the notion of uncanny adapted to climate change is a recent development. He quotes George Marshall: 'Climate change is inherently uncanny: Weather conditions, and the high-carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty'.<sup>11</sup> Ghosh addresses the impact of the environmental uncanny and of non-human agency:

Non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought. And to be alerted to such interventions is also to become uncannily aware that conversations among ourselves have always had other participants: it is like finding out that one's telephone has been tapped for years, or that the neighbours have long been eavesdropping on family discussions. But in a way it's worse still, for it would seem that those unseen presences actually played a part in shaping our discussions without our being aware of it.<sup>12</sup>

*Bleak House* is permeated by nonhuman forces, as in the case of environmental agency arising from the impact of by-products and waste products of industrialization, which affect the everyday lives of its characters. The intersection between Freudian and

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<sup>9</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, pp.16-19; 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Ghosh, 22,30.

<sup>12</sup> Ghosh, 31.

environmental uncanny is the backbone of this dissertation: the encounters between Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock are uncanny in the Freudian sense, but in those moments Esther is also particularly receptive towards her surroundings: the weather seems to switch from sunny to rainy, and from rainy to sunny, anticipating the uncanny meetings between the two women. Moreover, environmental agency shapes the mother-and-daughter reunion in Chapter 36 by disfiguring Esther's face, thus adding a further uncanny motif of (un)familiarity between the two.

This work expands the relation between Freudian and environmental uncanny to a broader intersection between the two areas. The most important concepts from this perspective are provided by Freud's essay on 'Screen Memories' (1899) and André Green's 'The Dead Mother' (1986). In particular, in Green's theory, the dead mother is emotionally dead and cold towards the daughter, and unable to nurture her. This image of coldness also relates to key environmental descriptions of Lady Dedlock, for instance in the third-person account of her days at Chesney Wold, or in her final escape, permeated by snow and coldness. While psychoanalysis has been focusing for decades on nineteenth-century fiction, environmental studies have only recently begun to do so. However, insights from works of Jesse Oak Taylor, Troy Boone, and John Parham, all concerning the impact of the environment in the novel, or the notion of nonhuman powers, have been extremely valuable in shaping the notion of the agency which characterises the environmental uncanny. Indeed, natural phenomena in *Bleak House* are not always moderate and orderly, and their uncanniness arise from the dichotomy between being fillers and being endowed with agency. Furthermore, gothic interpretations of *Bleak House* have dealt in detail with the environmental factors of the novel, and included to a variable extent the Freudian uncanny. In a sense, the gothic is what more closely embodies the tension between the 'familiar side' of realism, and the 'romantic' of what goes beyond it. Although this paper does not aim to be a gothic interpretation of *Bleak House*, this kind of criticism provides thoughtful perspectives. In the Introduction to Freud's 'The Uncanny', Hugh Haughton argues that the Freudian concept underpins a considerable amount of gothic criticism, to the extent that he considers one the 'uncanny double' of the other, and they both share the importance of the 'psychic underworld of

the death drive'.<sup>13</sup> Gothic readings employed here come from Allan Pritchard, who compared the rural gothic of Chesney Wold to the urban gothic of London, and from Robert Mighall and Peter Matthews, concerning the gothic atmosphere of the Tom-All-Alone's slum.<sup>14</sup>

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first provides the theoretical framework and the contexts of *Bleak House*. The first half focuses on psychoanalysis and realism, situates the Freudian uncanny within the Structural Model of the Psyche, and provides a brief trajectory of the concept through the decades. Despite having become an interdisciplinary concept, spanning from psychoanalysis to literature and architecture, until recent years the uncanny was marked by a lack of approach on environmental studies, whose gap was filled by Ghosh's theorisation. So, the environmental uncanny and its counterpart, the filler, are then related to Freud's approaches to consciousness and unconsciousness: while Moretti's fillers pertain to the conscious and rational pleasure of the narrative, Ghosh's term is compared to the unconscious: the ego cannot always hold back the id, much in the same way that fillers cannot contain environmental powers, which sometimes emerge from what on surface seems to be a description of everyday life. The second part of the chapter explores the relevance of psychological and environmental themes in Dickens's life and in the English context at the time of *Bleak House*, 1851-1853. Thus, it stresses the role of Dickens's childhood memories in his later life, and argues to what extent the theorization of the 'Dark Period' of his life is still a relevant concept. Moreover, it explores the topicality of the novel in relation to the environmental condition of mid-nineteenth-century England: for instance, the frequent rainfalls that characterise Chesney Wold, the Dedlocks' mansion in Lincolnshire, recall a period of heavy flooding in England in 1851, which struck the Midlands and Northern England. Furthermore, the chapter underlines the environmental agency surrounding many London

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<sup>13</sup> Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction', in Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by D. McLintock, and intro. by H. Haughton (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. vii-lx (pp. xlii-xliii).

<sup>14</sup> Allan Pritchard, 'The Urban Gothic of "Bleak House"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45.4 (1991), 432-452 (p. 433).

Peter Thomas Matthews, 'Haunted England: Dickens and the Gothic Imagination' (unpublished master's thesis, McMaster University, 1982), pp. 79 – 80.

Robert Mighall, 'From Udolpho to Spitalfields: Mapping Gothic London', in *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*, ed. by Robert Mighall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 27 – 77 (p. 32), <DOI 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199262182.001.0001>.

areas, which originated from the deadly powers of elements such as fog, winds, and water, arising from pollution and critical sanitary conditions. This form of environmental agency features predominantly in *Bleak House*.

The second chapter focuses on the intersection between environment and psychoanalysis in the introductory chapters of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson. The Lady is married to the nobleman Sir Leicester Dedlock, and thinks the child she had from an unmarried relationship with Captain Hawdon was stillborn. The child is Esther, who believes to be an orphan, and opens her autobiographical narrative with her childhood memories at her godmother's. The environment at Chesney Wold, the Dedlocks' mansion in Lincolnshire, stands in part as a filler, in part as a characterization of Lady Dedlock: indeed, the surroundings of the mansion reiterate the regular and boring everyday life at Chesney Wold, where nothing ever seems to change; at the same time, they stand for Lady Dedlock's frame of mind, because her mood is introduced in environmental terms, such as 'freezing', 'melting', and she is described surrounded by dim stars. The freezing mood brings forward the connection with Green's 'Dead Mother complex', the emotionally dead mother unable to nurture the child.<sup>15</sup> The focus lies on the Lady's emotional iciness which, at this point of the narrative, may have originated from incomplete mourning, because she was never able to see the dead body of her daughter, and she was only told that she died following birth. She also lost tracks of her former lover, Captain Hawdon. However, when the family lawyer Mr Tulkinghorn comes to their mansion to deal with some business, he reads a letter about the Chancery suit: Lady Dedlock recognises her lover's writing, and faints. The atmosphere suddenly turns from cold to uncomfortably warm. Esther is the daughter of the dead mother: she suffers from lack of material reality, because she was told that her mother died, but she never saw her body, nor her grave. Thus, on one hand she believes her to be dead, on the other she still has some hope. Yet, she is marked by guilt, which originates from being the daughter of the dead mother, because she can only blame herself for what happened. Furthermore, it is stressed the strained relationship with the aunt: despite Esther tells the reader she was a good woman, the godmother - and maternal aunt - hates Esther for the sin she represents. Moreover, when the aunt dies, her death goes unmourned by the niece. Esther's behaviour

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<sup>15</sup> Green, pp. 149-150.

towards the aunt closely mirrors that towards the mother discussed later in this dissertation. For now, a comparison of the two patterns underlying the death of the aunt and of the mother is introduced, and completed in Chapter 4, by stressing the relation between Green's complex and Freud's screen memories. This chapter also analyses the uncanny motif of Esther's doll, and the way it becomes a transitional object for the mother, drawing from studies by Carolyn Dever, Sarah Cash, and Robyn Schiffman. Lastly, this chapter focuses on Esther's awareness of her surroundings as a child and later on her arrival in London, and compares its lively but polluted environment to the monotonous and deadened atmosphere of Chesney Wold.

The third chapter focuses on the depiction of the nonhuman and Chesney Wold in Chapter 7, on the uncanny meetings between the Lady and Esther in Chapter 18, on nonhuman agency in Esther's disfigurement, and on the mother-and-daughter reunion in Chapter 36. For what concerns the nonhuman and Chesney Wold, the theoretical background is mostly provided by Jesse Oak Taylor, who calls for a renewed attention on 'aggregated agency', the way natural elements influence the narrative, and by Troy Boone, who focuses on an 'inhabitants-in-environment' reading of Dickens's rural spaces, meaning the way human and nonhuman inhabit the ecosystem of a place.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is argued that the nonhuman realm of animals is depicted in a livelier way than the human one, to the extent that animals in Chesney Wold are endowed with human agency. At the same time, Esther influences the dull environment of Chesney Wold even via her absence: Mr Guppy, a law-clerk who previously introduced the young girl to London, while touring the Dedlocks' mansion is struck by an uncanny feeling of déjà-vu by looking at a portrait of Lady Dedlock hanging over the chimney. He never saw the Lady, but her face looks uncannily familiar to him. The same feeling is experienced by Esther in Chapter 18, when she sees the Lady for the first time. Indeed, her face reminds her of her godmother's days, and Ada, Esther's companion, mistakes the Lady's voice for Esther's. The environment is embedded in the dichotomy between fillers and uncanny in

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<sup>16</sup> Troy Boone, 'Early Dickens and Ecocriticism: The Social Novelist and The Nonhuman', in *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 97-113 (p. 101).  
Jesse Oak Taylor, 'The Novel as Climate Model: Realism and the Greenhouse Effect in "Bleak House"', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 46.1 (2013), pp. 1-25 (p. 17).

Chapter 18, in the sense that environmental and Freudian uncanny seem to share a common framework, which alternates regular to uncanny moments.

The uncanny is embedded in Esther's disfiguration prior to the mother-and-daughter reunion in Chapter 36. In this case, environmental agency arises from pollution, which originates from insalubrious areas such as Tom-All-Alone's. The depiction of the slum stands in-between gothic and the real account of London of the time: for instance, Mighall, Matthews, and Pritchard focused on the gothic-ness of the area, albeit its horrific condition had its counterpart in some graves of nineteenth-century London, such as the Spa-Fields burial ground in 1845.<sup>17</sup> Jo, the slum-dweller, catches a contagious disease, which is transmitted to Caddy, Esther's maid, and ultimately to Esther, who nurse him. By discussing concepts from John Parham's essay, namely 'thing power', which endows by-products and waste products with agency, 'trans-corporeality', which believes that our body is contaminated by economic, industrial, and environmental systems, and miasma theory, which posits the spreading of contagious disease to toxic particles of decaying matter in air and vapours,<sup>18</sup> it is argued that Esther catches the smallpox because of two issues: her maternal attitude, which leads her to nurse Jo, and the environmental powers that originate from a polluted place and infect her. Moreover, while walking by night with Caddy to reach Jo at the brickmaker's house, she is permeated by a feeling connected 'to that spot and time' (380), which brings her to consider herself different from what she was only a moment before. Sarah Cash notes that this passage occurs almost in contemporary to Lady Dedlock discovering their bond, thus hinting to an uncanny telepathy between the two women.<sup>19</sup> However, the environment also foresees what is about to happen to Esther, namely the disfiguration of her face, which indeed brings her physical self to be something different from what she has been until that moment.

The uncanniness of the reunion lies on Esther's scarred face, because she feels estranged from that part of her body, to the extent that the Lady's face seems more

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<sup>17</sup> 'The Spa-Fields Burial Ground', in *Bleak House*, ed. by Ford, Monod, pp. 906-909 (first pub. in *The Times*, 5 March 1845, p.7).

<sup>18</sup> John Parham, 'Bleak Intra-Actions: Dickens, Turbulence, Material Ecology', in *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 114-129 (pp. 114-116, 119).

<sup>19</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 141-142; Sarah E. Cash, 'The Broken Mirror: Maternal Agency and Identity in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*', *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations* 828 (Florida International University, 2013), <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/828> (p. 70).

familiar, more similar to Esther's self, than her own face is. By looking at herself in the mirror, Esther seems permeated by the 'uncanny dichotomy between the strange familiarity of the other, and the strange otherness of the familiar', in Robyn Schiffman's words.<sup>20</sup> When Lady Dedlock tells Esther she is her mother, she adds that her secret is in danger, and that henceforth Esther should consider her dead. On her part, the daughter is thankful for her scarred face, so that her physical appearance will not put the mother in any danger. Green's 'Dead Mother complex' returns: the mother is cold and unable to nurture her own child, while the daughter feels guilty to be the cause of the mother's emotional lack, which recalls Esther's guilty affection towards her aunt. At the same time, it is argued that the lack of motherly affection hurts Esther. Indeed, following the encounter with the mother, Esther rehearses a reunion scene with her friend Ada, whom she avoided meeting during her contagious disease: as John Jordan puts it, Esther's reunion with Ada enables her to re-act in the right way the mother-and-daughter reunion.<sup>21</sup> For what concerns the environment, it is noted that Esther's feelings mirror it: when she feels happy and calm, her surroundings are perceived in a picturesque and comfortable; by contrast, when the guilt of the 'Dead Mother complex' overrules her mind, she identifies her surroundings as dark and gloomy.

The last chapter examines two environmental elements and their recurrence in the final part of the plot: moon and coldness. The former is associated with the passage of the Lady's past from canny to uncanny, in the sense that, from hidden and concealed, it becomes something 'that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the moon features predominantly in the events that lead to this transformation. These include the first time the Lady knows her secret has been discovered, as Tulkinghorn during a moonlight night tells the Dedlock family her story, omitting her name. Moreover, the moon is connected to the scenes where the Lady behaves accordingly to her maternal side, when she put Rosa's wellbeing before that of the family name. Indeed, throughout the novel she developed a maternal affection towards Rosa, her maid, and never wanted to part from her. At the end, when Tulkinghorn

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<sup>20</sup> Robyn L., Schiffman 'Wax-Work, Clock-Work, and Puppet-Shews: Bleak House and the Uncanny', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 30 (2001), pp.159-171 (160).

<sup>21</sup> John Jordan, 'Psychoanalysis', in John Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 44-66 (55-56).

<sup>22</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 132.

discovers her secret, but demands her to carry on as if nothing happened, she decides to free Rosa from her patronage, and to hand her over to the Rouncewells. Thus, she puts the maid before herself, and asks her to remember fondly their time together. Moreover, it is argued that the moon is associated to haunting and eerie moments, as when Lady Dedlock wishes Mr Tulkinghorn dead, and when the murder actually happens: indeed, a gunshot breaks the pervasive stillness of the moon and her stars on the night where Tulkinghorn and the Lady confronted each other for the last time.

Coldness is the most predominant environmental feature of the Lady's escape from Sir Leicester. It is suggested that this feeling surrounds these last chapters in two ways: first, it is an environmental coldness, because the Lady escapes on a wintry and frosty night, permeated by snow and ice, and secondly, it is the coldness of Green's dead mother, apparent in Lady Dedlock, who has always been characterised by the freezing mood, and now suffers from the same environmental condition, and in Esther. Moreover, it is argued that the recurrent passages in Esther's and the third-person narratives that focus on the melting snow are metaphors for the Lady's life, characterised for most part by a freezing attitude, melting as she gets nearer to her death. Iciness is also that of the child of the 'Dead Mother', because, in the final scene of the discovery of the mother dead, she is unable to mourn her. Moreover, in discovering her corpse, Esther frees herself from what in Green's theorisation is 'frozen love', which posited that real love could not be experienced completely by the subject of the 'Dead Mother'.<sup>23</sup> From the death of the mother, snow and frozen love melt, and, finally, 'on a most beautiful summer morning' (750) Esther is engaged to the man she loves, the middle-class physician Allan Woodcourt. At the end of the novel, she is in her seventh year of marriage, and mother of two daughters: the last and incomplete thought of the now mother arises by looking at the moon, which brings her to think nostalgically about her old and undamaged face. She is happy with her life, but the environment still has some influence on her, and reminds her of the uncanny experiences of her life.

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<sup>23</sup> Green, p. 156.

## CHAPTER 1: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE CONTEXT OF *BLEAK HOUSE*

This chapter is divided into two parts, and provides the background to the analysis of the novel. The first half specifies the theoretical framework: it develops the concept of the uncanny within the broader intersection between fiction and psychoanalysis. Moreover, it discusses Amitav Ghosh's environmental uncanny and Franco Moretti's fillers, in particular their mutual relation, and that with the Freudian uncanny. Lastly, the first section draws a parallelism between these two terms and Freud's structural model of the psyche, most notably the ego and the id. The second half of the chapter focuses on Dickens around the period of composition of *Bleak House*, the early 1850s, on the critical reception of the novel in light of the author's 'Dark Period', and on the environmental condition of mid-nineteenth-century England.

### 1.1 The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations of this dissertation lay on the encounter between environment and psychoanalysis provided by the uncanny, a relatively young concept, whose boundaries have long exceeded psychoanalysis to fully enter the realm of fiction. This is due to mainly two reasons: the first is that Freud, in *The Uncanny*, emphasised the relevance of this concept in fiction, explaining it through an analysis of Hoffman's 'The Sandman', alongside some events from his case-studies; the second is the marginal position of the essay in Freud's oeuvre for most of the twentieth-century. This favoured its detachment from a narrow psychoanalytic framework to become first a literary concept, and afterwards an interdisciplinary, spanning from literature to technology, architecture, and the post-human, just to name a few.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the section, it is also explored how Ghosh's environmental uncanny enters the conceptualization of the term,

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<sup>24</sup> Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), pp. 2, 4.

and, by pairing it to Franco Moretti's fillers, it is discussed the extent by which it can be related to the Freudian concepts of consciousness and unconsciousness.

### 1.1.1 Realism and Psychoanalysis

Over the last decades, psychoanalysis has provided fiction with a variety of tools that have enriched its analysis. Freud's 'Copernican Revolution' relegated human consciousness and rational principles in the background, to put in the foreground the unconscious and the repressed, which govern man and his ego.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, psychoanalysis goes beyond surface meaning to engage with the hidden and the repressed, and this holds true in analysing a literary text, too. An example of this may be the relationship between the psychoanalytic notions of displacement and condensation in dream-analysis, and the figures of speech metaphor and metonymy. Displacement relates to association of meaning, when one term or image-dream is closely related to another one, and gets substituted by it. This is what in literary analysis corresponds to metonymy, namely referring to a whole by naming a part of it, or by replacing it with a similar concept. By contrast, condensation works by fusing two or more ideas into one, and it corresponds to the metaphor.<sup>26</sup> Usually, these phenomena in dreams are born out of repression.<sup>27</sup> So, the interplay between the ego and the unconscious produces repression and consequently hidden meanings, and this situation is mirrored in language, as it condenses and displaces words so that they may mean something different from their supposed sense. Indeed, it can be said that a psychoanalytic reading of a work goes beyond the text itself, therefore beyond the author's intentions.<sup>28</sup> If to some people this can be seen as reading a work against the grain, it is also true that it enhances close reading, by permitting to discover hidden meanings and patterns which lay behind the surface, waiting to be explored and interpreted, to show that a literary work does not have

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp.5-6.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Klages, 'Psychoanalysis', in Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide of the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury), pp. 63-90 (64,65).

<sup>27</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 13.

an univocal meaning. Jeremy Tambling points out the ambiguity of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. He writes:

Literature is not committed to delivering truth, but psychoanalysis is, and, where psychoanalysis uses literature, it does so by imposing a frame around it, indicating that it misreads, simplifies, represses other possibilities. [...] The richness of literature – meaning texts which are not consumable, and so finished, by a single reading – is its excess over single meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, it is not psychoanalysis that offers a non-canonical reading of a book – rather, it is in the work's nature not being prone to a single reading. In this case, psychoanalysis simply confirms this, by developing close reading in a different way.

In the case of nineteenth-century realist narrative, its intersection with psychoanalysis may be more difficult to support. Realist fiction supposedly delivers a truth. Let us take the example of *Bleak House*. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, '*Bleak House* is an imitation in words of the culture of a city', because the novel reflects in detail the social reality of 1851-1853 England, and the Chancery plot benefits from Dickens's job in the late twenties, when he was a reporter in that court.<sup>30</sup> A novel which so well embodies the social concerns of the time may seem at odds with a psychoanalytic reading. Of course, the position of *Bleak House* within realism has long been debated (cf. Introduction), but it is unlikely that the novel's ability to represent the society of the time will be questioned. Despite the realist imprint of the novel, Tambling suggests that psychoanalysis can still be a helpful tool, because of its narrative which records a story that took place before the reading of the novel started. In this sense, psychoanalysis helps retrieving the contents of the past. Of course, he is well-aware of the limits of psychoanalysis, most notably of its claim to have access to the single truth, which is sometimes reached by forcing the reading of the novel, disregarding its realist output.<sup>31</sup> However, he also argues that realist fiction can sometimes reach an unconscious truth, permeated by partially unconscious structures

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<sup>29</sup> Tambling, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 151-152.

<sup>30</sup> J. Hillis Miller 'Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House*', in *Victorian Subjects*, ed. by J.H. Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 179-199 (p.1).

<sup>31</sup> Jeremy Tambling, 'Introduction', in *Bleak House: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Jeremy Tambling, New Casebook Series (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 1-28 (p.14).

of thought (Ideology, in Marxist terms), so imbued in our society that cannot be perceived explicitly: this is why psychoanalysis, by dealing with the conscious/unconscious dichotomy, can reveal this truth.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in relation to *Bleak House* psychoanalysis can be productive from at least two perspectives: to interpret the nebulous past of some characters in the retrospective narrative, in order to discover hidden meanings in the text, and to enlighten the debate between realism and other genres which has been related to the novel, most notably the gothic.

### 1.1.2 The Uncanny and Freud's Structural Model of the Psyche

The uncanny works within the context of Freudian consciousness and unconsciousness. Before focusing on its relationship with Freud's Structural Model built around the interplay between ego, id, and superego, it is useful to recall its origins. Sigmund Freud theorised the uncanny in 1919 as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar', and his essay set to explain 'under what conditions the familiar can become uncanny and frightening'.<sup>33</sup> The essay is divided into three parts: the first, a semantic exploration of the term, based on the relation between the *unheimlich* (uncanny) and the *heimlich* (canny); the second, mostly concerned with the analysis of Hoffman's 'The Sandman', and the third, where he draws a comparison of the uncanny in fiction and real life (cf. Introduction). The semantic analysis of the two terms results in their being synonyms and antonyms at the same time: *heimlich* means both familiar and comfortable, the opposite of *unheimlich*, and concealed, dangerous, or kept hidden, thus becoming its synonym. Moreover, Freud states that 'the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is what was once familiar [*heimlich*]. The negative prefix *un-* is the indicator of repression'.<sup>34</sup> Repression is inseparable from the unconscious: as Anneleen Masschelein points out, the latter does not know negation, this is why *un-* indicates something that is unconscious, rather than being a prefix that negates the homely. Moreover, she builds on Freud's notion that the uncanny concerns the return of the repressed: it appears as a sudden revelation of a remote memory trace in the unconscious,

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<sup>32</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', 124.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', 151.

which creates a connection with a recent image or experience in the conscious – rather than the thing itself, the uncanny is the ‘ghost’ of things.<sup>35</sup> Conscious and unconscious are two key terms in Freud’s oeuvre: the unconscious comprises absence of negation and contains thing-presentation, that is, memory traces in the form of visual images only; by contrast, the conscious comprises thing-presentation and word-presentation, an image translated into words that permits internal thought-processes to become conscious perceptions.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, in 1923 he delineates the structural model of the human psyche, based on: the id (since childbirth), the ego (around three years old), and the superego (around five years old). Whilst the ego belongs to the preconscious, being in part unconscious and in part conscious, the id and the superego are unconscious.<sup>37</sup> The id is the unknown and the unconscious, and also formed out of repressed consciousness. It is instinct-based, contains the death-drive and the sexual-drive, and it is unaffected by reality and the everyday world. Furthermore, it operates according to the pleasure principle, meaning that it wants every wish or impulse to be satisfied at the moment, and, when it is not so, we experience tension and unpleasure.<sup>38</sup> It is involved in primary process thinking, associated with wishes and fantasy, as in dreams, and characterised by unbound neurones and memories.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, the ego is involved in the rational and realistic secondary process thinking, and it is presented as a bound collection of memories, produced by repetition. It also tries to inhibit part of the primary processes, by judging which images belong to reality and which ones to phantasy.<sup>40</sup> So, it is the rational part of ourselves, operating according to the reality principle and mediating between the real world and the demands of the id, trying not to endanger the self or the id. Freud defines it ‘that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world’, and compares the relationship between the ego and the id to that of the horse and its horseman: the ego is ‘like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse’.<sup>41</sup> It seeks pleasure, but its pleasure does not derive from fulfilling every wish, as in the case of the id: rather, it is experienced by adhering to the reality

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<sup>35</sup> Masschelein, p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> Masschelein, p.36; Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Masschelein, 40; Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Saul McLeod, ‘Id, ego and superego’, *Simply Psychology*, 5 February 2016, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html> [Accessed 23 August 2019].

<sup>39</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, pp. 35, 36.

<sup>41</sup> McLeod

principle, thus avoiding pain and reducing tension. When it fails to operate according to that principle, unconscious defence mechanisms are enacted to repress anxiety and tension, aiming to counterbalance or justify un-rational choices or behaviours.<sup>42</sup> The ideal version of the ego is the superego, which also includes conscience, this is why it comprises a keen distinction towards good and bad values according to parents and society, and demands obedience to the good ones. When this does not happen, we may feel guilty, while if we behave according to the ideal self, we may feel proud of ourselves.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, on one hand it tries to repress the id's desires and drives, and on the other it tries to project the ego towards its ideal version, thus straining the relationship between the ego and the id, and our conscious perception. A balanced situation involving these three components would see the ego as the keystone, able to satisfy the id's demands by mediating them with the reality principle, and without upsetting the superego, thus tending towards the ideal ego or avoiding the morally unacceptable. In this case of a predominance of the superego or of the id, the person's psyche would be unstable.

The relation between the structural model and the uncanny becomes apparent by focusing on what Freud defined as experiences that can arise an uncanny feeling, for instance: anxiety, déjà-vu, the blurring and ambiguity between reality and imagination, uncertainty whether inanimate things really are so, or whether animate objects are indeed alive, the motif of the double, animism and primitive beliefs (i.e. about death), omnipotence of thoughts, unintended repetition and repetition compulsion. He provides some examples by drawing from Hoffman's short story and from some of his case-studies, thus endorsing a certain affinity between psychoanalysis and fiction, as long as the writer adheres to set his work on the ground of common reality:

Whatever has an uncanny effect in real life has the same in literature.

But the writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience [...] fiction affords possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> McLeod

<sup>43</sup> McLeod

<sup>44</sup> Freud, 'The uncanny', pp. 156, 157.

Among the uncanny experiences, some of them relate to the interplay between the three poles of the structural model. Anxiety is produced by the contrasts between the ego and the id; the double can be seen as the ideal ego, or as an id-driven and dangerous double of the self, and the blurring of reality and fiction can relate to the ambiguity between primary and secondary processes, and the in/ability for the ego to properly assess whether some images from the unconscious id (thing-presentation) belong to reality (word-presentation) or to phantasy. Furthermore, many of these motifs are foregrounded in literature and literary analysis too, and this is why the uncanny in fiction provides a way to disclose the hidden meanings of a text.

### 1.1.3 The Conceptualization of the Uncanny

The uncanny works as a bridge between a pure psychoanalytic reading of *Bleak House* and one that engages with compelling questions of our time, such as the role of the environment in the novel, because of the intrinsic versatility and contemporariness of this concept. However, throughout a century from its theorisation, the uncanny has not always been a thought-provoking notion. In her remarkable work *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late Twentieth-Century Theory* (2011), Anneleen Masschelein traces the genealogy of the uncanny over the last hundred years, providing a clear picture of its trajectory over time and of its interdisciplinarity. The premise of her work stands on the undisputed centrality of Freud as founder of the concept, because his importance has not been superseded by any subsequent theorist, despite the fact that the uncanny has long exceeded the psychoanalytic boundaries.<sup>45</sup> She follows Nicholas Royle in defining the uncanny as an unstable concept from its origins: ‘Because the uncanny affects and haunts everything, it is in constant transformation and cannot be pinned down’.<sup>46</sup> In light of its interdisciplinarity, what strikes is, arguably, the absence of environmental perspectives within a hundred years from its theorisation: this gap was filled by Amitav Ghosh in 2016, opening new and fascinating critical approaches to novels and the uncanny itself.

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<sup>45</sup> Masschelein, p.4.

<sup>46</sup> Masschelein, p.2.

Masschelein argues that following Freud's 1919 essay, there has been a period of conceptual latency, or preconceptualization, which lasted until the mid-1960s. During those decades, the uncanny has been downplayed: the founder of psychoanalysis himself disregarded the concept from 1921 and, alongside the confusion between the concept and the German adjective *unheimlich*, this contributed to the background position of the uncanny.<sup>47</sup> Still, some critics engaged with this idea, but they left very few traces on its conceptualization: the main areas were psychoanalytic approaches to religion and literary studies.<sup>48</sup> This is the case of Siegbert Praver, who in 1965 proposed a literary theory of the uncanny which moved beyond Freud, to combine psychological aspects to religious, historical, and sociological ones: in his lecture 'The Uncanny in Literature: An Apology for its Investigation', he argued that the relationship between man and the uncanny is based on secularization and alienation:

Man is doubly alienated from his being: in a religious sense, since he projects the best of his nature into a beyond, and socially because in an industrialized society, he is deprived of control over his work. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, the sense of alienation is reflected in a feeling of uncanniness in things. Man no longer has control over his world; therefore, the world of things seems strange and inimical.<sup>49</sup>

Praver provides a thought-provoking perspective on the uncanny, which to some extent anticipates Ghosh's theorization of the environmental approach, for what concerns man's lack of control over the world, and the degraded ontological condition of mankind resulting from industrialization. Unfortunately, Praver's theory left none or very few traces on subsequent debates on the uncanny, and he has been defined as 'a transitory figure who somehow slipped through the mesh of history'.<sup>50</sup> The most notable exception to irrelevance is Jacques Lacan, who in 1962-63 gave a cycle of seminars at the hospital Saint-Anne where he also discussed the uncanny as 'the indispensable pivot to address the question of anxiety'. However, these seminars were published only in 2004, and this

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<sup>47</sup> Masschelein, pp. 4, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Masschelein, pp. 50, 59.

<sup>49</sup> Masschelein, p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Masschelein, p. 70.

is why Lacan's theories on the uncanny did not flourish in the early 1960s, but only from the 1970s and 80s in relation to the three orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real.<sup>51</sup> Overall, the 1970s and 1980s characterised the actual phase of conceptualization of the uncanny, marked by the rediscovery and reassessment of Freud's essay. Other than Lacan, many eminent critics such as Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, and Tzvetan Todorov gave new strength to the uncanny, resulting in a broad conceptualization which could engage in the 1990s with many different critical and cultural areas, such as postcolonial studies, art history, architecture, and film studies. The new millennium is marked by the first books which try to trace the critical and theoretical approaches to the uncanny in a variety of fields, such as Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* (2003), and Mike Kelley's *The Uncanny* (2004).<sup>52</sup>

In recent years, the uncanny has not ceased to fascinate critics. Masschelein draws mainly four categories where the uncanny is an invaluable tool. The first is technology and robotics, which brought to a new level the traditional uncanny motifs of the double and automatons: by emphasising the uncanny human-likeness of robots in fiction, we may get used to them, and get ready to their arrival in our posthuman world as soon as technology is ready. Another category is the postromantic/aesthetic tradition, which has been developing since the 1980s and associates the uncanny with romantic concepts such as the sublime under the common label of repression and the return of the repressed, and with Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abject'. By abject, she means a much more violent sensation than the uncanny, which does not depend on the perception of the familiar. Rather, it is defined by the absence of clear boundaries between object and subject. Moreover, it is driven by 'the desire to protect borders and systems from contamination from what is outside, from other bodies, specifically the mother's'.<sup>53</sup> The third contemporary line of development concerns the unhomely and alienation as an economic, political, psychological, and existential condition. In contemporary times, the uncanny can be used to deal with problems in European society such as racism and nationalism, by reminding us that 'the stranger is not someone who threatens us from the outside; rather, the stranger is inside us and our identity is always contaminated from the

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<sup>51</sup> Masschelein, pp. 53 54, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Masschelein, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 86.

beginning'.<sup>54</sup> The fourth and last category is the one coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993), where he placed the uncanny at the heart of his study, discussing the legacy of the Marxist political thought following the fall of the Communist regime. The key that provides the link between the uncanny and Derrida's neologism 'Hauntology' is the return of the repressed, through which he argues that Marx's spectre haunts the world and its institutions, even more so now that has been declared dead by capitalist society. Overall, Derrida's new conceptualization of the uncanny put its relation with ghosts, the spectral, and telepathy back into the spotlight in cultural and literary studies.<sup>55</sup>

#### **1.1.4 Fillers and the Environmental Uncanny within and beyond Psychoanalysis**

The aims of this overview were twofold: on one hand, to illustrate the interdisciplinarity of the uncanny, and the fundamental role of Freud's essay. On the other, that its cultural and literary interdisciplinarity was marked by an absence: the lack of an uncanny approach to environmental issues. This is where Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* enters the debate, and this is why his insights are of invaluable importance in the conceptualization of the uncanny. In concluding this theoretical section, it is suggested a double function of the environmental approach to the uncanny: on surface, that Franco Moretti's notion of fillers and Ghosh's idea of the environmental uncanny are closely related to Freud's approaches to consciousness and unconsciousness. However, on a more in-depth level, the environmental perspective goes beyond psychoanalysis, by fulfilling what Freud's 'Copernican Revolution' could only partially do: decentring the human from his belief to be the centre of the world.

Part of the relationship between fillers, the environmental uncanny, and the Freudian uncanny has been mentioned in the Introduction, in particular for what concerns their analogy with plausibility of the fictional world, declined in particular through nineteenth-century novel. Whilst the filler works towards establishing and confirming the middle-class narrative pleasure of regularity, by banishing the improbable and emphasising the everyday, the environmental uncanny is a force that haunts the novel and

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<sup>54</sup> Masschelein, p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> Masschelein, pp. 138,139, 144, 145.

its characters, and not only places agency beyond human powers into non-human forces, but influences people thought and actions. Both fillers and the environmental uncanny share a common origin, industrialization, which turned the natural environment to human's use with consequences looming over contemporary times (i.e. climate change), and this exploitation of the natural world was also made on the perception that nature was moderate and quiet.<sup>56</sup> This relates the environmental uncanny to the Freudian one via the dichotomy between *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, turning the familiar nature into a threatening force. At the same time, this type of uncanny represents the other side of Moretti's fillers, turning pleasurable and regular narrative into a haunting one.

Fillers are what happens in a novel between one turning point and the next.<sup>57</sup> In describing them, Franco Moretti stresses two characteristics: that they 'offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life', and that they do so by repeating over again the same pleasurable and everyday activities.<sup>58</sup> He quotes Lukács:

Life is dominated by something that recurs systematically and regularly, by something that happens again and again in obedience to a law, something that must be done without concern for desire or pleasure. In other words, the rule of order over mood, of the permanent over the momentary, of quiet work over genius fed by sensation.<sup>59</sup>

This is why fillers rationalise the novelistic universe, turning it into 'a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all'.<sup>60</sup> Going back to Freud, the role of fillers in the narrative strikes a chord with that of the conscious and the unconscious, most notably in the contrast between the ego's rationality and secondary processes and the id's impulses and primary processes. In particular, fillers act in the same way the ego does, by adhering to the reality principle which seeks to reduce every tension which may result from fulfilling on the moment the pleasure principle, thus the id. This also happens through the control and repression of pleasure-and-phantasy-driven primary processes by

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<sup>56</sup> Ghosh, pp. 21, 109-115.

<sup>57</sup> Franco Moretti, *The bourgeois: between history and literature* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), p.71.

<sup>58</sup> Moretti, pp. 80-81.

<sup>59</sup> Moretti, pp. 80-81.

<sup>60</sup> Moretti, p. 82.

the reality-driven secondary ones. The same holds true for fillers, as they try to rationalise nineteenth-century novels by filling them of quiet and regular details of everyday life, aimed to contain the rash of actions. Moreover, ‘the ego is a solidified bound collection of memories, produced by *repetition*’<sup>61</sup> – the same happens with fillers, as they are a product of repetitions of the everyday.

The environmental uncanny has been described as the other side of Moretti’s filler. To carry the psychoanalytic analogy further, this kind of uncanny can be seen as unconscious, or id-related. Of course, the uncanny by definition cannot be a conscious process, being ‘something familiar that has been repressed and then reappears’<sup>62</sup>, and Ghosh himself, in moving it away from man and into the non-human world, did not exclusively conceptualise the uncanny in Freudian conscious/unconscious terms. However, what I suggest is to look at the relationship between the environmental uncanny and the filler in nineteenth-century novels as if it were that between the id and the ego: the ego tries to rationalise the impulses coming from the id, as fillers try to rationalise the narrative, and natural environment too, by keeping her under control under labels such as ‘commonplace’ and ‘moderate’.<sup>63</sup> Yet, the ego cannot always hold back the id, which sometimes emerges (as it is the case with the Freudian uncanny). Likewise, environmental elements cannot always be controlled by the rationality and regularity of the filler, and they emerge as environmental uncanny forces, having their own agency and influencing the characters’ actions and situations: what was forcefully kept in the background comes into the foreground.

The fact that Ghosh is the first scholar to theorise the environmental uncanny puts him in a different spot from the Freudian perspective. Indeed, Ghosh did not theorise the environmental uncanny by comparing it to other Freudian works than the uncanny, so any analogy with psychoanalysis should be weighted up. However, the uncanny has proved to be an extremely flexible concept, which fluctuated among many theories and critical perspectives, and this is why the broader relationship among environment, the uncanny, and the realm of consciousness can be intriguing. Nevertheless, it should be avoided to reduce Ghosh’s - and Moretti’s - theorisation to psychoanalysis only, because of at least

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<sup>61</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 152.

<sup>63</sup> Ghosh, p. 21.

two reasons: firstly, this is not their main (or only) context, and secondly, Ghosh not only supersedes the rational imprint of fillers, but goes beyond Freud's Copernican Revolution. By that, it is meant the impact of Freudian theories to undermine rational belief on the centrality of men, by decentring the conscious mind in favour of the unconscious. This resulted in the ego discovering that 'is not master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in his mind'.<sup>64</sup> Ghosh strikes another blow at what is left of 'human megalomania', by decentring it even more than Freud did: Nature is now master of what man thought to be his house, the world.

## **1.2 Charles Dickens: *Bleak House* and the Contemporary Context**

*Bleak House* is permeated with environmental concerns, and it also encompasses the author's interests in psychological themes, such as the role of memory and the return of the past in both his characters' and his private life. The novel was published in twenty monthly instalments, from March 1852 to September 1853, in Dickens's magazine *Household Words*, founded at the start of that decade. Dickens began writing it during the last months of 1851, in the wake of the critically-acclaimed *David Copperfield*. Many critics believe that *Bleak House* inaugurated a darker thread of novels, whose bleakness reverberates in both the author's life and the social condition of England. At the same time, the country was suffering from many environmental issues: for instance, insalubrious wind, fog, and water-related issues were topics of the social debate of those years, and deeply impacted the citizens' life. This chapter explores the relevance of psychological and environmental themes in Dickens's life and in the English background at the time of *Bleak House*, and to what extent these issues found their way into the novel.

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<sup>64</sup> Tambling, *Psychoanalysis*, pp. 5-6.

### 1.2.1 Towards *Bleak House*: Dickens, Childhood Memories, and the Return of the Past

In 1851 Dickens planted some of the seeds for *Bleak House*: in February, he mentions in a letter to Mary Boyle that ‘the first shadows of a new story [are] hovering in a ghostly way about me (as they usually begin to do, when I have finished an old one)’, shadows which in August began to take a more solid outline.<sup>65</sup> The decade had opened in a productive manner: by November 1850 he had published the last serial number of his autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*, his first work to be predominantly narrated in first-person, which has been referred to as ‘a novel of memories and a novel about memories’.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, he founded the journal *Household Words*, aiming to raise awareness to some of the most pressing topics in England of the time, namely sanitation, education, and housing.<sup>67</sup> These two literary endeavours proceeded together: for example, in October 1849, after completing the sixth number of his novel, he sent a letter to his friend and biographer John Foster, in which he asked his opinion about characterising his forthcoming journal by a narratorial presence called ‘The Shadow’: ‘a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature [...] the Thing at everybody’s elbow, and in everybody’s footsteps. At the window, by the fire, in the street, in the house, from infancy to old age, everybody’s inseparable companion’.<sup>68</sup> Foster did not react enthusiastically, thus the idea was not implemented in *Household Words*. Yet, it returned a couple of years later, in another shape: this time, ‘Shadows’ was the title given to a series of papers written in 1852 by Charles Knight, following Dickens’s invite, about ‘early English letter-writers and memoirists whose manuscripts had been published in the nineteenth century’.<sup>69</sup> Thus, ‘The Shadow’, from a narrative expedient which was supposed to include voices, people and places around England, returns to become a study of recently-found early-modern biographies and lives.

‘The Shadow’ is but one example of the past returning into the present in different shapes. This theme was already expressed in *David Copperfield*, in close association with

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<sup>65</sup> George Ford and Sylvère Monod, ‘Dickens’ Letters on the Composition of *Bleak House*’, in *Bleak House*, ed. by Ford and Monod, pp. 885-889 (p.885).

<sup>66</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.330.

<sup>67</sup> Ackroyd, p. 321.

<sup>68</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p.55.

<sup>69</sup> Bodenheimer, p.56.

preconscious memories and déjà-vu, the feeling to experience something that seems to have already happened in the past:

We have all some experience of a feeling, that comes over us occasionally, of what we are saying and doing having been said and done before, in a remote time - of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago, by the same faces, objects, and circumstances - of our knowing perfectly what will be said next, as if we suddenly remembered it!<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, the years around the writing of *Bleak House* were deeply concerned with themes such as childhood memories, autobiography, and the return of non-tangible shapes. This holds true in Dickens's life, too, as his childhood memories never ceased to haunt him: when he was twelve years old, his father was incarcerated for debt in Marshalsea Debtor's Prison for three months, and his son was sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory – a controversial and traumatic event in his life, which marked his adult life and the vacillating relationship with his father. In a letter sent to Foster around 1847, he describes this experience as still haunting him:

My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life.<sup>71</sup>

Taylor Stoeher, in his psychoanalytic work *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance*, believes that this period of Dickens's life was his most intense and powerful, and he claims that the novelist's memories were repressed, thus they should not be trusted on the surface.<sup>72</sup> However, Rosemarie Bodenheimer warns critics against trying to psychoanalyse a nineteenth-century man and his childhood episode: while it has often been considered a traumatic experience in his life, this episode was not always perceived so negatively by the author, to the extent that in 1832 he wrote an advertisement in the *True Sun* for Warren's Blacking itself. Therefore, Bodenheimer believes that the event was traumatic

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Chapman and Hall, ca 1870), p. 400.

<sup>71</sup> John Foster, *The Life of Charles Dickens: Volume I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.33.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor Stoeher, *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 93-94.

because Dickens's memory kept returning there often in his life, rather than for the intrinsic negative value of childhood work which perhaps was not so uncommon at the time.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, for what concerns the relationship between Dickens and memory, she argues that the novelist was well-aware of mid-century debates around memory, focused on double consciousness and its shaping of the self. He was interested on the role of hidden memories within the individual and how they could become apparent through the association of ideas, to the extent that these issues shape many uncanny fictional moments of his works, and his characters are often involved in the ambivalence between resentful remembering and strategic forgetting.<sup>74</sup>

Memory is not the only theme to provide a common thread between the man and his novels: as Robert Newsom puts it, 'the really astonishing thing, to my mind, about Dickens's life is how much of it finds its way into the work unmediated'.<sup>75</sup> An example of this may come from Dora, the heroine of *David Copperfield*, which also becomes the name of Dickens's ninth child, born on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 1850. In a letter to his wife sent a few days following the daughter's birth, the novelist writes that 'I still have Dora to kill – I mean the Copperfield Dora': as Peter Ackroyd notices, it is at least strange that he named a daughter after a character whom he decided to kill.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, his daughter died in 1851. This year is also marked by the death of his father, and by his wife Catherine's mental breakdowns, which in a few years escalated in a marital crisis. This brought some critics to consider 1851 the beginning of Dickens's 'Dark Period', which ends only in 1857, with the separation from his wife to turn his attentions to the eighteen-year-old actress Ellen Ternan. *Bleak House* is the first literary result of that period, as its planning began in August 1851 following the two devastating deaths, and the last number was published in *Household Words* on September 1853. The next part of the section focuses on the three-year span in which Dickens was involved with *Bleak House*, and examines to what extent, if any, theorising a 'Dark Period' can enhance a better understanding of the novel and the man.

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<sup>73</sup> Bodenheimer, pp.68-69.

<sup>74</sup> Bodenheimer, pp.57, 58.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Newsom, *Dickens on the romantic side of familiar things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p.94.

<sup>76</sup> Ackroyd, p.327.

### 1.2.2 *Bleak House* and the Dark Period

There is no agreement when it comes to define what Dickens's 'Dark Period' means: in particular whether it involves the themes of the novels published from 1851 to 1857, whether it relates to his life only, or to both, whether it indicates lack of creativity, or if it stands as a synonym for Dickens's artistic maturity, thus void of any negative connotation.

In August 1853, a month before the publication of the final instalment of *Bleak House*, Dickens was happy for his novel's success, and he wrote in a letter to Mrs. Richard Watson that 'I never had so many readers'.<sup>77</sup> Despite its good sales, nineteenth-century critics were not particularly fond of *Bleak House*, linking it to the beginning of Dickens's decline.<sup>78</sup> Even John Foster's review of it was not as laudatory as usual, as he argued that it was an inferior work compared to its predecessor *David Copperfield*, and defined Esther's narrative as a bad and unsuccessful copy of David's autobiographical story. Overall, he believed the novel to be a 'romance of discontent and misery, with a very restless dissatisfied moral', where most of its characters were 'much too real to be pleasant'.<sup>79</sup> Striking a more positive note, Foster also wrote that *Bleak House* stands as Dickens's structural masterpiece, a feature that has been cultivated in many of his later works but here reached its zenith, most notably through a series of what may seem at first glance coincidental events, which step by step become small pieces of the puzzle of *Bleak House*.<sup>80</sup> A good part of twentieth-century criticism insisted on the darker aspects of *Bleak House*, and associated them with the private difficulties of the author of the time, to coin the 1851-1857 'Dark Period'. For instance, Lionel Stevenson classifies the three novels written at the time - *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1857) - as permeated by a singular atmosphere of bitterness and frustration which annihilates the novels' conventional happy endings, and argues that they are the least read of his major works.<sup>81</sup> He tries to find an answer to this gloominess in Dickens's private life and the

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<sup>77</sup> Ford, Monod, 'Dickens' Letters', p.889.

<sup>78</sup> Ackroyd, 358.

<sup>79</sup> John Foster, *The Life of Charles Dickens: Volume III* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> Foster, *The Life of Charles Dickens: Volume III*, pp. 20, 22.

<sup>81</sup> Lionel Stevenson, 'Dickens's Dark Novels, 1851-1857', *The Sewanee Review*, 51.3 (July-Sept. 1943), pp. 398-409 (398-399).

context of the time: on one hand, he suggests that the deaths of his father and Dora, the marital crisis, and the pressing challenges posed by contemporary and emergent novelists, all played a part in the portrayal of dark and disappointing episodes of the three novels' narratives, and, on the other, that these works were also influenced by England's social malaise of the time and by the unsatisfactory 1854-1856 Crimean War.<sup>82</sup> Despite considering the three works as failures in Dickens's career, he follows Foster in praising the structural unity, coherence, and narrative pattern of *Bleak House*.<sup>83</sup> This last judgement also holds true for Taylor Stoeher, who, in 1865, offered a psychoanalytic reading of Dickens's novels and labelled *Bleak House* into the 'Dark Novels' realm – however, there is no evidence for a negative evaluation of the book. Rather, it is considered an important step in Dickens's ongoing development as novelist, and the critic praises the novel's structural unity which permitted to combine 'the most deeply divided of the plots with the most elaborately constructed network of superficial interconnections designed to bridge the gap'.<sup>84</sup> In his influential 1977 study on *Bleak House* and the Uncanny, Robert Newsom returned to the relationship between Dickens's private life and his works, arguing that the beginning of the 'Dark Period' coincides with the death of his father, which brought with it many psychological consequences. Moreover, he emphasised that Dickens had an ambivalent feeling towards his father: if he admired his creativity, he also hated his recklessness and irresponsibility, which among many things led Charles Dickens to the Warren's Factory when he was a twelve-year-old child.<sup>85</sup> Peter Ackroyd argues that their relationship was more complicated than that, so much so that 'there were times in later life when John Dickens became for him a creature of nightmare, forever weighting upon his life', although he notices that following John's death, Dickens always referred to him as 'my poor father'.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, John Foster recalls a conversation he had with Dickens in 1850, where the novelist himself admits a more benevolent outlook on his father as they both grow old: 'and Dickens liked his father more, the more he recalled his whimsical qualities. "The longer I live, the better man I think ' him"' he exclaimed afterwards'.<sup>87</sup> When his father died on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 1851,

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<sup>82</sup> Stevenson, pp. 402, 408, 409.

<sup>83</sup> Stevenson, pp. 403-404.

<sup>84</sup> Stoeher, pp. 137-138.

<sup>85</sup> Newsom, pp. 111, 112.

<sup>86</sup> Ackroyd, pp.9-10.

<sup>87</sup> Foster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, Volume III, p.11.

Dickens went through a period of insomnia, during which he took long walks around London by night, regardless of the weather, and wrote some articles about this state: ‘Lying Awake’ and ‘Night Walks’, in which he recalls some of the impressions from his walks and records the double states of consciousness and the trance-like state that, Newsom claims, will later inform *Bleak House*.<sup>88</sup> These walks continued without interruption into the composition of the novel, as he was feeling restless and anxious, a general malaise that led him to write it in many different places, besides the house move in 1851 from Devonshire Terrace to Tavistock House.<sup>89</sup> Despite these parallelisms between life and work, it is Ackroyd at the end of the twentieth-century to warn against the ‘Dark Period’ label:

Despite the general oppressed and oppressive tone of the book, in fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that Dickens was even happy while he was writing it – certainly happier than he had been in the previous year, when no proper creative work had been accomplished. [...] It might even be said that *Bleak House* cured the very malaise which was responsible for its composition.<sup>90</sup>

While he praises the attempt to systematize Dickens’s artistic production into different periods, he opposes the idea of the ‘Dark Period’ because there is no real evidence to permit such a categorization, and calls for a subdivision which goes beyond Dickens’s moods, to focus on his works’ structure:

The development of a novelist can really best be understood, not in terms, of his “moods” or even of his “themes”, but rather in that slow process of experimentation and self-education which changes the techniques of his prose. In that sense, the “darker” aspects of Dickens’s novels are merely an aspect of their more assiduously unified structure [...] he was seeing things more clearly, he was seeing them as a whole.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Newsom, pp. 107-108.

<sup>89</sup> Ackroyd, pp. 333, 348, 351, 352, 354.

<sup>90</sup> Ackroyd, p.348.

<sup>91</sup> Ackroyd, p.359-360.

The contemporary critical landscape has therefore changed a lot from Lionel Stevenson's article: during the last decades, praises for and interest on *Bleak House* have multiplied, while the existence of Dickens's 'Dark Period' has lost support. For example, Richard Gravil argues that Dickens's greatest novels were written in the 1850s, and seems to fully endorse Ackroyd's call in believing that '*Bleak House* (1852–53) was one of Dickens's most creative moments. In it he opened up a much darker seam of writing, and each of the five major novels that follows *Bleak House* can be seen as developing some aspect of its technique'.<sup>92</sup> To conclude, recent critical developments agree that *Bleak House* can still be read as the trailblazer of Dickens's later works. However, this should be done by considering its structure rather than by establishing a close connection with Dickens's moods during those years, although some parallelisms between the man and his work can be drawn.

### 1.2.3 *Bleak House* and the Environment

The months that led to the composition of *Bleak House* in November 1851 were chaotic for its author. Alongside the private difficulties of the year (cf. 1.2.1 and 1.2.2), Dickens was very busy with the London house move from Devonshire Terrace to Tavistock House, completed in November 1851, when he could finally begin his new novel. In two letters sent at the end of September, he wrote to the Duke of Devonshire:

I am in the first throes of a new book, and am spasmodically altering and arranging a new house besides, - and am walking by the sea every day, endeavouring to think of both sets of distraction to some practical end.<sup>93</sup>

and, to F.M. Evans:

I find my new house so remarkable for nothing as for its Drainage – which is of a most powerful description. [...] Wait till I get rid of my

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<sup>92</sup> Richard Gravil, *Reading Bleak House* (Penrith, California: HEB Humanities E-Books, 2012), p. 18.

<sup>93</sup> Ford, Monod, 'Dickens' letters', p.886.

workmen and get to my work, and see if we don't raise the (East) wind!<sup>94</sup>

These fragments are concerned with mainly three topics: his new house, his novel, and the environment. At a first glance, the last one may seem the odd one out. However, *Bleak House* has a strong environmental drive within itself, and this section aims to explore Dickens's relationship with England's environmental concerns of the time, which is mirrored in the close link between the natural setting and the novel.

To begin with, it is interesting to note the positive connotation of the sea, and its powers to mitigate Dickens's anxieties and to give him new strength. The weather and the environment have always influenced Dickens, sometimes alleviating his pains, other times by further suffocating and exhausting him.<sup>95</sup> When he writes a few years later about his nocturnal walks following his father's last illness in 1851, he keenly remembers the environmental details: 'The month was March, and the weather damp, cloudy, and cold. The sun not rising before half-past five, the night perspective looked sufficiently long at half-past twelve: which was about my time for confronting it'.<sup>96</sup> Peter Ackroyd believes that his awareness for his surroundings finds its way into *Bleak House*:

For three nights he walked the streets of London until dawn – just such a night as he recreated in *Bleak House*, his next novel, when 'every noise is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating.'<sup>97</sup>

Around the autumn of 1852, the same critic records a three-month rainy period in London. The rain is three-folded: real, under which Dickens insisted to take his long walks; hallucinatory, because when he got a bad cold following those walks, he wrote that 'my whole room looks swollen and giddy, and it seems to be incessantly raining between me and the books'; and fictional, as the rain that falls down in the London of *Bleak House* in the instalments of the time is the one to deadly weaken Jo the crossing sweeper.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the climate and the environment surrounding the composition of *Bleak House*

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<sup>94</sup> Ford, Monod, 'Dickens' letters', p. 885.

<sup>95</sup> Ackroyd, p.372.

<sup>96</sup> Ackroyd, pp. 107-108.

<sup>97</sup> Ackroyd, p. 336.

<sup>98</sup> Ackroyd, pp. 354-355.

find their way from Dickens's life to the novel, and provide a first example of the author's alertness towards this theme.

Besides, it is the reference to the (East) wind in the letter to M.F. Evans that provides the strongest association for *Bleak House* and the environmental condition of mid-nineteenth-century England. On one hand, it was said that wind coming from the East was a sign of ill-omen, injurious to health and spirits and, on the other, for Londoners it was a wind bringing disease, smells, and pollution from East End, the most degraded area of the city.<sup>99</sup> In addition, those areas were struck by drinking-water (most notably coming from the black and polluted Thames, and from the outdated sewage system) and food poisoning issues.<sup>100</sup> The novel's close association with the East Wind is already apparent from some of the working titles of *Bleak House*: the second working title is *The East Wind*, the seventh is *Tom-All-Along's/ The Solitary House/ Where the Wind Howled*, and the tenth and last provisional title is *Bleak House/ and the East Wind/ How they both got into Chancery/ and never got out*, before eliding it to *Bleak House* only. In the novel, the Tom-All-Along slum has dangerous servants: 'Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hour of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere' (553). Hector Gavin, a contemporary of Dickens, wrote in 1848 about the deadly powers of the wind:

In this most dirty street [...] a person named Baker, lately dead, here found a receptacle for every kind of manure [...] the decomposing organic particles which are ever being set free from the putrescent mass, are wafted by each wind that blows, over a population to whom they bring disease and death.<sup>101</sup>

Environmental concerns are deeply entangled with social ones, because most of well-off Victorians did not want to focus on London's and England's overcrowded spots,

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<sup>99</sup> Ford, Monod, *Bleak House*, p.61, note n.3.

<sup>100</sup> Ford, George, Monod, *Bleak House*, p. 901.

Gavin, Hector, 'Report on a Meeting of the Westminster Medical Society to Discuss How Cholera Is Spread', in *Bleak House*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 913-914 (first publ. in *The Lancet: A Journal of Medical and Chemical Science*, Oct. 13, 1849, pp. 431-433).

<sup>101</sup> Gavin, Hector, 'Sanitation in a London Suburb', in *Bleak House*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 913 (from Gavin, Hector, *Sanitary Ramblings* (1848)).

believing that they were the result of laziness, sin, and vices of the lower classes, rather than a serious consequence of pollution and overcrowding.<sup>102</sup> There were cries for help coming from the poor: on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, 1849, *The Times* published a letter signed by fifty-four slum-dwellers, where they lamented the harsh conditions of their environment to the indifference of their neighbours:

We are Sur, as it may be, livin in a Wilderniss, so far as the rest of London knows anything of us, or as the rich and great people care about. We live in muck and filth. We aint got no priviz, no dust bins, no drains, no water-splies, and no drain or suer in the hole place. The Suer Company, in Greek St., Soho Square, all great, rich and powerfool men, take no notice watsomdever of our complaints. The Stenche of a Gully-hole is disgustin. We all of us suffer, and numbers are ill, and if the Colera comes Lord help us.<sup>103</sup>

Although negligence was widespread, some intellectuals, journalists, and social reformers did care about their living conditions. The subeditor of *Household Words*, W. H. Wills, attacked the government for the elitist Health legislation, because of a wilful lack of a comprehensive vision to improve sanitary conditions of London's and England's slums.<sup>104</sup> In his essay, he recalls some of the episodes in which the wind had spread pollution and contagious diseases from London's poorer areas to wealthier ones, to the indifference of the institutional forces. Moreover, he argued that the costs of assisting terminally-ill people from cholera and other epidemic diseases and burying them were eight times higher than those for prevention, and he concluded with a pledge to support the Metropolitan Sanitary Association, an organization which wanted to improve the living conditions of those areas.<sup>105</sup> One of its members was Charles Dickens, who, in May 1851, gave a speech where he stated to a cheering audience that sanitation was England's

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<sup>102</sup> Diniejko, Andrzej, 'Slums and Slumming in Late-Victorian London', *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, & Culture in the age of Victoria*, 2013, pp.1-6. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/slums.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2019], p.1.

<sup>103</sup> Carter, Leighton, 'The Slum of All Fears: Dickens's Concern with Urban Poverty and Sanitation', *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, & Culture in the age of Victoria*, 2007, pp. 1-2. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/bleakhouse/carter.html>>, [Accessed 4 August 2019], p.1.

<sup>104</sup> William Henry Wills, 'Health by Act of Parliament', *Household Words*, 1.20 (1850), pp.460-463, <<http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/articles/health-by-act-of-parliament.html>> [Accessed 5 August 1850], p. 460.

<sup>105</sup> Wills, 'Health by Act of Parliament', pp. 461, 463.

most urgent need, and its reform should precede and pave the way to all other social legislation.<sup>106</sup> Previous to this speech, he published a series of articles in *Household Words* in 1850 and early 1851, for instance ‘The Last Words of the Old Year’, in which he satirised the dichotomy between England’s economic prosperity and the inefficiency in dealing with poor’s housing and the sewerage system, and ‘A December Vision’, where he described the brutishness of those areas of disease and murderous air.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, he was also involved in slum-clearance projects, to replace them with model housing for poor people, and by doing so he visited some of these areas, most notably Bermondsey, to inspect a site near Jacob’s Island, likely to have provided the setting for the fictional Tom-All-Along.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, Dickens’s awareness towards the environmental condition of England was two-folded: he tried to stir consciousness through his literary endeavours, while actively helping in projects for the benefit not only of slum-dwellers, but to improve everyone’s health standards.

The fog is the other by-product of industrialization which has received bulks of critical attention in *Bleak House*. As soon as the narrative begins, it encompasses London and the Court of Chancery. In fictional terms, characters from London are used to it, and consider it ‘a London particular’ (29), while others are worried and ask for explanations. This mirrors the real London environment, as the all-encompassing smoke was indeed a common occurrence for Londoners, yet, as Thomas Miller recalls, ‘to one unused to such a scene, there is something startling in the appearance of a vast city wrapt in a kind of darkness which seems neither to belong to the day nor to the night, at the mid-noon hour’.<sup>109</sup> The smoke that characterised the Capital at the time was a mixture of fog, gas-lights, coal-fires and other resources aimed to improve view-quality, but only worsened it. The deadly powers of the environment are underlined once again - this time, they do

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<sup>106</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘Speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association: May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1851’, in *Bleak House*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 915-916 (repr. from *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by K.J. Fielding (1960), pp.128-130), p.915.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘A December Vision’, *Household Words*, II.38 (1850), pp. 265-267, <<http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/articles/a-december-vision.html>> [Accessed 5 August 2019];

Charles Dickens, ‘The Last Words of the Old Year’, *Household Words*, II.41 (1851), pp. 337-339, <<http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/articles/the-last-words-of-the-old-year.html>> [Accessed 5 August 2019].

<sup>108</sup> John Butt, ‘“Bleak House” in the context of 1851’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 10.1 (June 1955), pp.1-22 (p. 13); Newsom, p. 100.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Miller, ‘A London Fog’, in *Bleak House*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 902-903 (repr. from *Illustrated London News*, Christmas Supplement (1849), p. 419), p. 903.

not spread from one class to the other, as it was the case with the wind and the East-End slums, but they may injury everyone:

During a heavy fog many accidents occur on the river, through barges running foul of each other, or vessels coming athwart the bridges – for there is no seeing the opening arch from the rock-like buttress, as the whole river looks like one huge bed of dense stagnant smoke, through which no human eye can penetrate.<sup>110</sup>

Smokes and lack of fresh air were too much to bear for many Londoners: in 1850, W.H. Wills wrote that these two polluting agents caused the death of around ten thousand people per year.<sup>111</sup> For what concerns the Thames, its recurrence in *Bleak House* is explored in section 4.2 – however, during those years, the Thames was a dangerous place for everyone in London: its water was poisonous, and, in the recurrent case of fog, it could become a mortal place to be in.

The weather and the climate in *Bleak House* also seem to resonate in uncanny ways. In March 1852, Dickens published the first instalment of his work, where, in Chapter Two, the first of many accounts of severe floods hitting Chesney Wold, the Dedlocks' mansion, is given. This fictional area corresponds to the English Midlands, more in detail to Rockingham Castle, Northamptonshire.<sup>112</sup> 1852 was one of England's worst years in recorded history for floods and rainfall: most notably, one of Nottingham's highest recorded inundations comes from November 1852 (River Trent), then serious flooding involved the Warwickshire area (River Leam) and Leicester (River Sence).<sup>113</sup> However, the worst tragedy happened earlier that year, on February 5<sup>th</sup>, when the Bilberry reservoir burst its banks to inundate the valley of Holmfirth, causing eighty-one casualties, floating dead bodies from the graveyard, and damaging the whole area.<sup>114</sup> This

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<sup>110</sup> Miller, 'A London Fog', p. 903.

<sup>111</sup> Wills, 'Health by Act of Parliament', p.462.

<sup>112</sup> Ford, Monod, *Bleak House*, p. 892.

<sup>113</sup> Neil MacDonald 'Reassessing flood frequency for the River Trent through the inclusion of historical flood information since AD 1320' (thesis, University of Liverpool, 2012), Table 3. Alison Williams and David Archer, 'The use of historical flood information in the English Midlands to improve risk assessment', *Hydrological Sciences Journal*, 47:1 (2002), pp. 57-76, DOI: 10.1080/02626660209492908, pp. 72-73.

<sup>114</sup>The Guardian Archive, 'From the archive, 11 February 1852: Holmfirth catastrophe as reservoir bursts', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2013/feb/11/flood-holmfirth-bilberry-reservoir-holme>> [Accessed 6 August 2019].

event deeply struck England, and news of it reached Queen Victoria. *The Holmfirth Express* in 1910 published a detailed account the natural disaster, reissued in 1991, writing that

Up to that year, it may be safely affirmed, nothing more terrific and destructive had ever happened in England. This calamity attracted at the time the attention of the whole nation, and aroused the benevolent sympathy of all classes, from the Queen on the throne to the humblest persons in the realm who had a heart to feel for the sufferings of their fellow men.<sup>115</sup>

These floods, which continued incessantly for the whole year, threatened the lives of many citizens, to the extent that George Ford and Sylvère Monod suggest that Dickens's description of the weather in *Bleak House* may have struck a chord in his readers' minds, as most of them would have been aware of the catastrophic rainfalls of that year.<sup>116</sup> Reality and fiction seem to merge with another: as established by Ghosh and Moretti, it is as if natural descriptions in the novel can move from being a filler, aimed to bring the regularity of bourgeois life into the fictional world, to become an uncanny presence, whose powers cannot be controlled by humans.<sup>117</sup> This is what happens in *Bleak House*, but it is also what happened in England of that time: wind, fog, and rain are all environmental features which can be innocuous and picturesque, but they can suddenly turn into deadly natural elements for human beings, or influence their decisions. To sum up, this last section has argued that the environment was playing a multi-faceted role in Dickens's time and around the composition of *Bleak House*, and the novel brings this all-round ambivalence into the fictional world. The next chapter introduces the plot of Dickens's work, and begins the analysis of the mutual relation between Freudian and environmental uncanny in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of *Bleak House*.

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<sup>115</sup> *Holmfirth Express*, 'The Holmfirth Flood', <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070625093134/http://www.huddersfield1.co.uk/huddersfield/holmfirthflood/>> [Accessed 6 August 2019].

<sup>116</sup> Ford, Monod, *Bleak House*, p. 899

<sup>117</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, pp. 19, 30.

## CHAPTER 2: ENVIRONMENT AND PSYCHOANALYSIS AT THE ORIGIN OF THE MOTHER-AND-DAUGHTER PLOT

This chapter draws some psychoanalytic and environmental parallels between Lady Dedlock, Esther, and their surroundings. It analyses Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of *Bleak House*: in the former, the third-person narrator introduces the Dedlocks and Chesney Wold, while in the latter Esther Summerson begins her autobiographical narrative, and deals with her childhood memories and her arrival in London as a twenty-year-old girl. The mother-and-daughter plot runs through both narratives, albeit predominantly through Esther's first-person account, and psychoanalytic and environmental constructs interact with this narrative. In particular, these include the uncanniness of the 'Dead Mother complex', as theorised by André Green, the role of Freud's 'Screen Memories' in interpreting Esther's childhood events, and the notion of the environment as agent, or filler, in Chesney Wold and London.

*Bleak House* involves about a hundred characters intertwined in two different but complementary narrations: one led by a third-person narrator, and the other told retrospectively and in first-person by Esther Summerson, one of the main characters. This web of relations gives way to a variety of plots and subplots, yet the book's central focus is two-folded. First, the Chancery suit related to a supposedly wealthy inheritance of the Jarndyce v Jarndyce case, where a bulk of wills have been found but the lazy and intricate Court of Chancery cannot understand nor find which is the last to have been written. Secondly, the novel focuses on Esther's quest for her unknown origins, which is embedded in the mother-and-daughter plot. Indeed, Lady Dedlock has a secret child, born out-of-wedlock with her former lover Captain Hawdon: this child turns out to be Esther. This mystery will be unfolded throughout the course of the narrative, because the initial setting of the novel shows a different picture: Esther is an orphan with no memory of her parents, and lives with Miss Barbary, her maternal aunt, who, despite being described by Esther as a good woman, knows what her sister did and hates her and Esther. Captain Hawdon earns his living as a law copywriter, he is known as Nemo (Latin for 'nobody') and leads a poor and unhappy life until he is found dead in his room at Krook's lodgings, whilst Lady Dedlock carries out 'bored to death' (11) her married life with a nobleman, Sir Leicester Dedlock, well-aware not to reveal her secret to anyone, and sure that her

child actually died following the childbirth, as her sister Miss Barbary told her at the time. The event which ultimately brings Esther and Lady Dedlock to the discovery of their bond happens in Chapter 2 'In Fashion', where the family lawyer Mr Tulkinghorn is reading to the Dedlocks a hand-copied document from the Jarndyce v Jarndyce suit: Lady Dedlock recognises the handwriting of her former lover, whom she believed to be dead, and faints. Sir Leicester ascribes his wife's fainting fit to the 'extremely trying' (17) hot weather, but the lawyer rightly presumes that some secret involves the author of the letter and the Lady. As a consequence, Mr Tulkinghorn tries everything he can to discover Honoria's hidden secret, while at the same time she embarks in the re-discovering of her maternal bond which eventually leads her to her death in her former lover's burial ground. Of course, Esther Summerson plays a major role in the psychological and physical quest for her mother and for her own self, which ultimately culminates with her discovery of her mother's corpse and, despite having been engaged for most of the novel with her guardian and suitor Mr John Jarndyce, with her marriage to the middle-class member and physician Mr Woodcourt.

## **2.1 Lady Dedlock and Chesney Wold: Emotional and Environmental Stillness**

Chapter 2 introduces Sir Leicester, Lady Dedlock, and their Lincolnshire mansion Chesney Wold. The third-person narrator describes the Dedlocks' aristocratic world:

There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air. (11)

The narrator uses environmental elements to portray the slow but inexorable decline of nineteenth-century aristocratic class, by symbolising them through a weary world, clung on to the defence of its resources, unable to understand reality anymore, and superseded by other planets that took its spotlight around the sun. Any growth of this world would be a sickened growth, as it cannot breathe fresh air anymore, a metaphor for its loss of

power and of brightness. The environment strongly characterises Sir and Lady Dedlock, too. Sir Leicester Dedlock believes in the centrality of the aristocratic class in England, and his anthropocentric belief mirrors the image of the unaware deadened aristocratic world:

He has a general opinion that the world might get on without the hills, but would be done up without the Dedlocks. He would on the whole admit Nature to be a good idea (a little low, perhaps, when not enclosed with a park-fence), but an idea dependent for its execution on great county families. (12)

Sir Leicester anthropocentrism mirrors his aristocracy-centrism, in believing that man overrules nature in the same way that aristocracy overrules any other class. Both beliefs are superseded by the end of the novel: the latter by the middle-class conclusion of the narrative, and the former by the novel itself, starting from this very chapter, as it makes clear that Nature cannot be fully fenced by men, rather it shapes characters and actions.

The weather and the environment melancholically influence Lincolnshire, where their mansion, Chesney Wold, is set:

My Lady Dedlock's "place" has been extremely dreary. The weather, for many a day and night, has been so wet that trees seem wet through [...] The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from an old time, the Ghost's Walk, all night. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. (11)

The description of a completely damp and flooded territory may have sounded familiar to Dickens's contemporary readers, because of the record rainfalls that were happening throughout England in 1852, around the time of this instalment (Cf.1.2.3). However, this passage is also important because it contains many elements that keep recurring later in the novel: this is what Robert Newsom labelled as the uncanny tension between the romantic and the familiar in *Bleak House*, as the opening instalment disseminates various

clues which become apparent to the reader only as the narrative progresses, re-appearing in different forms. This provides an uncanny feeling because sometimes these clues are introduced with no particular emphasis, so they tend to be quickly forgotten by a reader approaching the novel for the first time. However, this is a necessary condition for the uncanny to arise: without such forgetting of the familiar, there would be no uncanny feeling at all.<sup>118</sup> Some of these recurring motifs include the London fog, introduced twice to the reader in Chapter 1 and 3, the Ghost's Walk, which repeatedly appears in *Bleak House* by the double perspective of the first-person narrative and of the third-person narrative, and whose presence hovers in psychoanalytic and environmental uncanny ways. Moreover, the little church forms the background of the first ever meeting between the Lady and Esther in Chapter 18: once again, it is a moment strongly driven by Esther's uncanny feelings, and characterised by the presence of an ambivalent environment, too. The graves are another recurrent motif of the novel, which relate to the burial grounds in London that connect in different times, different classes and different people: most notably, Jo, Nemo, Esther, and Lady Dedlock. Moreover, the other intersection between different classes is provided by the above-mentioned aristocratic world's 'want of air', which physically characterises the other side of the fictional London, Jo and the Tom-All-Alone's slum. This creates another connection between the environment and the Freudian uncanny: for instance, it paves the way to the question of environmental agency through the uncanny and painful experience of Esther's disfiguration due to Jo's disease in Chapters 31 and 35 (cf. 3.2).

Chapter 2 sets in motion the mother-and-daughter plot. Once again, environmental elements are in the foreground, to the extent that they are naively labelled as the cause of the Lady's faintness. The family lawyer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, comes to their mansion to deal with a letter from the Chancery court case. He begins reading it, but suddenly, 'It happens that the fire is hot, where my Lady sits', and Lady Dedlock abandons her proverbial iciness, to ask impulsively who copied it. Mr. Tulkinghorn does not know the answer, although he is surprised by her sudden interest. He gets back to the letter, but, 'the heat is greater', and Lady Dedlock faints, telling that 'it is like the faintness of death' (16). Once she is brought into her room, Sir Leicester apologises to the lawyer: his wife has never

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<sup>118</sup> Newsom, p. 86.

fainted before, ‘but the weather is extremely trying – and she really has been bored to death down at our place in Lincolnshire’ (17). From an environmental perspective, this episode associates Lady Dedlock to the warm-and-cold dualism, which runs extensively throughout the novel. Moreover, from this moment, both Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock are actively engaged in what soon becomes the mother-and-daughter plot: the former by discovering what secrets the Lady may hide, and the latter to disclose if the handwriting was that of her former lover, which leads her to the discovery of her child, Esther Summerson, whom she thought stillborn.

In this chapter, the environment alternates between being a filler and being endowed with agency that characterises the environmental uncanny. It relates to fillers, in the sense that the lengthy descriptions of rainy days at Chesney Wold at a first glance do not add any notable event to the narrative, other than a regular sense of boring everyday life. In this chapter, the terrace of the ‘Ghost’s Walk’ has no other role than embodying the monotony of rainfalls: drops ‘fall, drip, drip, drip’, caught at every hour of the day by its vases. This pervasiveness of regular everyday life is exemplified in human terms by Lady Dedlock. She is ‘childless’, she always feels ‘bored to death’ (11), and her lack of stimulus is expressed in environmental terms: ‘having conquered her world, [she] fell, not into the melting, but rather into the freezing mood’ (13). Because of this apparent absence of feelings, she thinks to be indecipherable to others human being. Yet, ‘every dim star revolving about her [...] knows her weaknesses, prejudices, follies, haughtiness, and caprices’ (14). On one hand, the metaphor of the solar system we were already familiar with now comprises stars revolving around the agonizing upper-class world, ready to make their motion as profitable as possible to its expenses, and, on the other, Lady Dedlock seems to embody the barren aristocratic land, by not having any (known) children herself, and by being as bored and motionless as the surrounding Chesney Wold is.

It is in light of the interconnection between Lady Dedlock’s characterization and the environment as filler that a more in-depth analysis of this chapter can be done, towards the understanding of an uncanny pattern underlying the environment. The aristocratic life with Sir Leicester bores Lady Dedlock, and this boredom mirrors and is mirrored by the surrounding environment: Coste, Huguet, and Vanfasse coin the term ‘mindscapes’, to describe ‘landscapes [that] always complement what they frame or foreground in subtle

and complex ways. Some of them even seem to exist in their own right and not as mere frameworks for other subjects'.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay argues that the environment may symbolise the past, or foreshadow the future, as it alternatively provides some viewpoints on the Dedlocks' past and future: mutually, landscapes are always saturated with and shaped by the past.<sup>120</sup> He also believes that the environmental description alerts us of Lady Dedlock's deep internal psychological sufferings, reaching a state of 'chronic depression'.<sup>121</sup> This is why it can be said that from the beginning the environment stands in-between agency and fillers, as it seems capable to understand and to mirror the characters' feelings deeper and more accurately than even kinship can do, as exemplified by Sir Leicester's inability to properly understand his wife's deep malaise, despite his genuine love towards her. Ghosh describes the environmental uncanny as the feeling of 'finding out that one's telephone has been tapped for years, or that the neighbors have long been eavesdropping on family discussion'.<sup>122</sup> Arguably, this can be applied to the description of Lady Dedlock from the beginning, because it is as if the environment were there at the time of the Lady's secret, concerning her former lover and the illegitimate child, and never ceased to haunt her, from Chapter 2 until her death.

This provides a connection between the uncanny agency of the environment and a psychoanalytical uncanny approach to motherhood: John Jordan associates Lady Dedlock's depressive state with André Green's 'Dead Mother complex', which deals with the relationship between an absent mother and her child.<sup>123</sup> According to this theory, the mother is not literally dead, but suffers from depression and melancholia to the extent that she is emotionally dead and unable to nurture her offspring. This complex usually arises from the loss of a person cathected by the mother, or because of an abrupt and negative change in the nuclear family. Also, the mother's melancholy may originate from incomplete mourning. By contrast, the child is marked by loss of meaning, thus it believes it is to blame for the mother's detachment, as a consequence of its drives towards her, and

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<sup>119</sup> Marie-Amélie Coste, Christine Huguet, Nathalie Vanfasse, 'Introduction', in *Dickensian Landscapes*, ed. by Marie-Amélie Coste and others (Grenoble: Centre d'Etudes sur les Modes de la Représentation Anglophone, 2016), 1-7 (p.1).

<sup>120</sup> Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay 'Uncanny Connected Vessels: the Country and the City in *Bleak House*', in *Dickensian Landscapes*, ed. by Coste and others, 72-85 (pp.74, 78).

<sup>121</sup> Dupeyron-Lafay, p.80.

<sup>122</sup> Ghosh, p. 31.

<sup>123</sup> Jordan, p. 48.

it cannot imagine any other reason.<sup>124</sup> The child's ego tries to enact at least two defence mechanisms to contrast this emotive neglect: the first, is the decathexis of the maternal object, a psychical murder of the object, accomplished without hatred, and the second is the unconscious identification with the dead mother, in the hope to establish a reunion with her.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, both mother and child suffer from depression: the former's is 'black depression', originated by the cases described above, and the latter's is 'blank/white depression', permeated by a sense of emptiness, and by a sense of guilt.<sup>126</sup> John Jordan identifies Lady Dedlock as emotionally dead from the beginning, suffering from melancholia and depression originating by the double loss she experienced: that of her former lover, Captain Hawdon, and of her child, both of whom she believes to be dead. This secret loss is triggered by Tulkinghorn's letter, as she thinks for the first that perhaps at least his lover may be alive.<sup>127</sup> This ambiguity between life and death is what may originate an uncanny feeling: Freud argues that death may generate an uncanny feeling because it is part of our primitive beliefs. This happens because man's outlook on death has changed little throughout history: he still has a strong emotional reaction towards it, and uncertainty surrounds our scientific knowledge about death – whether and why it is unavoidable - which is partly due to the unreceptiveness of our unconscious towards our own death.<sup>128</sup> In Lady Dedlock's case, it is the mourning of the members of what may have been her beloved family, Captain Hawdon and Esther, that causes her emotional death. Moreover, it should also be considered that this symbolical death could also have been caused by incomplete mourning, as she was told both her lover and her daughter were dead, but presumably she had never seen any of the bodies. This relates to what Freud describes as the uncanniness of the blurring of reality and fantasy: this happens when 'we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary', and it is characterised by 'the excessive stress that is laid on psychological reality, as opposed to material reality'.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, Lady Dedlock's emotional void originates from the predominance of the psychical reality over the material one, as she was never put in front of the materiality of the death of her two cathected objects:

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<sup>124</sup> André Green, p. 150.

<sup>125</sup> Green, pp. 149-151.

<sup>126</sup> Jordan, pp. 48-49.

<sup>127</sup> Jordan, p. 50.

<sup>128</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 148-149.

<sup>129</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 150-151.

rather, it was the psychological certainty that both of them were dead to arise the ‘Dead Mother complex’, and this is why the sudden hypothesis of Captain Hawdon being alive arises an uncanny feeling, with consequences on her psychological mindset, and on the environmental landscape.

## **2.2 The Beginning of Esther’s Narrative: Her Childhood Memories**

Esther’s first-person narrative begins in Chapter 3, and provides four issues that develop the intersection of the mother-and-daughter plot with psychoanalysis and the environment. The first, is the reliability of Esther’s narrative; the second, her childhood memories; the third, her doll; lastly, the environmental perception of her childhood days and of London. Esther’s opening narrative spans from her childhood memories of growing up with her godmother, followed by the six years spent at Greenleaf, Reading, and finally by her arrival in London to get acquainted with the Chancery case prior to her stay in John Jarndyce’s Bleak House.

For what concerns the reliability of her narrative, what is immediately noticeable is the gap between what Esther says about herself, and what the actual events are. The nearer we get to the end of the narrative, the more relevant it becomes, this is why stressing this ambivalence from the beginning is important. She opens her narrative by writing that

I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. [...] I have not by any means a quick understanding. When I love a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten. But even that may be my vanity.  
(17)

Two of Esther’s characteristics are introduced in this passage: modesty and mediocrity. The first is apparent in her trying to minimise her understanding, by subordinating it to feelings, although throughout the whole novel she generally seems to understand things quicker than most of the characters. This happens for example when she describes the growing affection between her cousins Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, or when she

begins to underline Richard's growing naivety and tendency to squander money already from Chapter 6, whose habits slowly degenerate in Richard's death. Whilst Esther underlines that affection quickens her understanding, this does not always hold true: most notably, the quest for her mother at the end of the novel sees Esther at the mercy of events, unable to clearly discern them. Despite stressing her mediocrity at the beginning of her narrative, we find her a few pages later, at about fourteen years old, learning and soon rising to a teaching position at Greenleaf school. In introducing this six-year-span at Greenleaf, she still struggles with her autobiographical narrative: 'It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of my life! But my little body will soon fall into the background now.' (27). Once again, what she says is at odds with reality: the narrative remains that of her life, as she goes on telling her emotions in reading the invitational letter to London, and then she focuses on what happened there. So, Esther's introductory chapter sets an opposition that recurs throughout the whole book, the ambivalence between her modesty in the outspoken wish to refrain from making the narrative about herself, and the fact that she is writing her autobiography, and therefore it is a narrative about herself, as she only rarely acknowledges it.

Her childhood memories are ambiguous, too: in the same way that Esther is ambivalent in considering the narrative about herself or not, or in overemphasising her mediocrity, here it emerges a sharp contrast between what Esther as a narrator recalls being her feelings towards her godmother, and what the memories actually tell us. To try to infer some meaning from her memories, some insights from Sigmund Freud's essay 'Screen Memories' may help, in particular due to its stressing of the impact of childhood memories into adulthood.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, André Green's 'Dead Mother complex', already discussed in relation to Lady Dedlock (cf. 2.1), provides a framework for Esther's relation with her maternal kinship. Esther's childhood memories are indeed concerned with her very early years spent at her godmother's, who turns out to be her maternal aunt. Overall, Esther's narrative is constituted by three different chronologies: the retrospective narrator, the married Esther who tells what already happened, and who closes the

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<sup>130</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories', in *The Uncanny*, trans. by D. McLintock, and intro. by H. Haughton, 1-22 (p.3).

narrative in chapter 67; Esther as a character, the twenty-year-old growing woman involved in the Chancery plot and in the discovery of her origins, from the second half of chapter 3; and lastly there is Esther the little girl, whose childhood events happened before the major plots are set in motion and occupy the first half of Chapter 3, but whose impact reverberates through the life of the growing woman. Of course, Esther the young child could not genuinely know about her origins, nor that who she thought to be her godmother was in truth her maternal aunt, Miss Barbary, who raised her in secret after telling her sister (Lady Dedlock) that her child was stillborn. Yet, Esther is writing her autobiography as a woman, and more in detail these first pages are recollections from her 'earliest remembrance', when she was a 'very little girl' (17). This is why it can be assumed that what Esther writes is retrospectively shaped, imbued with a knowledge of events that the young child could not have had.

Talking about her godmother, she stresses how kind and devoted she was, although in her words there is an implied contradiction: 'She was a good, good woman! [...] She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel – but she never smiled' (17). She never smiled because presumably she hated Esther, for sure she hated what she represented: a child born out of an illegal relationship. Indeed, she forbade the young child to celebrate her birthdays, which to her were only a reminder of Esther's 'orphaned and degraded' status (19), to the extent that on the day of her birthday the godmother tells her gloomily 'It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!' (19). Esther is devastated to hear this: yet, from the following day she cannot help but being 'fervently grateful to her in my heart, than ever' (20). So, on one hand Esther shares the memories of her days at her godmother's, imbued of her godmother's hatred towards her, and on the other Esther also recalls what she thinks she felt at the moment, and those feelings are clearly at odds with the events. Perhaps, the death-scene of her godmother provides the only example which implicitly reveals Esther's true feelings: when Miss Barbary collapses, and lays for more than a week in bed, Esther remembers that

I kissed her, thanked her, prayed for her, asked her for her blessing and forgiveness, entreated her to give me the least sign that she knew or heard me. No, no, no. Her face was immovable. To the very last, and even afterwards, her frown remained unsoftened. On the day that my

poor good godmother was buried, the gentleman in black with the white neckcloth reappeared. (21)

What stands out in this passage is that Esther stresses her good feelings against the harshness and toughness of her godmother's, even prior to her death: from her narrative, it is ambiguous whether Miss Barbary could actually reply or even notice Esther, because after her collapse it is not said whether she spoke any word to anyone, and it can be presumed that her aunt fell into a comatose state that the young child did not notice, or did not want to mention. Indeed, 'her face was immovable', and soon afterwards death came, and throughout the whole week of her illness and following her death her facial expression did not change. The last sentence of this passage is the most fascinating: as soon as her godmother is buried, Esther opens a new phase of her life, symbolised by the arrival of the gentleman, Mr Kenge, from the London law-firm Kenge and Carboy's. What strikes is that the godmother's death goes unmourned, and despite the narrator's efforts to stress her affection towards Miss Barbary, at the moment of her death she is the one unmoved, and ready to go on with her life as soon as the first occasion presents itself. This ambivalence may arise from what Rosemarie Bodenheimer identifies as 'deliberate suppression'. In analysing *David Copperfield* to understand the role of memory and retrospective first-person narrator, she notices that the narrator tries to cover up haunting painful memories, to give the impression of his younger self free from anger and resentment:

In moments like these, knowledge about the activity of suppression circulates on the surface of the narrative, although the narrator does not interpret it for us. His [Dickens's] decision in *David Copperfield* to link the exploration of memory with a retrospective first-person voice suggests his willingness to confront both the memory that erases and the memory that persists.<sup>131</sup>

Arguably, deliberate suppression is what happens to Esther in dealing with her childhood memories, because what the narrator tells she was feeling as a young child and what she

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<sup>131</sup> Bodenheimer, pp. 76-77.

was experiencing at her godmother's are at odds with each other, until the unmourning of the godmother's death finally reveals Esther's emotional void towards her.

Esther's unmourning also relates to Green's 'Dead Mother complex' – this time, this theory may enhance the understanding of Esther's ambivalent feelings towards Miss Barbary, by bearing in mind the fundamental aspect that Esther as a narrator knows her godmother to be her maternal aunt, which in turn allows to draw a more closely relation with the mother. According to Green's theory, a consequence of the emotional death of the mother is that the child feels guilty of having caused it, as it is characterised by loss of meaning, because the child has no other means to understand causality other than attributing every fault to itself.<sup>132</sup> Esther's role as the infant of the 'Dead Mother' is already apparent from Chapter 3, as it interconnects in uncanny ways with the Lady's situation in Chapter 2, most notably by the perceived guilt of the infant and the uncanniness of the blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy, life and death. Indeed, in the same way that the Lady never saw the dead bodies of her child and of her lover, which leads her psychical reality to overrule the material one, resulting in depression and boredom until she notices Tulkinghorn's letter, Esther does not remember the materiality of her mother:

I had never heard my mama spoken of. I had never heard of my papa either, but I felt more interested about my mama. I had never worn a black frock, that I could recollect. I had never been shown my mama's grave. I had never been told where it was. Yet I had never been taught to pray for any relation but my godmother. (18)

This passage exemplifies Esther's lack of material elements to associate her mother's death with reality: she is told her mother died, but she does not have any other element that prompts her to permanently close the door to the idea of her mother's perhaps being alive. Her godmother is her only relation, and her only source to inquiry after her mother: 'O, do pray tell me something of her. What did I do to her? How did I lose her? Why am I so different from other children, and why is it my fault, dead godmother?' (19), to which the godmother replies by the infamous phrase that Esther and her mother were mutually each other's disgrace, and it would have been better she had never been born. Esther

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<sup>132</sup> Green, p. 150.

cannot help but focusing once again over guilt: 'I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confusedly felt guilty and yet innocent)' (20). The recurrent pattern in these passages is guilt in relation to the self: Esther's questions inquire after what role she played in her mother's departure. So, Esther feels guilty to have done something bad to her mother, and it is her fault that she is lonely and different from other children, although she also feels innocent because she does not know what she did, yet she is aware there is a misdeed to be repaired. This is why Green's 'Dead Mother complex' and the Freudian uncanny can be associated with young Esther: although she is told her mother died, the lack of material certainty does not make her fully believe this is true. However, since she is constituted by loss of meaning, because the mother departed when Esther was a child and thus the daughter did not have any explication of what was happening, she experienced it as a catastrophe about which only herself was to be blamed.<sup>133</sup> Esther's guilt pervades the absence of the mother, and the presence of the emotionally dead aunt, Esther's only maternal relation: despite Miss Barbary's emotional iciness towards the niece, what Esther can do is only to blame herself, so this sense of guilt may also explain why she uses affectionate tones towards her aunt, despite the objective ill-treatment. She feels so guilty over the absent mother that she feels culpable of the aunt's lack of maternal affection, too.

Bearing in mind that Miss Barbary is Lady Dedlock's sister, the behaviour little Esther finally has towards her aunt resembles the one she has at the end of the novel with her mother: despite the seemingly affectionate disposition towards her, once she finds Lady Dedlock dead, Esther does not mourn her, rather she is immediately ready to 'proceed to other passages of my narrative' (714). Whilst this passage is explored more in detail in section 4.2, for now it should be noticed how this repetitive framework may arise an uncanny feeling to the reader. Indeed, Esther's narrative of her mother's death is permeated by many psychological and environmental implications: whilst the latter are developed later in Esther's narrative – the awareness of her surroundings becomes more explicit once she gets to London, towards the end of Chapter 3 - the emotional and psychological frameworks that underlie both the mother's and the aunt's passages are interconnected, and comprise: affection towards the maternal, death of the maternal,

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<sup>133</sup> Green, p. 150.

unmourning of the maternal, and finally the beginning of a new stage in Esther's life. This is why Carolyn Dever argues that the godmother occupies the position of the mother in Esther's childhood narrative, and that throughout this chapter

Esther rehearses the drama of maternal death, literalizing the tropes of loss with the death of her godmother, an event that presents the most practical implications of maternal loss devoid of emotional content. [...] But this maternal death goes unmourned; the godmother has only ever offered Esther a cheerless existence.<sup>134</sup>

It is true that the godmother offered Esther a cheerless childhood, although the girl never explicitly states that. However, the aunt's death is not the only one unmourned: the same happens with Lady Dedlock's death, and this is why one mirrors the other. Following this parallel, it should be considered whether the original emotional framework between the two episodes may be that aroused by Lady Dedlock's death, and, in describing her aunt's death, the narrator reflects in her very young self what she more consciously experienced later in life, as a grown woman. This is why Freud's 'Screen Memories' may provide an interpretative pattern to these memories.

In 'Screen Memories', Freud is interested in the process of repression that involves childhood memories. Overall, he considers this process unconscious, constructed 'almost as works of fiction'.<sup>135</sup> He states that while childhood experiences leave indelible traces on the inner self, most of the times these memories do not mirror events as they happened, rather they are the result of a compromise between two psychical forces: one that would remember the original experience because of its importance, and the other, the force of resistance, that opposes this choice. The resulting compromise involves the processes of displacement and association: usually, it is not the experience itself that supplies the memory image, but another psychical element/object connected to and displaced from the original. This is how repression in memory occurs: what is repressed is replaced by something spatially or temporally close.<sup>136</sup> However, the opposite holds true, too: this means that the screen memory may represent thoughts and

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<sup>134</sup> Carolyn Dever, 'Broken mirror, broken words: *Bleak House*', in *Death of the Mother from Dickens to Freud*, ed. by Carolyn Dever (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81-106 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585302> (pp. 89-90).

<sup>135</sup> Freud, 'Screen Memories', p. 14.

<sup>136</sup> Freud, 'Screen Memories', pp. 3, 6, 7.

impressions from a later period of the person's life, even though the experience itself remains the original one, or one closely associated with the original by links of a symbolic or similar nature. Some of the variations from the original experience include: transferring an event to a place where it did not happen, merging two people into one, substituting one person for another, or merging two different experiences into one.<sup>137</sup> Two conclusions that can be drawn from this study relate to the difficulties to properly distinguish between real memory and screen memory: it is unsure whether we have 'any conscious memories *from* childhood: perhaps we have only memories *of* childhood [that] show us the first years of our lives not as they were, but as they appeared to us at later periods' [italics in the original].<sup>138</sup> However, what is sure is that 'all autobiographical memory is always retrospectively shaped [...] and the distinction between memory and fiction is almost as slippery as that between memory and screen memory'.<sup>139</sup> Esther's narrative is indeed retrospectively shaped, and this is why the argument that memories of her childhood were actually shaped by later events of her life, namely the mother's death, may be supported through Freud's insights.

Moreover, Esther's screen memories relate to her condition as child of the 'Dead Mother'. Green argues that the subject of this complex is likely to have repressed by decathexis some memories of the dead mother, which remain latent in the subject, and may appear in form of a screen memory.<sup>140</sup> This is why some hints of the 'Dead Mother complex' may be discernible from the childhood experiences Esther recalls, or in what she says her feelings were. If Esther were a reliable narrator, perhaps the reader might be tempted to trust every part of her narrative, but Esther's narrative is ambiguous from the beginning: this provides the key starting point to question these memories. Overall, it is very likely that the experiences Esther tells were true: Miss Barbary was in truth her aunt, and her ill-treatment of the child was due to her hatred of Esther's illegitimacy and of her sister's sin. However, there are significant overlapping contents between her childhood relationship with the aunt, and the adult one with her mother, and Freud's screen memories originate from these parallels. Miss Barbary is as cold towards Esther as Lady Dedlock is when, later in the narrative, she emerges for the first time as Esther's mother,

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<sup>137</sup> Freud, 'Screen Memories', pp. 15, 20, 21.

<sup>138</sup> Freud, 'Screen Memories', p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> Haughton, 'Introduction', p. xx.

<sup>140</sup> Green, p. 159.

and asks her to consider her dead. The Lady decides to put the Dedlock's family honour well above her daughter, by rejecting her. Esther's behaviour towards the mother parallels that towards the aunt: Esther apparently bears affectionate feelings towards her, and stresses them throughout the narrative. However, when the mother dies, her death goes unmourned, and Esther can finally 'proceed to other passages of my narrative' (714). What differs from the death of the aunt is Esther's age: when the events with her mother happened, she was already past her twenties. By contrast, in the ones with her aunt she is only a growing child, who may have very well remembered such traumatic experiences, but whose actual feelings could have been displaced and associated with the ones she had towards her mother, the absence of the two unmourning scenes working as a bridge between the two maternal events. The 'Dead Mother complex' works twofold within the context of the screen memory: first, the underlying emotive patterns of Esther's relation towards her maternal relatives resemble each other, to the extent that it may be argued that her memories *from* childhood are actually memories *of* childhood, where the experiences she had with her mother as a grown woman are projected back to her time as a young child at her aunt's. Secondly, Esther's feeling in Chapter 3 are permeated by the guilt she often experiences when dealing with the maternal. In childhood, it is caused by the absence of material reality and loss of meaning concerning the mother's disappearance, and by the emotionally dead maternal aunt; later, guilt is aroused by the Dead Mother's rejection of Esther, which reinforces the subject's perception to be the cause of the Lady's downfall (cf. 3.3), and it is lastly projected back into her childhood memories.

It is Esther's doll, Dolly, to provide the most straightforward relation with Freud's uncanny. This is due to the uncanniness of dolls, automata, and wax-works inscribed by Freud himself in his essay on the uncanny: in focusing on Hoffman's short story 'The Sandman', he stresses the ambiguity surrounding Olimpia's status as animate or inanimate. Moreover, he considers the infantile attitude of treating dolls as if they were alive, or wishing they actually were alive, as providing an uncanny feeling.<sup>141</sup> The relation between Esther's doll and Freud's uncanny was explored by Robyn Shiffman. First, Dolly exemplifies the uncanniness in relation to the boundary between the human and the

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<sup>141</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 135, 141.

nonhuman; secondly, the doll and Esther's childhood memories reappear in defining moments of Esther's sexual development, providing an uncanny feeling of repetition and a proof of their long-standing pervasiveness in the unconscious of the child.<sup>142</sup> Dolly is characterised by human traits from the beginning of the narrative:

She used to sit propped up in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me – or not so much at me, I think, as at nothing – while I busily stitched away, and told her every one of my secrets. (17)

Beautiful complexion, rosy lips, staring at me: these are all elements that could easily be applied to a human. The only hint of this description that prevents us from considering Dolly as completely alive is that she stares at nothing. However, the doll is Esther's only friend, and she confides everything to her, including her pledge to 'repair the fault I had been born with' (20). Some critics have considered Dolly in light of Esther's motherhood, as a substitute for the lack of the mother, as in the case of Carolyn Dever, or in relation to Esther's own approach to motherhood, as Sarah Cash did. In the first perspective, the relationship between Esther and the doll is analysed through object-relations theory: in this way, the doll is a transitional object, and acts as a substitute for the mother, through which Esther as a child begins to negotiate self-other relationships.<sup>143</sup> By contrast, Sarah Cash reads the doll as being the first child Esther cares for and nurtures, thus represents the motherly element of her character.<sup>144</sup> These two approaches can be helpful to interpret the last scene with Dolly in Esther's childhood: the burial. In a striking contrast with Esther's aunt, and, later, with Lady Dedlock, the doll is the only one to be properly mourned. This happens following the aunt's death, when Esther is finally ready to leave for Greenfield on a frosty and snowy day:

A day or two before, I had wrapped the dear old doll in her own shawl, and quietly laid her – I am half ashamed to tell it – in the garden-earth, under the tree that shaded my old window. (24)

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<sup>142</sup> Robyn L. Schiffman, 'Wax-Work, Clock-Work, and Puppet-Shews: Bleak House and the Uncanny', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 30 (2001), pp.159-171 (159, 162, 163).

<sup>143</sup> Dever, p. 88.

<sup>144</sup> Cash, p. 65.

In view of Dolly as a transitional object for the mother, Carolyn Dever argues that this burial is both symbolic and ineffective:

Esther here repeats in literal form the psychological drama enacted by her own mother on her own birthday: a mother burying her dead baby. Esther is burying her doll-baby, her godmother, and in fact her childhood. Perhaps most importantly, however, she is doing as her godmother wished and burying her mother, for from this point on, her lost mother goes unmentioned until the actual moment of reunion.<sup>145</sup>

Sarah Cash fundamentally agrees with Dever's analysis, and she adds one more layer:

Esther's burial of her doll is a chilling representation of Esther's own mother symbolically burying Esther herself after Esther's fictional death. [...] But Esther's doll is more than just a representation of Esther herself. The doll is also Esther's child, and she is the first baby that Esther cares for and nurtures. As Esther buries her doll, she also buries her own maternity. [...] She lowers herself and her sexual motherhood into the ground with her dead doll.<sup>146</sup>

Both perspectives are complementary and thought-provoking – however, they are ambiguous in two points: Cash states that Esther buries her own motherhood, but this overlooks the motherly affection she has towards many of her London companions. Moreover, by the end of the novel she becomes a real mother of two daughters, thus stating that Esther's motherly instinct is buried with the doll might be misleading. The comparison of Dolly's burial and Lady Dedlock's burial of the child is fascinating, although it is unclear whether Lady Dedlock buried a child thinking it was her own, or she did not bury any, and believed Miss Barbary's words in telling her that her child was stillborn. The second option is the most likely, as in Chapter 36 it is told that Esther was only laid aside as dead, and, following some signs of life, Miss Barbary brought her home, and raised her in secrecy. However, Dever's and Cash's interpretations reiterate the importance of material reality over the psychological one, and this resonates within the uncanniness of the 'Dead Mother' complex: the fact that Esther buries her doll is but

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<sup>145</sup> Dever, pp. 90-91.

<sup>146</sup> Cash, pp. 64-65.

another proof of mother and daughter embedded in this complex, and contributes to intensify the uncanny feeling resulting from the blurring of life and death, of reality and imagination. Whether this burial is understood as Lady Dedlock burying her daughter, or as Esther burying her mother, what it is perceived is that both characters suffer from the lack of material reality, overruled by the psychical reality of what others told them, and try to cope with this uncertainty by creating a substitute for material – and maternal – reality, the burial of the surrogate of a mother or child. The predominance of psychical reality is mirrored in what both characters feel, and overall in their behaviour.

### **2.3 Esther's Perception of the Environment and the Agency of the Urban City**

At a first glance, the importance of the environment in Esther's autobiography becomes apparent less in Chapter 3 than later in the narrative. As a consequence, analysing Esther's introduction to her life from an environmental perspective may not arise an all-encompassing merging with a psychoanalytic reading, as it was the case for Lady Dedlock in Chapter 2. However, there are some seeds that are planted in Chapter 3, whose sprouts begin to grow as the narrative progresses, as soon as the clues that lead to Esther and Lady Dedlock's bond grow. These seeds are: a different and more explicit awareness of her surroundings from the moment Esther gets to London, compared to the time of her childhood memories; the way that the capital's surroundings mirror Esther's feelings; and the role of the environment as filler or agent, which includes a comparison between London and Chesney Wold, the settings of these introductory chapters.

Prior to her arrival in London, Esther seems perceptive of her surroundings twice. The first happens on the evening of her birthday, just prior to her godmother's violent words, and relates to the surrounding homely atmosphere: 'My godmother and I were sitting at the table before the fire. The clock ticked, the fire clicked; not another sound had been heard in the room, or in the house, for I don't know how long' (18). This passage sets an opposition between a figurative coldness and a physical warmth, which to some extent recalls that of Lady Dedlock in Chapter 2, but most importantly anticipates the perpetual return of this dichotomy in the mother-and-daughter encounters and in the climatic final quest for Lady Dedlock. Cold is the atmosphere of the house, while warm

is the heat arising from the chimney. The stillness of this description seems to be that of Chesney Wold: both arise because of a deaden atmosphere, which in the case of the aristocratic family is the result of the boredom and of the emotional void of Sir Leicester's wife, and, in Esther's case, mirrors the strained relationship between her and her aunt. This passage also recalls a literal meaning of the uncanny, that of homely (canny) and unhomely (uncanny): the feeling of the uncanny arises when something that is perceived as familiar, comfortable, and homely suddenly becomes a threatening, unfamiliar presence – a chimney fire warming an house more closely relates to a feeling of comfortableness, than one of uncanny and threatening stillness. By contrast, in Esther's perception of the house, the fire creates an uncanny atmosphere, prelude to the aunt's violent words towards her. Symbolically, the warmness of the fire contributes to create an icy scene, which relate to the aunt's attitude towards Esther. Moreover, in the child's second perception of the surroundings, coldness definitely overrules warmness. This brief and apparently innocuous impression is introduced in a few words in the passage that comes between her departure for Greenfield and the burial of her doll: she notices that 'an old hearthrug with roses on it, which always seemed to me the first thing in the world I had ever seen, was hanging outside in the frost and snow' (23-24). What is by definition tapestry for the familiar - thus canny - Victorian hearth now abdicates its association to a warm spot, and hangs useless outside the house, in the cold and snow.

Esther begins to observe the environment in a different way once she gets to London. Following the six years spent at Greenleaf after her aunt's death, Esther is asked by the law firm Kenge and Carboy's, on behalf of John Jarndyce, to come to London and become the companion of Miss Ada Clare, one of the court case's wards alongside her cousin Richard Carstone. The London environment differs completely from that of Chesney Wold in Lincolnshire, and also from that of Esther's childhood days and in Greenleaf. From the moment she reaches London, Esther is struck by her new surroundings. When she gets off the conveyance, she is welcomed by Mr. Guppy, a law clerk from the firm, to whom she asks

whether there was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen.

"Oh dear no, miss," he said. "This is a London particular."

I had never heard of such a thing.

“A fog, miss,” said the young gentleman.

“O indeed!” said I. (29)

The fog plays a multifaceted role. First of all, it may arise an uncanny feeling on readers according to what Robert Newsom termed as an uncanny feature of *Bleak House*, the fact that through the double narrative the same character, thing, or event, is often introduced at least twice, in a different shape.<sup>147</sup> This provides an uncanny effect by playing on the dichotomy between familiar and unfamiliar, because readers are likely to be introduced to a character or place from a different light that makes it look like new, only to discover afterwards that it was already a familiar feature. From this perspective, the fog in Chapter 3 represents the return of the familiar in a different shape: readers were already aware of it since the first page of the novel, which depicted the all-encompassing London fog, with its centre in the Court of Chancery.

In addition, this double uncanny perspective on the fog relates to the difference between objective and subjective experiences. Jesse Oak Taylor follows Michel De Certeau in arguing that this duplicity is what characterises urban experience: on one hand, the third-person view of the city mirrors that of cartographers and city planners, and it is characterised by a view from the above, while Esther’s perspective is that of the sensorial experience of the pedestrian.<sup>148</sup> Of course, not every character experiences the fog in the same way: for Guppy, the character from London, it is just a ‘London particular’. In Taylor’s words, his reply

abdicates the responsibility to explain, suggesting that it is the "natural" climate of the city, in the rhetorical move by which nature is evoked to preclude analysis by ascribing social conditions to a timeless, noncontingent certainty.<sup>149</sup>

This brings up an important point in discussing the London environment: fog, pollution, and sanitation were all interrelated in a chain of causal relation. (cf. 1.2.3). In the same way that the description of Chesney Wold resonates in the record English floods of 1852,

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<sup>147</sup> Newsom, p.86.

<sup>148</sup> Taylor, p.11.

<sup>149</sup> Taylor, p. 16.

Esther's astonished reaction and Guppy's calm behaviour embody that of strangers and Londoners in front of the capital's environmental condition. Indeed, this passage from *Bleak House* comes really close to mid-nineteenth-century London: in 1849, Thomas Miller wrote that

Although a real Londoner looks upon a dense December fog as a common occurrence [...] to one unused to such a scene, there is something startling in the appearance of a vast city wrapt in a kind of darkness which seems neither to belong to the day nor the night, at the mid-noon hour.<sup>150</sup>

Moreover, the social origin of the fog is embedded in a broader discourse involving agency of the nonhuman: this is what John Parham defines as the toxic consequences of 'the power of things'.<sup>151</sup> For what concerns agency and the nonhuman, in Guppy's reply there is no hint to any amount of environmental agency: rather, in fictional terms, the fog stands as a filler, a topic for everyday conversation, as the fog hovering over London was indeed part of the city's everyday life, and apparently caused no surprise or trouble. Thus, Guppy stands in what Ghosh termed the nineteenth-century tradition of considering Nature moderate and orderly, and this is why he perceives the fog as filler, superseding its deadly consequences.<sup>152</sup> Just to name a toxic power of the fog, at that time Victorians thought that diseases were spread through air and vapour, which took deadly particles from decomposed matter and disseminated it around the city.<sup>153</sup> This theory, called 'miasma theory', grants agency to the environment, spreading toxicity and diseases, and the only way for the Victorians to avoid it would have been by severely improving the capital's sanitary and environmental conditions. In *Bleak House*, the prevalent attitude towards these problems is that of Guppy, as many London characters are not troubled by fog or pollution issues. However, as Esther's reaction to her surroundings points out, there are some characters that notice the importance of the environment, and the dangers that nonhuman agency posits for humans. So, in Esther's chapter the fog is experienced at three different levels: as readers, we are reintroduced to

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas Miller, 'A London Fog', p.903.

<sup>151</sup> Parham, p. 116.

<sup>152</sup> Ghosh, p. 22.

<sup>153</sup> Parham, p. 119.

it, and it becomes an uncanny source of the return of the un/familiar; for Londoners, it is nothing more than a 'London particular' that permanently characterises the city, and in labelling the fog as such they absolve themselves from analysing its real social causes and consequences; to Esther, it brings curiosity and fear, and symbolises the opening of a new step in her life, based in the industrial London. At the same time, this opens the new framework of the urban city in the narrative of *Bleak House*, in sharp contrast with Chesney Wold. What it is left to discuss is how Esther perceives her new experience in the urban world, and how London can be compared with the Dedlocks' mansion.

When entering London for the first time, Esther seems to be at loss with her surroundings: 'I was quite persuaded that we were there, when we were ten miles off; and when we really were there, that we should never get there' (28). Chaos pervades the streets: 'every other conveyance seemed to be running into us, and we seemed to be running into every other conveyance' (28). Moreover, the impact with London is problematic for Esther's sense of smell: 'We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought) [...] that I wondered how people kept their senses' (29). In addition, Esther notices a grave, an element which already recurred in Chesney Wold: there, it was referred to as 'a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves' (11). By contrast, Esther sees a burial ground under Lincoln's Inn Chapel, an area of the Court of Chancery: 'And there really was a churchyard, outside under some cloisters, for I saw the gravestones from the staircase window' (29). Whilst there is no direct relation between the two graves, it is significant that the introductory chapters of the mother-and-daughter plot bear this element that soon becomes of primary importance in the narrative, in both psychoanalytical and environmental terms. Moreover, this element and the labyrinthic nature of Esther's approach to London have been considered by Allan Pritchard as paving the way to the novel's urban gothic, a new definition of the genre as opposed to the old and traditional rural gothic, represented for instance by Chesney Wold. He argued that Dickens's urban gothic adapted traditional rural gothic conventions to convey an original sense of social criticism through the horrors of the modern city.<sup>154</sup> So, the labyrinthic London can be seen as the ultimate gothic castle, with all its secrets and intricacies, but also recalls the intricate architecture of the

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<sup>154</sup> Pritchard, p. 433.

Lincolnshire estate.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, the critic believes that moving back and forward from Chesney Wold to London makes clear that rural Gothic elements in the Dedlocks' mansion exist in much more powerful forms in the city, 'where they are not only more horrific than the conventional rural representation, but filled with implications of social failure'.<sup>156</sup>

Pritchard's analysis is mostly concerned with environmental issues in the country and the city. This dichotomy is exemplified in the contraposition between London and Chesney Wold, which in turn can be analysed from an ecocritical perspective based on nonhuman agency. For instance, John Parham notes how the power of nonhuman things differs from country to city: in Chesney Wold, it seems to be a less effective force, which embodies the stagnant and fading power of the Dedlocks; by contrast, in the city, the power of things is more pronounced and literal.<sup>157</sup> This becomes apparent by turning to Esther's confusion once she gets into Kenge and Carboy's office:

Everything was so strange – the stranger for its being night in the day-time, the candles burning with a white flame, and looking raw and cold [...] The I went on, thinking, thinking, thinking, and the fire went on, burning, burning, burning; and the candles went on flickering and guttering, and there were no snuffers [...] (29-30)

Labyrinth, smells, fog, and darkness: these elements influence Esther's perception of the environment, and she seems lost in the chaos of the urban city. However, to some extent Pritchard and Parham underestimate the environmental elements of Chesney Wold: whilst it is accurate that the toxic London environment cannot be detached from its social causes, it is also true that the natural surroundings of the Dedlocks' mansion exemplify social failure as much as London does, as the opening remarks of the narrator in Chapter 2 make clear (cf. 2.1). What differs is the way nonhuman powers are represented: in the case of Chesney Wold, their agency stands in their pervasiveness of the area, as they seem to properly embody and contribute to the dullness of the mid-nineteenth-century aristocratic class, and to Lady Dedlock's emotional void. So, in Chapter 2 nonhuman agency haunts

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<sup>155</sup> Pritchard, pp. 435, 438.

<sup>156</sup> Pritchard, p. 438.

<sup>157</sup> Parham, p. 120.

Lincolnshire, in a way that is appropriate to their dying world. The same appropriateness holds true for London and Esther's perception of it: the nonhuman could not be represented as dying and stagnant there, as this would have appeared at odds with the chaotic nature of the urban city; rather, the way it is represented here mirrors Esther's surprise and astonishment in going there for the first time. This chaotic liveliness of London should not lead to underrate its deadly powers: its environment is as deadly as the one in Chesney Wold is, only that it takes a metropolitan shape, but it is not a stronger type of agent, as Pritchard instead argues. So, both nonhuman powers arise from social causes: the failing powers of aristocracy, and the harsh conditions of London due to poor sanitation and pollution.

For what concerns the mother-and-daughter plot, Chapter 3 operates in a twofold manner: in Esther's remembrances of her childhood and Greenleaf years, some contrasts between cold and warm are set, which were already apparent in Lady Dedlock's emotional coldness in Chapter 2, and in the 'Dead Mother complex' in both introductory narratives. With her arrival in London, Esther is acquainted with a wholly new environment: coherently with her amazed state, the narrative of her origins is temporarily set aside. However, her portrayal of London allows us to draw some conclusions, related to the fog and to Chesney Wold. The different perspectives on the fog concern: its uncanniness to readers, its being a filler for Guppy, the character from London, and its chaotic impact on strangers. For what concerns the relation between London and the Dedlocks's mansion, both places are permeated by nonhuman agency. Moreover, Chapter 3 addresses the environmental urgencies of London, and this theme becomes interrelated with the mother-and-daughter plot as the narrative progresses. The next chapter discusses the relevance of the environment in the mother-and-daughter parallel narratives and psychoanalytical uncanny moments, for instance by focusing on how the settings of London and Chesney Wold play a role in the development of their story.

## CHAPTER 3: ESTHER'S ENCOUNTERS WITH LADY DEDLOCK

This chapter analyses the relation between environment and the Freudian uncanny in the first half of the mother-and-daughter plot, most importantly in Chapter 18, where Esther and Lady Dedlock meet for the first time, and Chapter 36, where the Lady reveals to the young woman to be her mother. The last section also draws from Green's 'Dead Mother complex', and compares Esther's feelings in being emotionally rejected by the mother to those she experienced as a child at her aunt's. Moreover, this chapter emphasises the role of the environmental uncanny, originating in London's toxic atmosphere, in Esther's disfiguration, and draws some parallels between the different role of the surroundings of Chesney Wold in the two chapters where mother and daughter meet. Prior to Chapter 36, there are many moments throughout the narrative that are worth exploring from a psychoanalytic and environmental perspective: the casual encounter between Lady Dedlock and Esther in Chapter 18, entangled in a pattern of repetition and déjà-vu that often recurs in the novel, which anticipates the discovery of their bond. Moreover, the environments of London and Chesney Wold increase their involvement in the development of the mother-and-daughter plot: the former through the Tom-All-Along's slum, as it shapes Esther's physical appearance just prior to the discovery of her origins; the latter by alternating stillness and monotonous rain to a dynamic environment in key moments of the plot.

Lady Dedlock reveals Esther to be her mother in Chapter 36, at Chesney Wold. Esther is recovering from her illness there, because she was invited by Mr Boythorn, the Dedlocks' grouch neighbour. In Chapter 29, Lady Dedlock reached the conclusion that Esther is her daughter, due to her dialogue with Guppy, the law-clerk, who basically discovered her secret and understood who her daughter was even earlier than the Lady. He knows that Miss Barbary was the Lady's sister, that Nemo, Captain Hawdon, was her lover, and that when he died, the Lady disguised herself as a servant, and asked Jo, the cross-sweeper, to lead her to Nemo's burial ground. Lastly, he discovered that Esther's real surname was Hawdon and, as he felt startled by the similarities between the two women, he came to the conclusion that Lady Dedlock and Esther were mother and daughter. However, the Lady refused to acknowledge this to Guppy, but as soon as Esther

comes near Chesney Wold, she tells her the story of her origins. However, the Lady's secret is still in danger because of Tulkinghorn, who is relentlessly pursuing to discover it, and to defend the yet-unaware Sir Leicester's interests and honour. This is why Lady Dedlock cannot fulfil her maternal role towards Esther, and puts family honour first.

### **3.1 Esther and Chesney Wold: From Dullness to Agency**

Esther and the Chesney Wold environment mutually influence each other. The first connection between them is provided in Chapter 7, and comes twofold: the third-person narrator mentions Esther and Chesney Wold in the same sentence, and Guppy, visiting the mansion, is struck by a portrait of Lady Dedlock hanging on the wall. The opening passages of Chapter 7 introduce the reader to the ecosystem of Chesney Wold, which in part recalls the same environmental pattern already described in Chapter 2 (cf. 2.1), and it is made of three components: the human, the nonhuman, and the weather. Their interplay creates the atmosphere pervading the place:

While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes, it is still wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire. The rain is ever falling, drip, drip, drip, by day and night, upon the broad flagged terrace-pavement, the Ghost's Walk. The weather is so very bad, down in Lincolnshire, that the liveliest imagination can scarcely apprehend its ever being fine again. Not that there is any superabundant life of imagination on the spot, for Sir Leicester is not here (and, truly, even if he were, would not do much for it in that particular), but is in Paris, with my Lady; and solitude, with dusky wings, sits brooding upon Chesney Wold.

There may be some motions of fancy among the lower animals at Chesney Wold. (76)

The relation between individual elements of the ecosystem, and their influence on the overall atmosphere of the setting, has been analysed by various Dickens scholars. For instance, Jesse Oak Taylor calls for a renewed attention of atmosphere and climate in literature. He believes that their importance has long been overlooked, as exemplified by Roland Barthes's 'reality effect', which is provided in novels by those inconsequential,

easily overlooked details that ‘say nothing but this: *we are the real*’ [italics in the original]:<sup>158</sup>

This refusal to take literary atmosphere and/or climate seriously as matters of concern elides the fact that literary atmosphere is composed of the same elements with which Barthes identified the reality effect: those largely intangible and diffuse aspects of form and content that create the overall mood and experience of the text without entering into conscious awareness (except perhaps on a dark and stormy night). In this respect, Barthes's reality effect can be reconsidered as an attempt to formulate the function of literary atmosphere.<sup>159</sup>

So, Taylor believes that traditionally, atmospheric elements have been considered individually and unilaterally: their function was to establish moods or effects of the real, by reiterating what the real had already established. By contrast, Taylor puts forward a new way to understand these elements, that of ‘aggregated agency’: so, patterns such as rain, fog, damp, wet, should be understood in terms of their impact on the narrative, starting for instance from what their role in shifting perspectives and locations tells us.<sup>160</sup> Taylor’s dichotomy recalls that of fillers and environmental uncanny: fillers originate from what Barthes calls ‘catalyzers’, clusters to keep the narrative under control, to give it a regularity, without modifying the turning points of the novel; the environmental uncanny starts from this assumption of regularity to become its very opposite. Indeed, it focuses on the impact of the nonhuman to shape human agency, and it is disguised under a pattern of familiarity that turns out to be uncanny, because, despite being an extremely familiar process, its agency goes beyond that of humans.<sup>161</sup> So, the environmental uncanny posits a stronger emphasis on agency than Taylor’s theorization. Another scholar receptive to this theme is Troy Boone: in his essay, he focuses predominantly on Dickens’s early works, and on rural settings of his later urban novels. To some extent, he agrees with Taylor by endorsing what Dominic Head had already stated almost two decades earlier, namely that an ecocritical reading of a novel should analyse how ‘the

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<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Taylor, p.3.

<sup>159</sup> Taylor, p. 3.

<sup>160</sup> Taylor, p. 17.

<sup>161</sup> Moretti, pp. 71-72; Ghosh, pp. 30-31.

represented landscape becomes a text in which human interaction with the environment is indelibly recorded'.<sup>162</sup> However, he differs from Taylor for what concerns the importance of nonurban environment: Taylor thinks that environmental descriptions should eventually lead to the discovery that the individual subject of the novel is not the human, rather London; by contrast, Boone argues that nonurban spaces should not be dismissed as mere pastoral settings, and their analysis offers some interesting insights on human, the nonhuman, and lastly the urban city.<sup>163</sup> He calls for an 'inhabitants-in-environment' reading, 'where inhabitants can be plants and human or nonhuman animals existing in the ecosystemic place that we call the setting of a novel'.<sup>164</sup>

Read from this perspective, the opening passage of Chapter 7 offers interesting insights. First, the shift in perspective and location from Chapter 6, told in first-person by Esther from Bleak House in St. Albans, is provided by the rain, which characterised Chesney Wold already in Chapter 2. Esther herself is mentioned here for the first time by the third-person narrator, moreover in a passage describing her - yet unknown - mother's home, and its pervasive boredom. Esther's explicit relation with Chesney Wold becomes apparent later in the text – for now, it can be said that her routinely actions of sleeping and waking up mirror the ever-falling Lincolnshire rain, and its relation within the mother-and-daughter plot. Indeed, Dupeyron-Lafay interprets the incessant raindrops as a metaphor for the teardrops that Lady Dedlock secretly cried, or hid behind her social mask.<sup>165</sup> Moreover, this passage offers some insights on the relation between the human and the nonhuman, which Boone's inhabitants-in-environment reading would presumably investigate: 'Dickens renders human and nonhuman characters as equivalent inhabitants of an environment—and, crucially, equivalent not only physically but also intellectually'.<sup>166</sup> What emerges from the first paragraphs of this description is that the nonhuman, most notably the realm of animals, is livelier and more fanciful than humans. They share the same environment, and are embedded in the same ecosystem, but they relate to it in a different way. Coherently with their status as members of a dying but still self-centred world, and with the Lady's emotional void, Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock

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<sup>162</sup> Boone, p. 100.

<sup>163</sup> Taylor, p. 17; Boone, p. 100.

<sup>164</sup> Boone, p. 101.

<sup>165</sup> Dupeyron, p. 80.

<sup>166</sup> Boone, p. 105.

are excluded from having any imagination, and their presence, or absence, brings nothing that can break the monotony of Chesney Wold. Indeed, they cannot even imagine the weather being fine again. By contrast, it is the nonhuman realm of animals to possess the imaginative force the aristocratic couple lacks: the narrator says that horses, greyhounds, and pigeons ‘may contemplate some mental pictures of fine weather on occasions’ (76). Moreover, when the stable’s door is shut, what can be heard is a ‘livelier communication than is held in the servants’ hall, or at the Dedlock Arms’ (76-77), and that animals there could ‘even beguile the time by improving (perhaps corrupting) the pony in the loose-box in the corner’ (77), while the mastiff in the park complains ‘Rain, rain, rain! Nothing but rain – and no family here!’ (77). So, animals are pervaded by more agency than humans in reacting to the monotonous rainy environment surrounding them, and they are the only ones to feel alive despite the tedium encompassing the whole ecosystem.

Esther and the mother-and-daughter plot bring the most important change in the ecosystem of the place, albeit indirectly. Indeed, the most vibrant change in the atmosphere of Chesney Wold is provided by what happens within its walls. The housekeeper, Mrs Rouncewell, is showing the house to Mr Guppy, the law-clerk who welcomed Esther to London in Chapter 3, and who now visits Chesney Wold for the first time. At first, the visit seems to be permeated by the same dullness of the outside: passing from room to room,

It appears to the afflicted Mr. Guppy and his inconsolable friend, that there is no end to the Dedlocks, whose family greatness seems to consist in their never having done anything to distinguish themselves, for seven hundred years. (82)

Guppy’s thought is an extremised version of the narrator’s metaphor of the solar system in Chapter 2: there, the narrator introduced the Dedlocks as members of a deadened aristocratic world, incapable of being as bright as it was before; by contrast, Guppy emphasises the boredom and dullness of the upper class by thinking that they never took actions to distinguish themselves. However, this atmosphere pervading Chesney Wold from the inside and from the outside is suddenly broken, when he sees a portrait over the fireplace, and ‘he stares at it with uncommon interest; he seems to be fixed and fascinated by it’ (82). When he asks who the portrayed woman is, he is replied that she is the current

Lady Dedlock. Whilst he has never seen her before, nor the portrait was ever made public, Guppy is affected by an uncanny feeling of *déjà-vu*, because the Lady looks like a too-familiar face, although he cannot associate it to anyone yet:

‘It's unaccountable to me,’ he says, still staring at the portrait, ‘how well I know that picture! I'm dashed,’ adds Mr Guppy, looking round, ‘if I don't think I must have had a dream of that picture, you know!’ [He] follows into the succeeding rooms with a confused stare, as if he were looking everywhere for Lady Dedlock again.

He sees no more of her. He sees her rooms, which are the last shown, as being very elegant, and he looks out of the windows from which she looked out, not long ago, upon the weather that bored her to death. All things have an end - even houses that people take infinite pains to see and are tired of before they begin to see them. (82)

The chapter ends with the legend of the Ghost's Walk, which relates to the terrace of Lady Dedlock's room. However, Guppy is still so focused on the portrait that he is sure the legend has something to do with it, and he asks twice about any connection between them. Mrs Rouncewell guarantees that the story has nothing to do with the picture – however, Guppy is not completely wrong, because as the narrative proceeds, it becomes clear that the consequences of the legend very closely relate to the mother-and-daughter plot, thus with the Lady Dedlock portrayed above the fireplace. Overall, Guppy's uncanny experience opens a first breach on the boredom atmosphere of Chesney Wold, because it provides the first actual hint to a relation between two characters from the different narratives, and it is the first time, alongside the nonhuman perspective, that something other than dullness is experienced in this place, in the same rooms where Lady Dedlock usually finds herself bored to death. Whilst it is true that a change in the dull pattern of the mansion was experienced in Chapter 2, following the Lady's fainting fit, then the reason was circumscribed to the unusually trying weather, and to the Lady's boring attitude. This time, the reason of the change in the atmosphere is provided by an uncanny motif that is left unexplained. Robert Newsom inscribes this situation to the dichotomy between the romantic and the familiar stated by Dickens in his Preface to *Bleak House*: the Freudian uncanny framework of *déjà-vu* provides a feeling that blurs the boundary

between the known and the unknown, because Guppy is sure to have seen that portrait before, although he cannot remember where nor associate it to someone known to him.<sup>167</sup> So, two images are overlapped: the familiar image of Lady Dedlock bored to death in her room, and Guppy wandering in the same room with this uncanny thought in his mind, which temporarily relieves him from the all-encompassing monotony of the place. Moreover, what brings the change of mood is that the mystery is left unaddressed, and to that is added the haunting motif of the Ghost's Walk. So, Esther and the Lady indirectly influence the overall aura of Chesney Wold: but this is just the beginning, because all of their meetings enter in a deep relation with the surrounding environment, starting from Chapter 18.

Chapter 18 merges the Freudian uncanny with a new environmental perspective on Chesney Wold. This chapter is still focused on the Dedlocks' mansion, but it is narrated from Esther's viewpoint, who is a guest at Boythorn's, Sir Leicester's neighbour. As soon as Esther and her companions get there, she stresses the delightful weather, proper of the summer period. When Boythorn points to Chesney Wold, it emerges a striking difference between Esther's perspective and that of the third person narrator in the previous chapters:

It was a picturesque old house, in a fine park richly wooded. Among the trees, and not far from the residence, he pointed out the spire of the little church of which he had spoken. O, the solemn woods over which the light and shadow travelled swiftly, as if Heavenly wings were sweeping on benignant errands through the summer air; the smooth green slopes, the glittering water, the garden [...] how beautiful they looked! (221)

Esther is struck by the 'serene and peaceful hush' and 'undisturbed repose' (222) that pervade Chesney Wold. The same atmosphere that the third-person narrative defines as dull and monotonous, to Esther conveys a deep feeling of rest and peace, and the characteristics of the mansion seem to mirror the upper-class wealth of its owners, without any reference to their decay.

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<sup>167</sup> Newsom, p. 50.

Whilst it can be thought that sun and summer air make Chesney Wold a better place than when wetted by seemingly-eternal rain, the environmental framework of this chapter works within a dichotomy of fillers and uncanniness. In this chapter, Esther meets Lady Dedlock for the first time, and this meeting happens twice: this provides an uncanny feeling of déjà-vu in Esther, even more powerful than that felt by Guppy in Chapter 7. What should be noticed is that these two uncanny moments are embedded in a broader environmental framework that changes as soon as these scenes are about to happen. So, this pattern alternates the following scenarios: starting from the sunny weather, there is a first change in the environment (shadow-like, uncanny), which anticipates the first uncanny moment (church scene). Then, the environment goes back to being sunny and regular (filler), although it soon changes for the second time (storm, uncanny), and foresees the second uncanny moment (lodge scene), and lastly comes the third change in the environment (end of the storm, sunny, filler), which marks the end of the uncanny encounters.

On a sunny Sunday morning, Esther's group goes to the service in the Dedlock's church in the park. While they are waiting for the Dedlocks to come, Esther's awareness of her serene surroundings begins to change slightly:

As the bell was yet ringing and the great people were not yet come, I had leisure to glance over the church, which smelt as earthy as a grave, and to think what a shady, ancient, solemn little church it was. The windows, heavily shaded by trees, admitted a subdued light that made the faces around me pale, and darkened the old brasses in the pavement and the time and damp-worn monuments, and rendered the sunshine in the little porch, where a monotonous ringer was working at the bell, inestimably bright. (224)

Overall, this description sets a bleaker tone than Esther's first view of Chesney Wold, and provides the first environmental change of this chapter. The smell of the church is compared to that of the grave, a key and recurring motif in *Bleak House*. Now that the sun does not filter properly in the church, Esther begins to notice her surroundings in a different, darker way, which accentuates the contrast with the 'inestimably bright' sun. The Dedlocks enter the church, and suddenly something happens:

Shall I ever forget the rapid beating at my heart, occasioned by the look I met as I stood up! [...] Very strangely, there was something quickened within me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's; yes, away even to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass after dressing my doll. And this, although I had never seen this lady's face before in all my life--I was quite sure of it-- absolutely certain. [...] The lady was Lady Dedlock. But why her face should be, in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances, and why I should be so fluttered and troubled (for I was still) by having casually met her eyes, I could not think. I felt it to be an unmeaning weakness in me and tried to overcome it by attending to the words I heard. Then, very strangely, I seemed to hear them, not in the reader's voice, but in the well- remembered voice of my godmother. [...] And yet I-- I, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing--seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, whom I not only entertained no fancy that I had ever seen, but whom I perfectly well knew I had never seen until that hour. (224-225)

What happens here is the first ever encounter between mother and daughter, yet unaware of their kinship. The uncanniness of this passage stands on Esther's feelings of *déjà-vu*, because she has no clue of who the Lady is to her: she is sure to know her despite never having met her before. Moreover, Esther compares the Lady to her godmother, in truth her maternal aunt, as her presence strikes a chord back to her childhood memories. However, despite this meeting, Esther and the Lady do not have a chance to speak to each other, so the question of the Lady's uncanny resonance in Esther's life is left unaddressed for the moment. Yet, their encounters are not over. The following Saturday, Esther is walking in the park with Mr Jarndyce and Ada. It is a bright and sunny day. Abruptly, a storm breaks out:

The weather had been all the week extremely sultry; but, the storm broke so suddenly – upon us, at least, in that sheltered spot – that before we reached the outskirts of the wood, the thunder and lightning were

frequent, and the rain came plunging through the leaves, as if every drop were a great leaden bead. [...] It was grand to see how the wind awoke, and bent the trees, and drove the rain before it like a cloud of smoke [...] while thinking with awe of the tremendous powers by which our little lives are encompassed. (228)

The familiar Chesney Wold rainfalls here are evoked with a force and agency completely absent in the third-person narrative, where wind and rain are monotonous and almost soporific elements. Here, they are a lively, almost raging force, and Esther cannot but feel powerless before their abrupt awakening. Their powers are uncanny, in the sense that Esther can feel the presence and proximity of the nonhuman.<sup>168</sup> This sharp change in the weather anticipates the second uncanny meeting of the chapter, which happens in the lodge where they took shelter:

‘Is it not dangerous to sit in so exposed a place?’

‘O no, Esther dear!’ said Ada, quietly.

Ada said it to me, but, *I* had not spoken.

The beating of my heart came back again. I had never heard the voice, as I had never seen the face, but it affected me in the same strange way.

Again, in a moment, there arose before my mind innumerable pictures of myself. (228) [italics in the original]

This time, it is Ada to mistake the Lady’s voice with Esther’s, and this is what provides an uncanny feeling, reiterated by Esther’s inability to understand why she shares so many similar features with Lady Dedlock. Moreover, the uncanniness of these passages also relates to what has been described as the uncanny feature of the ‘Dead Mother complex’ in 2.1 and 2.2: namely, the blurring of what is believed to be reality with what is perceived to be unreal, or phantasy. Indeed, whilst secretly Esther may hope her mother to be alive, because she never saw her grave, what everyone told her throughout her life goes in the opposite direction. This is why Esther does not manage to connect the maternal resonances of Lady Dedlock with both herself and her maternal aunt – concerning faces, voices, and various similarities – with the conscious idea that her mother may actually be alive, and this is why what stays firmly in the foreground is Esther’s uncanny feeling.

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<sup>168</sup> Ghosh, p. 30.

The same holds true for Lady Dedlock, because she will associate Esther being her daughter in Chapter 29, following the dialogue with Guppy, and she tells her daughter in Chapter 36 that when she first saw Esther, she thought that her child would have been like her, if it had ever lived. So, these encounters are inherently uncanny, because both characters, Esther in particular, cannot associate their striking similarities with their maternal bond. Moreover, if psychoanalysis draws us towards the uncanny, the environment does no less. As their last encounter draws to a close, it comes again in the foreground:

Lady Dedlock again sat looking at the rain. The storm soon began to pass upon its way. The shower greatly abated, the lightning ceased, the thunder rolled among the distant hills, and the sun began to glisten on the wet leaves and the falling rain. (230)

The same natural elements that Esther described with awe at the beginning of the storm are put back in the picture under a different light, and work as fillers, now that the uncanny moments are temporarily suspended. This perspective is quieter and more relaxed, and recalls Esther's opening description of Chesney Wold: it is not a dull environment, rather it is calm and peaceful. So, by the end of this chapter a double uncanniness has been experienced: a Freudian one provided by strangers who closely resemble each other, and an environmental one, as the natural agents seemed to know what was about to happen, and moved from their role as fillers, of narrative of everyday life, to an uncanny one by putting themselves in the foreground, and by making their presence felt by Esther. Moreover, these two uncanny feelings interconnected in a pattern of repetition that includes sharp environmental changes paving repeatedly the way to Freudian uncanny moments, and so on. With the darker tone of the church passage, they paved the way to the first meeting between Esther and Lady Dedlock; with the storm in the second passage, they anticipated and also caused the second meeting, because presumably without the storm Esther would have felt no need to go into the lodge, where Lady Dedlock was already sitting.

The consequential chain of environmental and Freudian uncanny moments works twofold: on one hand, it means that Chesney Wold is alive; on the other, that environment and the mother-and-daughter plot are closely related to each other. For what concerns

Chesney Wold, this chapter transforms its seemingly-everlasting dullness and monotony into the place that importantly affects the mother-and-daughter plot. Critics have usually ascribed more agency, and overall importance, to London, because of its role as urban city, and this often happened to the detriment of the rural space, symbolised here by Chesney Wold (cf. 2.3 and above). London is surely important in *Bleak House*, but, as Troy Boone suggested, the rural space deserves importance on its own, and Chesney Wold in this chapter redeems itself from the pervasive boredom by setting the pace to the psychoanalytical uncanny encounters between Lady Dedlock and Esther. This reiterates the idea that environment and the mother-and-daughter plot are closely related to each other, in a bond that becomes explicit from this chapter. The next section focuses on the role of the London environment in leading to Chapter 36, where Chesney Wold becomes once again of primary importance.

### **3.2 Tom-All-Along's: Environmental Agency and Esther's Uncanny Disfiguration**

London's environmental agency influences the mother-and-daughter plot, most notably by disfiguring Esther's face, a source of uncanny feeling in the encounters with her mother. This is due to the smallpox Esther and her maid Charley took from Jo, the cross-sweeper. The origin of this disease stands on environmental and polluting agents, for instance wind and air that spread infections from the most toxic areas of the city to other parts of London, and to people who came in touch with inhabitants of those areas. On one hand, this deadly environmental agency originates from environmental injustice, because it was mostly concentrated in those areas characterised by debased living conditions, but on the other these agents go beyond environmental injustice by spreading disease even to the wealthier areas of the city, as miasma theory demonstrated (cf. 2.3).<sup>169</sup>

The connection between different classes is explicitly explored in Chapter 16, entitled 'Tom-All-Along's':

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the

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<sup>169</sup> Parham, pp. 122, 126.

outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard step? (197)

The connection is multifaceted, and can be interpreted in a multitude of ways: here it is studied in relation to Chesney Wold and the London slum, within the bigger picture of the Freudian and environmental uncanny in the mother-and-daughter plot. The Tom-All-Alone's slum draws together members from the highest and lowest parts of society, Lady Dedlock and Jo, following the burial of Nemo, the Lady's former lover. News of his death reaches Lady Dedlock, who, disguised as a servant, visits the places where his former lover spent his days and is now buried. She meets Jo, who accompanies her through the streets of this infamous part of London. Once they reach the pauper grave where Nemo is buried, the Lady is shocked by the 'scene of horror' (202) in front of her eyes:

'There!' says Jo, pointing. 'Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchin winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom if the gate was open. [...] Look at the rat!' cries Jo, excited. 'Hi! Look! There he goes! Ho! Into the ground!'

The servant shrinks into a corner - into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress [...]

'Is this place of abomination consecrated ground?'

'I don't know nothink of consequential ground,' says Jo, still staring.

'Is it blessed?'

'Which?' says Jo, in the last degree amazed.

'Is it blessed?'

'I'm blest if I know,' says Jo, staring more than ever; 'but I shouldn't think it warn't. Blest?' repeats Jo, something troubled in his mind. 'It an't done it much good if it is.' (202)

The scene in front of the two characters is disgraceful: Nemo's body is buried in a totally poisonous place, on top of other corpses, so that Jo, if the door were open, could – and would - exhume him. The toxicity of the place is also represented by the rat, eager to banquet with decomposing flesh. Obviously, the Lady's shock is in sharp contrast with Jo's enthusiasm, and her naive question whether the place was consecrated mirrors her

upper-class ingenuity and distance from Jo's world: he is right in asserting that it is pointless to know whether it is blessed, and, if it were, then prayers would have been useless in front of the extremely ill condition of the slum. This situation recalls the dichotomy between gothic and real London: for instance, Alan Pritchard considers Tom-All-Along's as one of the clearest examples of Dickens's urban gothic, an image of urban decay, dilapidation, and disease.<sup>170</sup> Mighall's gothic reading of the novel connects Tom, the personified slum, with the role of a gothic villain who plans and executes his revenge.<sup>171</sup> Peter Thomas Matthews includes Tom-All-Along's in Dickens's gothic imaginary, although he is aware that the slum also originates from empirical reference to the social and environmental condition of the England of the time.<sup>172</sup> Indeed, whilst the description of Nemo's grave would easily fit within Dickens's gothic tradition, the situation of London's poorest areas of the time was not much different from what depicted here. To some extent, it can be argued that reality was even more horrific than Dickens's gothic, as in the case of the Spa-Fields Burial Ground in 1845. A grave-digger denounces:

Our mode of working the ground was not commencing at one end and working to the other, but digging wherever it was ordered, totally regardless whether the ground was full or not; for instance, to dig a grave seven feet deep at a particular spot, I have often disturbed and mutilated seven or eight bodies; that is, I have severed heads, arms, legs, or whatever came in my way with a crowbar, pickaxe, chopper, and saw. Of the bodies, some were quite fresh and some decomposed.<sup>173</sup>

This account mirrors what Nemo's burial is: a pile of dead bodies put one above the other, regardless of the sanitary condition of the graveyard and of its surroundings. Moreover, this constant activity of burying, mutilating, and disinterring the same corpses produces horrible smells surrounding the area, and paves the way to the spreading of contagious and deadly diseases, in nineteenth-century London as much as in *Bleak House*.<sup>174</sup> So, the

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<sup>170</sup> Pritchard, pp. 438, 440.

<sup>171</sup> Mighall, p.32.

<sup>172</sup> Matthews, pp. 79 – 80.

<sup>173</sup> 'The Spa-Fields Burial Ground', p. 907.

<sup>174</sup> 'The Spa-Fields Burial Ground', pp. 908-909.

boundary between gothic and reality in the scene described in Chapter 16 is more blurred than what it can be thought at first.

Debasement was a shared condition of these places and their inhabitants. The third-person depiction of Jo stands in-between the human and the nonhuman realm, portraying him as an animal, or as a human waste.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, the animals evoked here are in stark contrast with those pervaded by human agency in Chapter 7 (cf. 3.1). Indeed, Chapter 16 illustrates the Tom-All-Alone's slum, property of the Chancery Court, where Jo lives, or better said, 'has not yet died' (197). It is a 'black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people', whose decadent tenements contain 'a swarm of misery' (197). The narrator stresses Jo's ignorance and illiteracy, and the fact that he is not well-accepted anywhere, rather he is 'hustled, jostled, and moved on' (198). He compares him to an animal:

It must be a strange state, not merely be told that I am scarcely human (as in the case of my offering myself for a witness), but to feel it of my knowledge all my life! To see the horses, dogs, and cattle, go by me, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend! (198)

Moreover, he does the same activities animals do: for instance, when a band comes and plays nearby, both Jo and a dog listen to it, 'probably with the same amount of animal satisfaction' (199). So, whilst animals in Chapter 7 provide a fanciful escape to the human and environmental dullness of Chesney Wold, in Chapter 16 they are perceived as inferior to human beings, and Jo's debased living conditions come closer to that of animals than of humans. Indeed, John Parham considers Jo a 'human waste', a casualty of environmental injustice and industrial by-products, which strike the poor first. He is no better than an animal, and a victim of social and environmental powers.<sup>176</sup>

Overall, it is the spreading of insalubrious air what constitutes the environmental agency of Tom-All-Alone's, which indirectly infects Esther prior to the reunion with her mother in Chapter 36. Despite the slum's neglectful state, the third-person narrator warns

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<sup>175</sup> Parham, p. 123.

<sup>176</sup> Parham, pp. 122-123.

that Tom does not resign itself to passivity, and provides the most powerful description of the place:

But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. [...] There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge. (551-553)

This is one of the last insights of the slum in the novel, and it emphasises its deadliness: the winds are its lethal messengers, and they spread pollution and contagion from poorer to richer areas. The narrator states that Tom will not stop until he reaches the upper part of society, where the majority of the culprits for its negligence stands. So, its agency seems to be everlasting, its haunting powers continue even beyond the end of the novel. This is a feeling that was put into words by Hélène Cixous in discussing the uncanny: 'The Unheimliche has no end, but it is necessary for the text to stop somewhere'.<sup>177</sup> Whilst she was talking about the Freudian uncanny, this perspective also concerns the uncanny environmental forces that haunt the text even after its ending, and threaten that retribution will come. So, nonhuman actors affect the human world. Moreover, the nonhuman had already begun to take its revenge on humans from different social classes from Chapter 31, via Esther and Charley disfiguration. Indeed, the smallpox escalated from the animal-like Jo to Charley, Esther maid, and ultimately to Esther herself.<sup>178</sup>

Esther's smallpox originates from social and environmental issues. In Chapter 31, she and Charley pay a visit to the brickmaker's house, in a poor working-class area of London, where his wife Jenny is nursing Jo, sick with fever. The environment works in a twofold manner: on one hand, by stressing the toxicity of the place; on the other, by

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<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Masschelein, p. 158.

<sup>178</sup> Parham, p. 126.

influencing Esther in an uncanny way, which prefigures that something is about to happen. While the two companions are going to the brickmaker's house, Esther is struck by the insalubriousness of the area: 'The kilns were burning, and a stifling vapour set towards us with a pale blue glare', and the place 'had an unhealthy, and very peculiar smell' (380). Jo's contagious illness, the smoke and bad smells surrounding the area, are all factors that reiterate the agency of environmental elements, mostly born out of man's unscrupulous social and economic activities, slipped from his control. This opens up the question of the effects of human actions in the natural world: John Parham employs two notions from Jane Bennet and Stacy Alaimo, 'thing power' and 'trans-corporeality'. The first comes from the belief that things, such as by-products and waste products, have an ability to 'act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own'.<sup>179</sup> Alaimo's 'trans-corporeality' focuses on the interconnection between the material and society, and indicates that the toxic power of things originates from economic and industrial systems, and moreover that our body is contaminated by economic, industrial, and environmental systems. She came to this conclusion by participating in a Greenpeace campaign, where people were asked to send a sample of their hair to be tested, and found out that they were mercury-contaminated.<sup>180</sup> Probably, there would be no need to run such a test on Esther and the other characters to assume that they are contaminated by the surrounding environment and the by-products of economic expansion, whether they are foul smells arising from the decomposing bodies in a pauper grave, the air spreading toxic particles, or the smog arising from factories. The smallpox Charley and Esther catch from Jo is probably transmitted by their direct contact with him, yet its origins lie in the pollution of Tom's slum, the working-class area, and the London fog. In Ghosh's words, this uncanniness pertains to the nonhuman itself, which is fed by cumulative human actions, and unleashes its powers on man in different shapes and forms, as indeed via the animal-like Jo and his smallpox.<sup>181</sup>

Alongside the polluted environment, during the same night Esther experiences an eerie feeling from her surroundings:

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<sup>179</sup> Parham, pp. 114 – 115.

<sup>180</sup> Parham, pp. 115 – 116.

<sup>181</sup> Ghosh, p. 32.

It was a cold, wild night, and the trees shuddered in the wind. The rain had been thick and heavy all day, and with little intermission for many days. [...] The sky had partly cleared, but was very gloomy – even above us, where a few stars were shining. [...] I had no thought, that night – none, I am quite sure – of what was soon to happen to me. But I have always remembered since, that when we had stopped at the garden-gate to look up at the sky, and when we went upon our way, I had for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was. I know it was then, and there, that I had it. I have since connected the feeling with that spot and time, and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the miry hill. (380)

Sarah Cash notices that this passage possibly coincides with Lady Dedlock's discovery of her daughter being alive in Chapter 29: this is an interesting perspective because it would ascribe a certain kind of uncanny mental interconnection, if not telepathy, between mother and daughter, with Esther yet unaware of their bond.<sup>182</sup> Robert Newsom believes that Esther's thoughts relate to a kind of supernatural experience, because by stressing that she felt different at that specific time in that specific place, avoids a direct relation with the cause of her physical change, Jo's illness. Rather, she is interested on what she felt for its own sake, as a curious and possibly supernatural experience. Newsom rightly adds that her words are so enigmatic that it becomes impossible to know what she really meant.<sup>183</sup> However, it can be argued that Esther's sensation may have aroused from foreseeing some danger: she was aware of the risks of staying in close contact with people ill from contagious diseases, as, when Charley and Esther caught it, she isolated both of them from the household, asking for help to a servant only in specific and unavoidable cases. Read in this way, the gloom sky reflects the gloominess inside her at the thought of these possibilities, which nevertheless do not discourage her or her maid to help Jo, as Cash's emphasis of their maternal attitude towards the destitute underlines.<sup>184</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>182</sup> Cash, p. 70; Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 141 – 142.

<sup>183</sup> Newsom, p. 78.

<sup>184</sup> Cash, p. 71.

Freud associates the feeling of foreseeing something to the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’, whose uncanniness originates when someone has presentiments that usually come true.<sup>185</sup> This is what happens to Esther, as by looking at the surrounding environment she suddenly thinks to be someone different from who she is, and indeed within a few pages she finds herself disfigured by the smallpox, leaving her face different from what it was a moment before.

What stands before Esther and Charley is a very demanding night. When they reach the brickmaker’s hut and talk with Jo, he is afraid of Esther, and says ‘I won’t go no more to the berryin ground [...] I ain’t a-going there, so I tell you!’ (381). He obviously misrecognises Esther for Lady Dedlock, but Esther does not grasp it because she is unaware that the Lady and Jo had previously met, and thinks he is being nonsensical. In truth, Jo experiences the same uncanny feeling Guppy had by looking at the Lady’s portrait in Chesney Wold, and Esther when she saw her mother for the first time (cf. 3.1): they all arise because of the similarities between the two faces. They bring Jo to Bleak House, and take care of him. However, he escapes during the night, and the following day Charley starts feeling unwell. Esther, conscious of the spreading of the disease, isolates everyone from them both, and she does her best to nurse her companion, who slowly recovers, without being physically marked permanently. However, the disease had already reached Esther, and has a devastating impact on her. She turns temporarily blind, and, despite recovering from the illness, her face gets heavily scarred, to the extent that Charley and Mr Jarndyce remove every looking-glass from her rooms. So, environmental agency affects Esther’s familiar face, which until this moment has featured as the key uncanny element in the encounters with her mother, and transforms it just prior to the reunion scene.

To sum up, the nonhuman force of the environmental uncanny influences the development of the mother-and-daughter plot by providing a connection between Lady Dedlock and the horrific and insalubrious areas where her former lover lived and died, and by affecting Esther’s face, the main source of uncanny resemblance between the two women. Prior to the infection, Esther seemed keenly perceptive of her surroundings: she felt a totally different person from her usual self by looking at the night sky, and this feeling uncannily foresees what is about to happen to her. Environmental agency is

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<sup>185</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 146.

aroused by the toxic consequences of industrial processes, and from revenge, coherently with the third-person description of the Tom-All-Alone's slum: the London areas neglected from many years sooner or later unleash their deadliness on humans at every step of society. One way they do so is by infecting social class in a hierarchical order, starting with Jo, a victim of environmental injustice, then Charley, Esther's maid, and Esther herself.

### **3.3 Esther's New Self and the Reunion with Lady Dedlock**

Chapter 36 engages with many of the issues and themes discussed throughout this work. In this chapter, a new meeting between Esther and Lady Dedlock takes place at Chesney Wold, where the Lady discloses her to be her mother. The uncanny features predominantly in this chapter. From a Freudian perspective, the most relevant uncanny motifs are Esther's scarred face and its relation with the Lady's features, and the haunting return in Esther's life of her godmother's words. Moreover, Chapter 36 and Chapter 3 are mutually compared via Green's 'Dead Mother complex', which offers an interpretative pattern to Esther's relation with her mother and her aunt. From an environmental perspective, agency plays a less predominant role than in the previous sections, but the uncanny resonates in analysing how Esther's perception of her surroundings change prior to, and following, her mother's revelation, in a framework that in part recalls that of their first meeting in Chapter 18.

Feeling better, Esther recovers from her illness at Boythorn's, near Chesney Wold. She goes there with Charley, on a 'delightful evening in the early summer time' (444). As soon as she is alone, she looks at herself in the looking-glass for the first time since the illness.

I was very much changed – O very, very much. At first, my face was so strange to me, that I think I should have put my hands before it and started back, but for the encouragement I have mentioned. Very soon it became more familiar, and then I knew the extent of the alteration in it even better than I had done at first. It was not like what I had expected; but I had expected nothing definite, and I dare say anything definite would have surprised me. I had never been a beauty, and had never

thought myself one; but I had been very different from this. It was all gone now. (444-445)

Critics have extensively dealt with this passage from a psychoanalytical perspective. For instance, Robyn Schiffman associates it to the uncanny dichotomy between the strange familiarity of the other, and the strange otherness of the familiar.<sup>186</sup> In a note to 'The Uncanny', Freud recalls an episode of his life that gave him a similar feeling:

I was sitting alone in my sleeping compartment when the train lurched violently. The door of the adjacent toilet swung open and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and travelling cap entered my compartment. I assumed that on leaving the toilet, which was located between the two compartments, he had turned the wrong way and entered mine by mistake. I jumped up to put him right, but soon realized to my astonishment that the intruder was my own image, reflected in the mirror on the connecting door. I can still recall that I found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant. [...] Was the displeasure we felt at seeing these unexpected images of ourselves perhaps a vestige of the archaic reaction to the 'double' as something uncanny? <sup>187</sup>

Freud experienced an uncanny feeling because he thought to have seen his double, someone other than his own self but at the same time connected to it, in what in truth was his mirrored image. The eeriness he feels in being unable to see himself in his reflection is similar to what Esther perceives. Indeed, she does not recognise herself at first, and she treats the mirrored face as a stranger, as other than herself. Only after a while she comes to terms with the truth, and accepts her new face. Moreover, Esther's different physical appearance is coherent with the feeling she had by looking at the gloom sky a few days before falling ill: there, she mentally perceived to be a new self compared to her usual one, and here the new self is embodied in her scarred face, linking Esther's mental reality to the physical one. Thus, the face first perceived as stranger, soon becomes the familiar look of Esther's new self.

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<sup>186</sup> Schiffman, p. 160.

<sup>187</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', note III.1, p. 162.

The dualism between strangeness and familiarity can be read at the mother-and-daughter level, too. Carolyn Dever notices how, in Esther's moment of self-unrecognition, the familiar face of the stranger Lady Dedlock is felt more similar to Esther than her own disfigured face:

Lady Dedlock was familiar because she was like Esther, Self, not Other; this face, supposedly Self, is completely Other. The sense of unfamiliar familiarity originally directed at Lady Dedlock is now directed at Esther herself at this moment of "self-recognition."<sup>188</sup>

So, the Lady's face and Esther's new one stand in mutual and opposite relation: the former was familiar to Esther despite the strangeness of the Lady in her life; by contrast, Esther's scarred face is unfamiliar despite being her own reflection in the mirror. However, the most important implications of Esther's new face within the mother-and-daughter plot become more relevant once their bond is revealed, and relate to the fact that Esther, in losing her old face, lost what was commonly perceived as the closest element resembling Lady Dedlock, thus the element that more than any other provoked the uncanny feeling. Sarah Cash follows Helen Michie in arguing that Esther's illness and the resulting disfigurement mark the point where Esther's self begins to emerge, so her being physically different from her mother provides a way to find her own identity.<sup>189</sup> However, this interpretation is at odds with Esther's sexual development: indeed, she is in love with Allan Woodcourt, the middle-class physician, who before embarking for India gave Esther some flowers. She thinks that the illness and the scarred face now put a premature end to their yet-to-born romance, as she feels too ugly for him. So, while she may emerge as a totally different being from her mother, the scars put Esther's developing sexuality in danger.

When the Lady asks Esther to walk with her for some time, Esther is struck by her face: 'I was rendered motionless [...] by a something in her face that I had pined for and dreamed of when I was a little child; something I had never seen in any face', to the extent that 'I could no more have removed my eyes from her pale face, than I could have stirred

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<sup>188</sup> Dever, p. 100.

<sup>189</sup> Cash, p. 71.

from the bench on which I sat' (448). Suddenly, Lady Dedlock falls down on her knees and the revelation comes:

“O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me” – when I saw her at my feet on the bare earth in her great agony of mind, I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us. (449)

Esther's dichotomy between guilt and love for the mother emerges from the reunion scene. Esther forgives her, out of the 'natural love' (499) that a daughter feels towards the mother. However, the Lady tells Esther that they shall meet no more, and that she should consider her dead. John Jordan notes how Esther's scarred face should have been a motif to encourage their reunion, and the Lady's choice deeply disappoints the daughter: indeed, Esther's scarred face reduces remarkably the similarities with the mother, and puts her less in danger to be discovered, so the daughter hopes that their bond could be retrieved precisely because of their different appearances.<sup>190</sup> At the same time, while Esther is right in asserting that their physical unlikeliness places the mother less in danger, Mr Tulkinghorn is already too close to the truth to be fooled. Thus, Lady Dedlock puts her family herald before Esther, as the prestige of the House of Dedlocks must come first, and seeing Esther and the Lady together might have cleared Mr Tulkinghorn's mind of any doubt yet left. Despite this, Esther seems to love her mother and to avoid reproaching anything to her. This triggers a resonance with Esther's days at her godmother's, the Lady's sister, and with André Green's 'Dead Mother complex' (cf. 2.1): despite the godmother's ill-treatment of her niece, she could not but be humble and grateful towards Miss Barbary. The only time Esther's emotive indifference towards her aunt became apparent was at the time of her death, dismissed without any mourning. In Chapter 36, the situation is similar: on one hand, there is the emotionally dead mother of Green's theory, who basically rejects her daughter and refuses nurturing her after giving her the illusion of becoming a new presence in her life, and on the other there is Esther who, like

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<sup>190</sup> Jordan, p. 55.

a child, cannot but blame herself for the mother's lack of maternal feelings. Indeed, she is thankful to God that she almost died, and got her face scarred, by smallpox, so that she should not be a burden to the mother who is about to abandon her for the second time. Moreover, it should be noted that thanking God for her face, rather than for the reunion with her mother, is the first reaction she has when she reunites with Lady Dedlock. This demonstrates Esther's sense of guilt, as the painful nature of her scarred face is turned into an advantage for the mother's secret. Alongside guilt, Esther is marked by love and tenderness towards Lady Dedlock, what she refers to as 'natural love' (499) between daughter and mother: this dichotomy mirrors, and amplifies, what she felt towards her aunt, in describing her supposedly angel-like features and by stressing how grateful Esther was to her, which contradicted the way Miss Barbary actually treated Esther. What is constant is Esther's love for the maternal figure, and her sense of guilt in perceiving to be the cause of the emotive death of her maternal relatives.

Moreover, another recurring pattern from both scenes is the substitute for the mother: in Chapter 3, the doll worked either as a transitional object for motherhood, in absence of the real mother, or as an early sign of Esther's maternal attitude (cf. 2.1). This time, Esther finds herself in a similar situation, in the sense that despite the physical presence of the mother, she is emotionally rejected, and she has to continue living believing the fiction of her mother's death to be true. So, the scene with the Lady fails to be an actual reunion of the maternal bond, rather, it reiterates the fictional death of the mother. However, this does not stop Esther from rehearsing a true reunion scene, which John Jordan perceives as a substitute for the failed maternal reunion: this is the closing scene of Chapter 36, the first encounter with Ada following Esther's illness. Indeed, Jordan believes that Esther is disappointed by the reunion scene because she thought that with her different physical appearance, the mother could accept her.<sup>191</sup> This would have been hardly possible, because in putting family honour first, Lady Dedlock does a clear choice of relegating Esther in the background. Indeed, if people already suspicious of their bond were to see both women together, this would have simply increased their assumptions. Thus, Esther tries to be comforted by Ada's reunion, although she is afraid that her physical appearance would scare her, too: 'Might she not look for her old Esther, and not find her? Might she not have to grow used to me, and to begin all over again?'

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<sup>191</sup> Jordan, p. 55.

(455). These doubts refer to Ada, but the second one could easily originate from what she has witness the previous day with her mother's desire to begin all over again, as if Esther did not exist. However, Ada's reaction finally provides Esther a positive reunion scene:

Ah, my angel girl! the old dear look, all love, all fondness, all affection.

Nothing else in it – no, nothing, nothing!

O how happy I was [...] holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek,

bathing it with tears and kisses, rocking me to and fro like a child [...]

and pressing me to her faithful heart. (456)

Jordan notes that in this passage the old doll resonates: for instance, it was described as 'dear faithful Dolly', and, in the same way that Dolly was a substitute for the mother, here is Ada to be her substitute. Indeed, this time Esther rehearses what she thought the mother-and-daughter would have been like, imbued with love and acceptance that in the end Lady Dedlock was not able to give her.<sup>192</sup>

When Esther is alone, following the meeting with her mother, she is struck by guilt, wishing to have died in her birth, and by the remembrance of her aunt's words:

"Your mother, Esther, was your disgrace, and you are hers. The time will come – and soon enough – when you will understand this better, and will feel it to, as no one save a woman can." With them, those other words returned, "Pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head." I could not disentangle all that was about me; and I felt as if the blame and the shame were all in me, and the visitation had come down. (453)

The aunt's words return, many years later, to haunt Esther, and her prophetic sentences seem to have been fulfilled. Indeed, in meeting her mother and seeing her torn between her duties as a mother and those as a wife, she probably felt what the aunt's words were supposed to mean. Moreover, the sins of Nemo and Lady Dedlock visited her in at least two shapes: by giving her a mother who cannot fulfil her maternal role, and by disfiguring Esther's face. Indeed, Robert Newsom believes that Esther's smallpox has social and sexual causes, because its origin can be traced back to the sexual and social crimes that

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<sup>192</sup> Jordan, pp. 55 – 56.

gave birth to her – the extra-marital intercourse between the Lady and Captain Hawdon, and the toxicity of latter's resting place.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, it can be added a crime that is perhaps only implicit in Newsom, the environmental one: smallpox was so widespread because of London's – and industrial England's – environmental condition. Fog, winds, and pollution eased the proliferation of contagious diseases throughout the whole social sphere, not only to people living in debased conditions. Social and environmental crimes are close to each other: for instance, a grave such as Nemo's was without any doubt a social issue, but the lethal consequences of neglecting such a place were mostly spread by natural agents.

During the time Esther spends at Chesney Wold, she experiences many different emotions, which stand in mutual relation with her perception of the environment. Whilst in Chapter 18 the surroundings of Chesney Wold were endowed with agency, in this chapter it is Esther who perceives them in a different way, depending on her emotive reactions to what is happening. So, Esther's emotions span through three different peaks: calm, guilt, calm. When she comes at Boythorn's to recover from her illness, she is calm and peaceful, and lives in harmony with her surroundings: for instance, she describes the bucolic life of the nearby country village, and not even her disfigured face causes any sadness: 'The air blew as freshly and revivingly upon me as it had ever blown, and the healthy colour came into my new face as it had come into my old one' (447). Moreover, she loves spending time on a specific spot of the park of Chesney Wold, which gave her a 'lovely view' of the 'bright sunny landscape beyond', with particular emphasis to 'a picturesque part of the Hall, called the Ghost's Walk' (447). She knows that there is a legend behind this name, although she does not care particularly for it. The only mysterious element from this description is that Esther never went close, nor inside, Chesney Wold, because of the 'indefinable feeling' (448) with which Lady Dedlock had previously impressed her. However, the meeting with the Lady soon happens in Esther's favourite spot, and with that comes the revelation of their bond. Following the Lady's refusal of taking her role as Esther's mother, the daughter feels guilty of the situation, and the perception of her surroundings changes accordingly. Suddenly, 'among the still woods in the silence of the summer day, there seemed to be nothing but our troubled minds that was not at peace' (449), thus what was previously perceived as a peaceful spot

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<sup>193</sup> Newsom, pp. 79 – 80.

stands in sharp contrast with the two women's minds. This contrast is reiterated when Esther is left alone:

Calm and quiet below me in the sun and shade, lay the old house, with its terraces and turrets, on which there had seemed to me to be such complete repose when I first saw it, but which now looked like the obdurate and unpitiful watcher of my mother's misery. (452)

When her aunt's words come to her mind, she is still depressed, and coherently 'the day waned into a gloomy evening, overcast and sad, and I still contended with the same distress' (453). Moreover, Esther's guilt also modifies the perception of the picturesque part of the mansion, the Ghost's Walk. Its legend focuses on the ancestors of the current Dedlocks. The steps that are usually heard in that terrace pertain to an elder Lady Dedlock, who was lamed in a fight with her husband. She did not die on the moment, but continued walking in the terrace, and let herself dying there. Before dying, she swore her husband that the household would always hear her steps even after her death, because she would not rest until the pride and prestige of the House would have crumbled. Now, following the Lady's rejection, Esther's guilt is such that she believes to be the ghost of the Ghost's Walk:

My echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost's Walk; that it was I, who was to bring calamity upon the stately house; and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. (454)

Thus, Esther's guilt that originates from being the subject of the 'Dead Mother complex' influences both her psychical and physical reality, bearing consequences on the way she perceives herself, and the way she perceives her surroundings: from being a picturesque feature of Chesney Wold, the Ghost's Walk becomes its most threatening area. However, her spirit turns positive again during the same night, when she receives some letters from Ada and Mr Jarndyce. She feels loved again and, looking forward to the reunion with Ada, she thinks of

how happy I ought to be. [...] For, I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived [...] and that if the

sins of the fathers were sometimes visited upon the children, the phrase did not mean what I had in the morning feared it meant. I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers, and that before by Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it. (454-455).

With this passage, she seems to dismiss the fact that her scarred face is the result of her parents' sin, rather, she is probably persuaded that she caught the smallpox because of its contagious nature. Moreover, the parallel between herself and the queen echoes the that of the Tom-All-Along's slum, whose revenge 'shall work its retribution through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud and to the highest of the high' (553). Pollution and the environment can shorten the divide between rich and poor, by infecting them regardless of their status. Following these thoughts, Esther feels that 'the darkness of the morning' (455) is passing away, and indeed the following day she sees her surroundings in a different light, which recalls that of the beginning of the chapter: 'On our return, we held a great review of the house and the garden; and saw that everything was in its prettiest condition' (455). Esther's surroundings become familiar and comfortable once again, as she finally rehearses successfully a reunion scene with Ada, who occupies the place that was meant to be her mother's.

To conclude, the intersection between environment and psychoanalysis is multi-layered. First, the environment influences the perception of the Freudian uncanny, because through Esther's disfiguration it affects one of the uncanniest sources of the mother-and-daughter physical bond. This type of environmental agency originates from a long-standing negligence in dealing with polluted and insalubrious areas of London, as Nemo's grave and Tom's slum exemplify. Moreover, these fictional areas have often been read from a gothic perspective, but the London reality of the time was even more horrific and went beyond Dickens' fictional gothic. Secondly, Esther's perception of her surroundings at Chesney Wold differs from Chapter 18 to Chapter 36: in the former, the environment seems endowed with agency, to the extent that it influences the events of the mother-and-daughter plot through its frequent changes, from rain to sun and vice versa, and its pattern seems to proceed in a parallel way to Esther's uncanny experiences. By contrast, in Chapter 36 the environment seems to be a mirror for Esther's thoughts and emotions: if she has a positive outlook on her life, then her surroundings are perceived as

comfortable and peaceful; by contrast, when she feels guilty and depressed, she sees the environment with the same gloominess. Throughout Chapter 36, Esther perceives in a different way the Ghost's Walk, due to the influence of the guilt for the emotionally dead mother: in this case, the terrace turns from being a picturesque feature of the mansion to being dreaded for its haunting legend, which brings Esther to become herself the female ghost that will cause the fall of the House. The next chapter focuses on the role of moon and coldness in the key events that lead Lady Dedlock to escape, and in Esther and Inspector Bucket's final quest.

## CHAPTER 4: MOON AND COLDNESS IN THE QUEST FOR LADY DEDLOCK

This chapter focuses on the interplay between environmental elements and the final part of the mother-and-daughter plot. The stress lies on the natural elements which recur predominantly in these conclusive moments of the narrative, the moon and the cold. It explores the role and recurrence of the moon in Tulkinghorn's uncanny discovery of Lady Dedlock's secret, in the Lady's maternal affection towards Rosa, and finally in the lawyer's death. The second section focuses on the semantic field of the cold, already familiar to *Bleak House*, which here returns in various shapes: the cold weather of the Lady's final escape, the emotional coldness of the 'Dead Mother complex', and, at last, Esther's cold dismissal of the mother's death. Moon-related terms, including 'moonlight' and 'moonshine', occur in 37 entries in *Bleak House*. Overall, this marks the highest gathering for these words in a Dickens's novel.<sup>194</sup> Among these entries, 20 of them result in Chapters 40, 41, and 48, which develop the encounters between Lady Dedlock and Mr Tulkinghorn, and the Lady's struggle between her maternal affection towards Rosa and her secret. Conversely, words related to coldness and ice become more frequent towards the end of the novel, namely Chapters 57, 58, and 59, those concerned with the Lady's escape and Esther's quest and discovery of the dead mother. Once Lady Dedlock dies, these words recur less – for instance, 'cold' appears three times from Chapter 60 to 67, against 10 of the three chapters of the Lady's escape, and words such as 'snow' and 'ice' do not appear anymore following her death. This association between Lady Dedlock and the environmental elements resonates within the broader psychoanalytic framework: for instance, the moon relates to Lady Dedlock's first serious attempt to behave in a motherly way, albeit not towards her natural child, and at the same time it characterises Tulkinghorn's murder, whom the Lady often wished dead. The coldness refers to the mother-and-daughter complex of the 'Dead Mother', because Honoria's emotional coldness towards Esther is mirrored in the freezing environment through which Esther searches for and finds the dead body of the mother. However, it also relates to the child's

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<sup>194</sup> For what concerns the recurrence of specific words in *Bleak House* or in the whole of Dickens's corpus, searches have been made through an online software: Mahlberg, M., Stockwell, P., de Joode, J., Smith, C., & O'Donnell, M. B., 'CLiC Dickens: Novel uses of concordances for the integration of corpus stylistics and cognitive poetics' *Corpora*, 11.3 (2016), pp. 433–463, <https://clic.bham.ac.uk/>.

condition: on one hand, Esther coldly departs from the mother by avoiding to mourn her; on the other, Esther's love is not frozen anymore, and she becomes wife and mother. Once the mother dies, the ice is melted, and Esther does not feel cold anymore. However, in the final scene of the novel some uncanny thoughts about her old face originates by looking at the moon, ending her narrative with one last glimpse of the environmental and Freudian uncanny.

In the final part of the mother-and-daughter plot, things quickly degenerate for Lady Dedlock. Her secret is discovered by Mr Tulkinghorn, who at first demands her to behave as if nothing happened, because that is the best option for Sir Leicester's honour. However, her motherly instinct prevails over her. This is not felt towards Esther, rather towards Rosa, Mrs Rouncewell's maid, and relates to the struggle between aristocratic and middle-class worlds, introduced by the metaphor of the solar system in Chapter 2 (cf. 2.1). In the novel, Sir Leicester struggles with Mr Rouncewell, the middle-class ironmaster, who defeated the nobleman's party in the National Elections. Moreover, Mr Rouncewell previously asked Rosa's hand for his son, disapproving his choice, which was negated by the Dedlocks because of this long-standing hatred, and because the Lady did not want to part with her. Following the dialogue with Tulkinghorn, this time Honoria is resolute to hand Rosa over to Mr Rouncewell, to save her from the shame of being patronaged by a dishonoured Lady. She manages to save Rosa's faith, but not her own: Tulkinghorn tells her that he will soon expose her secret to Sir Leicester. However, back home from this encounter at Chesney Wold, the lawyer is suddenly shot in his house. Everything crumbles for the Lady: albeit innocent, she is suspected of Tulkinghorn's murder, and her secret reaches Sir Leicester via Inspector Bucket's words. Under the nobleman's order, the Inspector engages Esther in the final quest to save Lady Dedlock, who had escaped on a wintry and frosty night. She only left a letter for his husband, where she says she had no role in Tulkinghorn's murder, but she pledges guilty for every other rumour Sir Leicester hears. The quest ends with Esther discovering the body of the dead mother on the steps of Nemo's grave. However, she immediately proceeds to other passages of her narrative, which culminate in the middle-class happy ending: she marries the physician Mr Woodcourt, and becomes mother of two daughters.

#### 4.1 Moon, Hauntings, and the Maternal in Lady Dedlock's Downfall

In the events that culminate with her escape, Lady Dedlock is often associated with the moon, via their shared feature of stillness, her maternal attitude towards Rosa, and the ambiguous description of Tulkinghorn's murder.

In Chapter 40, the sun is setting at Chesney Wold. Physically, because the scene described takes place from sunset to night, and metaphorically, because Tulkinghorn's discovery of the Lady's secret drastically changes the complexion of the mansion.

But the fire of the sun is dying. Even now the floor is dusky, and shadow slowly mounts the walls, bringing the Dedlocks down like age and death. And now, upon my Lady's picture over the great chimney-piece, a weird shade falls from some old tree, that turns it pale, flutters it, and looks as if a great arm held a veil or hood, watching an opportunity to draw it over her. Higher and darker rises shadow on the wall – now a red gloom on the ceiling – now the fire is out. (498)

This description employs already-known environmental elements of the mansion in a gloomier, darker way. To some extent, this passage prefigures the Lady's death: the veil-like shape recalls Lady Dedlock's disguise as servant at the time of Nemo's death, and foresees her changing of clothes with Jenny, the brickmaker's wife, to mislead Inspector Bucket and Esther so to reach unimpeded her lover's grave once again, and die there. At last, the fire is out for Chesney Wold, as much as it will soon be for Lady Dedlock. The moon takes the sun's place, yet the gloomy and sterile atmosphere remains: 'Now, the moon is high; and the great house, needing habitation more than ever, is like a body without life' (498). Indeed, the couple is not at Chesney Wold, which is momentarily inhabited by the household only, until the following evening. Nor that their arrival would satisfy the mansion's need for inhabitants: in Chapter 7, which introduced the eco-system of the place, the third-person narrator granted more agency and vitality to the non-human realm of animals, rather than to that of the humans (cf. 3.1), so it might be thought that the mansion would remain a senseless body also with the Dedlocks within its walls.

Overall, in the three chapters closely intertwined with Lady Dedlock, Tulkinghorn, and Rosa, the moon's role is twofold: on one hand, it is the environmental element more closely associated with Lady Dedlock's maternal instinct, in opposition to

her cold attitude related to the ‘Dead Mother complex’; on the other, it plays a haunting role in both the Lady’s and the lawyer’s lives. This ambivalent role of the moon was already a familiar trope in 1840s Victorian fiction: for instance, Kurt Harris and Michelle Wilson analysed the role of the moon within maternal reunions in the plots of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848). Wilson argues that, in nineteenth-century Victorian fiction, the re-appearance of the mother often occurs in moonlight, in brief but important moments of the plot, which sometimes mark a shift in genre, for instance between the realist and gothic dichotomy.<sup>195</sup> Thus, the moon relates to both the maternal and the haunting side of the plot. She underlines a passage from *Mary Barton*, where, under the moonlight, Mary misrecognises the figure of her shamed aunt Esther, for that of her dead mother, and Esther’s sister. Thus, the moon provides the background for maternal misrecognition between a virtuous woman and her destitute sister. In *Jane Eyre*, the moon frequently appears. For example, when Jane is dreaming, she gazes at the moon in the night-sky, which progressively comes nearer to Jane, and it suddenly takes the shape of her beloved mother, who advises her to flee from temptation. Thus, in this case the moon personifies the mother, and also becomes a feature of uncanny and ghostly appearance.<sup>196</sup> Kurt Harris stresses how Jane is engaged in a mutual relationship with the moon: its gaze can intimidate and cause anxiety, but can also comfort and guide; moreover, as Jane often gazes at the moon, the latter seems to watch over her, too, and this is why Harris refers to *Jane Eyre*’s moon as ‘maternal’.<sup>197</sup> In *Bleak House*, the moon is engaged with Lady Dedlock’s maternal struggle. Its appearance marks the only point in the novel where she puts her maternal affection towards Rosa above the prestige of the family name, a decision she was previously unable to take for her real daughter, Esther. Indeed, while she asked her daughter to consider her dead, putting Sir Leicester’s honour first, she also dismissed Rosa from the household, but by doing that she broke the agreement with Tulkinghorn, and paved the way to the public disclosure of her secret. Thus, she put maternal instinct before family name.

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<sup>195</sup> Michelle L. Wilson, ‘Legal Spectres, Narrative Ghosts: Mothers and the Law in the Victorian Novel’ (Doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 2012), pp. 4-5.

<sup>196</sup> Wilson, pp. 124-125.

<sup>197</sup> Kurt Harris, ‘The Signification of the Omphalos: On Maternal Loss and the Metaphorics of Reunion in Victorian Literature’ (Doctoral thesis, University of California Santa Cruz, 2004), pp. 115-116.

In Chapter 40, when all the Dedlocks are reunited at Chesney Wold, the lawyer asks permission to 'tell a story' (505): namely, the Lady's secret, omitting her name. Lady Dedlock is sitting before a window where moonlight streams 'a cold pale light, in which her head is seen' (505). It is the moon to provide the framework to his 'story', before and after: 'By the light of the fire, which is low, he can be seen looking towards the moonlight. By the light of the moon Lady Dedlock can be seen, perfectly still.' (505). When Tulkinghorn's story is over, the same scene is repeated: 'By the light of the fire he can be seen looking towards the moonlight. By the moonlight, Lady Dedlock can be seen in profile, perfectly still.' (506). The moon becomes the element associated with the moment Tulkinghorn reveals, and Lady Dedlock understands, that her past is not a secret anymore. The lawyer is obviously looking towards Lady Dedlock to discern her reaction, which apparently does not come yet.

In Chapter 41, later that night, the two characters meet to discuss the revelation. Alongside the Lady's natural bond with Esther, the maternal affection towards Rosa comes into the foreground. Indeed, she immediately asks what she should do to keep Rosa's honour safe. He simply replies that she has to carry on as if nothing happened, because if the Lady's secret turns public, this would be to the detriment of his client Sir Leicester's honour. Indeed, he tells her that his husband relies completely on her, to the extent that 'the fall of that moon out of the sky, would not amaze him more than your fall from your high position as his wife' (511). The long-running environmental metaphor of the aristocratic world here is reworked in new terms: Sir Leicester and the aristocratic class represent the sky, while Lady Dedlock is the moon. This time, there is no hint to any decay or dismissal of the upper class, rather the metaphor works towards expelling a foreign body, Lady Dedlock, whose maternal body is indeed sign of shame and strangeness. The moon is also mentioned by the third-person narrator:

Away in the moonlight lie the woodland fields at rest, and the wide house is as quiet as the narrow one. The narrow one! 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? (509)

This time, the moon is associated with environmental stillness, rather than with the Lady's one, but it is also juxtaposed with an eerie motif of grave-digging. Indeed, the digger and the spade here refer to the metaphorical burial of Tulkinghorn's last-acquired secret

among the others in his possession, so that the Lady – and consequently, Rosa’s and Sir Leicester’s honours – would not suffer any consequence. Moreover, the image of burying piles of secrets one above the other resonates with a similar action described in Chapter 16: that of Nemo’s grave, where tons of bodies were buried on top of each other, regardless of sanitary conditions and easing the spreading of diseases. So, this passage, by opposing the stillness of the moon to the digger and the spade, recalls the blurred boundary between realism and the gothic, as what seems to be a description of the surrounding environment turns out to be so ambivalent to contribute to the overall uncanny atmosphere of the novel. Furthermore, this wish to bury Tulkinghorn’s secrets can be extended to the Lady’s implicit wish of burying the lawyer himself. The above passage originates from the narrator, who in the last part seems to read the Lady’s mind. Indeed, this feeling later occurs in her mind, when she is suspected of Tulkinghorn’s murder:

Her enemy he was, and she has often, often, often, wished him dead. Her enemy he is, even in his grave. [...] she used to think “if some mortal stroke would but fall on this old man and take him from my way!” [...] What was his death but the key-stone of a gloomy arch removed, and now the arch begins to fall in a thousand fragments, each crushing and mangling piecemeal! (666)

Lady Dedlock’s wish for his death echoes the uncanniness that originates from ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ (cf. 3.2): the animistic belief that by strongly wishing something, at the end it becomes reality, thus marking a much stronger emphasis on psychological reality over the material one.<sup>198</sup> Despite the upcoming dangers for Lady Dedlock, and the multifaced role of the moon, the ending of Chapter 41 seems to draw the curtain over these matters:

Up comes the bright sun, drawing everything up with it – the Wills and Sallys, the latent vapour in the earth, the drooping leaves and flowers, the birds and beasts and creeping things, the gardeners to sweep the dewy turf [...]. Lastly, up comes the flag over Mr Tulkinghorn’s unconscious head, cheerfully proclaiming that Sir Leicester and Lady

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<sup>198</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, pp. 146, 151.

Dedlock are in their happy home, and that there is hospitality at the place in Lincolnshire. (514)

This bucolic ending seems to work as a filler: the aristocratic couple is ready to carry on with their regular activities as usual, as the overall mansion and surrounding environment are. The moon's stillness and pale beams give way to the brightness and liveliness of the sun, which transform the place into a happy home. However, it is this hint to a supposedly regularity of everyday life to confer an eerie atmosphere to this passage: first, the third-person narrator never described Chesney Wold as a happy place, stressing multiple times its dullness and passivity; moreover, this description is too much at odds with the events of the last two chapters. Furthermore, it can be argued that the uncanny resonates in the discovery of the Lady's secret, because of two sets of meanings that, in tracing the etymology of the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, Freud discovered the uncanny to have. These refer to the status of a secret: *heimlich* is what is secret and kept concealed, while, once the secret is no more, it becomes *unheimlich*. Thus, the 'uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come to the open'.<sup>199</sup> What happens from Chapter 41 is that the narrative concerning Lady Dedlock becomes increasingly uncannier, in the sense that her past is not hidden anymore, and, as Tulkinghorn later remarks, *her* secret has become *the* secret, and it is Tulkinghorn's prerogative to decide if and when spread it. This is why all these passages transmit an uncanny feeling, which becomes apparent in the contrast between the pretence of regular activity in Chesney Wold or in Lady Dedlock, and the reality which makes clear that the dull atmosphere is soon going to be shocked. Indeed, the pastoral appearance of the mansion turns out to be just a temporary illusion.

In Chapter 48, at their house in London, Lady Dedlock breaks the agreement. She separates from Rosa, and gives her hand to Mr Rouncewell's son. John Jordan believes that Rosa is the Lady's surrogate child,<sup>200</sup> and indeed what the Lady rehearses here is comparable to what Esther previously did to create a surrogate for motherly affection, concerning the maternal bond created with her childhood doll, and the reunion scene with Ada to re-enact in the right way that with her mother. The maternal bond between Rosa and Lady Dedlock is emphasised in this chapter: 'Do you know, Rosa, that I am different

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<sup>199</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 132-133.

<sup>200</sup> Jordan, p. 51.

to you from what I am to anyone?’ (573), the Lady asks her, and ‘with that motherly touch of the famous Ironmaster night, lays her hand upon the dark hair, and gently keeps it there’ (574). When Lady Dedlock tells her they must part, Rosa is deeply saddened, and asks whether her lady would be happier when they part. The Lady replies:

I have said, my child, that what I do, I do for your sake, not my own. It is done. What I am towards you, Rosa, is what I am now – not what I shall be a little while hence. Remember this, and keep my confidence.  
(574)

So, the Lady abandons her ‘daughters’ twice in the novel: to Esther, it coincided with the moment of their unexpected reunion. That time, she told her daughter the reason behind her choice, and asked her to consider her dead. So, she put family honour before her maternal bond, avoiding to raise any suspect on her past. This time, the situation is slightly different: Lady Dedlock knows that by sending Rosa away, she will suffer heavy consequences at the hands of Tulkinghorn, who would probably spoil her secret to her husband, ruining her reputation, and, if rumour spread, that of the whole House. By handing Rosa over to the Rouncewells, Lady Dedlock puts her motherly attitude before anything else for the first time in the novel: indeed, she deliberately chooses to save Rosa’s honour to the detriment of her own. At the same time, this does not mean that Lady Dedlock is not the emotionally dead mother of Green’s theorization: indeed, she remains emotionally dead towards Esther, her real daughter, and adopts a maternal attitude towards who should simply be Mrs Rouncewell’s assistant. Moreover, the way she frees the two ‘daughters’ differs: whilst she told her natural child that they would not be able to be daughter-and-mother in everyday life, and that Esther should carry on with the fiction to consider the mother dead, to Rosa she stresses how they should both remember their motherly and affectionate bond as it was before parting, despite their need to part from each other. In Esther’s case, she put family honour before the daughter; with Rosa, she put her before the House and the Lady’s own self.

The moon returns in the second half of the chapter. On the evening when Mr Rouncewell is expected, the Lady wishes to speak with her husband to tell him her decision about Rosa. However, Mr Tulkinghorn is with him. Her behaviour following the dialogue with Rosa seems to be the usual:

She is in her haughtiest and coldest state. As indifferent as if all passion, feeling, and interest, had been worn out in the earlier ages of the world, and had perished from its surface with its other departed monsters.  
(574)

The Lady's appearance recalls the ending of Chapter 41: both passages focus respectively on Chesney Wold and Lady Dedlock carrying on with their regular and everyday lives as usual, as if nothing happened, and both are at odds with reality. Indeed, Mr Tulkinghorn lurks behind the superficial pattern of boredom and regularity, and this is why the fiction of the Lady's indifferent behaviour cannot last. Her mindset is unsettled as soon as she joins Sir Leicester in the library:

‘Sir Leicester, I am desirous – but you are engaged.’

O dear no! Not at all. Only Mr Tulkinghorn.

Always at hand. Haunting every place. No relief or security from him for a moment.

‘I beg your pardon, Lady Dedlock. Will you allow me to retire?’

With a look that plainly says, ‘You know you have the power to remain if you will,’ she tells him it is not necessary, and moves towards a chair.

Mr Tulkinghorn [...] retires into a window opposite. Interposed between her and the fading light of day in the now quiet street, his shadow falls upon her, and he darkens all before her. Even so does he darken her life. [...] She sends a look in that direction, as if it were her heart's desire to have that figure removed out of the way. (575)

The third-person narrator emphasises the Lady's perspective. Indeed, she feels haunted by the lawyer, and Tulkinghorn's position near the window mirrors, and perhaps mocks, that of the Lady under the moonlight when he told her story in Chapter 40. The moon is implicitly present here, as an association of these two specular moments. Moreover, the shadow falling upon Lady Dedlock recalls the shade falling upon her portrait at Chesney Wold in Chapter 40: Mr Tulkinghorn becomes the shadow that darkens her life. Another comparison originates from the Lady's wish to have ‘the figure removed out of the way’: the third-person narrator already expressed a similar position with the image of the digger and the spade burying Tulkinghorn's last secret, and implicitly his dead body, and this

thought originated by looking at the still moon over the fields. Both images are associated with the moon, and convey the feeling that Lady Dedlock wishes the lawyer dead.

Once Rosa is turned over to Mr Rouncewell, the Lady and Mr Tulkinghorn engage in their last confrontation, where he tells her that he considers their arrangement broken, and whenever it suits him, Tulkinghorn will tell Sir Leicester her secret, which would result in the personified moon, Lady Dedlock, falling from the aristocratic sky. Following their dialogue, Mr Tulkinghorn heads back home. At this point, the third-person narrative switches between both perspectives, the Lady's and the lawyer's, under the common framework of the moon shining outside:

It is a moonlight night; but the moon, being past the full, is only now rising over the great wilderness of London. The stars are shining as they shone above the turret-leads at Chesney Wold. This woman, as he has of late been so accustomed to call her, looks out upon them. Her soul is turbulent within her; she is sick at heart, and restless. The large rooms are too cramped and close. She cannot endure their restraint, and will walk alone in a neighbouring garden. (583)

At first, 'this woman' may seem to refer to the moon, but by the end of the paragraph it becomes clear that she is Lady Dedlock, who, restless because of what her maternal instinct has cost her, takes a walk outside. Tulkinghorn's perspective is merged with hers, as while walking he thinks 'what a fine night, what a bright large moon, what multitude of stars! A quiet night, too' (584). Indeed, the narrator stresses that it is 'a very quiet night. When the moon shines very brilliantly, a solitude and stillness seem to proceed from her, that influence even crowded places full of life' (584). Once again, the stillness of the moon recalls the apparent stillness and inscrutability of Lady Dedlock in hearing Tulkinghorn's story by the moonlighted window in Chapter 40 and, previously, that of the whole environment of Chesney Wold (cf. 2.3 and 3.1). The environmental stillness is such that it cannot even be broken by the noisy London factories in the background:

Every noise is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum,  
as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating.

What's that? Who fired a gun or pistol? Where was it?

[...] It shook one house, or so a man says who was passing. It has aroused all the dogs in the neighbourhood, who bark vehemently. [...] The church-clocks, as if they were startled too, begin to strike. The hum from the streets, likewise, seems to swell into a shout. But it is soon over. Before the last clock begins to strike ten, there is a lull. When it has ceased, the fine night, the bright large moon, and multitude of stars, are left at peace again. (585)

The surrounding environment is struck by the shot, and its stillness is replaced by barks and curiosity of the people nearby the area. Moreover, the noise from the factories is perceived differently, first as a hum, then as a shout. However, all this happens within the few seconds of the church-bell strikes: as soon as the tolls are over, the focus switches back to the moon and the stars, which mark the Chancery area with quiet and stillness. The result of this shot is twofold: Tulkinghorn is killed, as the shot was fired within his house, and Lady Dedlock becomes one of the principal suspects, and she decides to leave her house for good, while her secret reaches Sir Leicester via Inspector Bucket. The leading environmental role of the moon comes to a halt with Tulkinghorn's murder, and later significantly reappears at the end of Esther's narrative.

To sum up, the moon has featured predominantly in the environment of Chapters 40, 41, 48. The uncanny has aroused in the transition concerning the role of the Lady's secret: at the beginning of Chapter 40, it was her secret, thus it referred to the realm of the *heimlich*, hidden and concealed. Throughout these chapters, it is clearly perceived a shift from being the Lady's secret to becoming *the* secret, at the hands of Tulkinghorn, thus the uncanny originates from her past not being concealed anymore, against the owner's wishes. Moreover, the moon characterises the only moments where Lady Dedlock acts out of her maternal side, and hands Rosa over for marriage to the middle-class Mr Rouncewell, breaking Tulkinghorn's agreement. The moon does not seem to be endowed with specific agency, but it seems to be closely interrelated with Lady Dedlock. For instance, Tulkinghorn compares Lady Dedlock's fall from the position of Sir Leicester's wife to that of the moon falling from the sky. Moreover, the moonlight enlightens the Lady's shape while she listens to Tulkinghorn's story, and seems to haunt the lawyer, in turn a haunting figure for the Lady, on the night of his death. There, the third-person narrator switches constantly between the perspective of the two characters

walking under the same moonlight: the satellite looks down at the gunshot fired at Tulkinghorn's, which fulfils Lady Dedlock's secret wish to have him dead. Thus, the moon predominantly features in the Lady's deepest wishes, the death of the lawyer, and the maternal affection towards Rosa, but at the same time it is the environmental image that marks the beginning of her downfall.

#### **4.2 'I proceed to other passages of my narrative': Coldness and The Mother's Death**

Coldness permeates the Lady's escape and Esther's reaction to her death. The cold attitude that characterises the mother-and-daughter bond in light of Green's 'Dead Mother complex', here also pertains to the nonhuman realm of the environment. Indeed, Lady Dedlock's long-standing cold and freezing mood prefigures the haunting environmental features of her death, cold and snow. In her last letter, she writes that cold, wet, and fatigue 'are sufficient causes for my being found dead' (710). In her final journey, the indifferent aura of the aristocratic Lady Dedlock, the coldness of the emotionally dead mother, and the freezing environment are in the foreground of Esther's climatic discovery of her mother's body in Chapter 59, and of her even colder unmourning at the beginning of Chapter 60.

Frozen love characterises the mother and daughter of Green's complex. On one hand, the mother is emotionally dead, depressed, and unable to properly care for and nurture her child; on the other, the daughter's love is frozen: she may become attached to other people and felt loved by them, but in truth love is still mortgaged to the dead mother, and it is never completely satisfied.<sup>201</sup> Green writes that 'this cold core burns like ice, and numbs like it as well, but as long as it is felt to be cold, love remains unavailable. There are barely metaphors'.<sup>202</sup> The final quest for Lady Dedlock is an environmental metaphor of Green's account of the mother-and-daughter bond, because the ice and snow that predominantly recurred in the mother's life and her final escape are melted by the end of the journey, such as the Lady's life is, and Esther's love is not frozen anymore. When Lady Dedlock runs away from the Dedlocks house in London, she leaves a letter to Sir Leicester, where she declares herself innocent for Tulkinghorn's murder, but guilty of

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<sup>201</sup> Green, pp. 149, 150, 156.

<sup>202</sup> Green, p. 156.

any other accusation he will hear about her. There are no hints to Esther in her letter, nor any maternal affection, and she takes leave from Sir Leicester ‘only with a deeper shame than that with which she hurries from herself’ (667). Here, the Lady’s maternal side is seen as the ultimate shame. Sir Leicester fully forgives her, and asks Inspector Bucket to try to save his wife from harm. He asks Esther for help, and they search for her in London and its outskirts.

The escape is marked by an extreme coldness from the beginning: the Lady is ‘pelted by the snow and driven by the wind’ and ‘miserably dressed’ (674), while Mr Bucket warns Esther to dress in warm clothing, because ‘it’s a desperate sharp night’ (675). The wild night and the desperate enterprise influence Esther’s perception of her surroundings: she feels as disoriented as she was when she first came to London in Chapter 3 (cf. 2.3), and she recounts that ‘we rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets, that I soon lost all idea where we were; except that we had crossed, and re-crossed the river’ (676). The Thames is also stressed in a dark way:

The river had a fearful look, so overcast and secret, creeping away so fast between the low flat lines of shore: so heavy with indistinct and awful shapes, both of substance and shadow: so deathlike and mysterious. [...] In my memory, the lights upon the bridge are always burning dim. (678)

The deadly powers of the Thames are emphasised within the gloominess of the search for Esther’s mother – however, what Esther recalls here is a deadly feature of the nineteenth-century Thames: the river was actually dangerous because of the low visibility around the area, which was also due to the fog and the gas lamps that were frequently used in London, to the extent that vessels could crash amongst each other, and people could die. Moreover, the other way that the Thames could be linked to mortality was via its polluted water, as many diseases could also be caught by drinking it (cf. 1.2.3). So, the environmental problems surrounding nineteenth-century London here are read from the perspective of Esther’s mind, under distress because of the scary journey ahead of her. Esther’s thoughts also associate her mother with the surrounding snow: following an inquire at the brickmaker’s, where Lady Dedlock went to talk with Jenny, for reasons yet unknown to Bucket and Esther, they are following the path of the woman that is believed to be Lady

Dedlock towards the outskirts of London. After some hours of travel, they stop by an inn to get some refreshment. Esther looks at the road ahead:

As I looked among the stems of the trees, and followed the discoloured marks in the snow where the thaw was sinking into it and undermining it, I thought of the motherly face brightly set off by daughters that had just now welcomed me, and of *my* mother lying down in such a wood to die. (688) [italics in the original]

In this passage, the daughter associates the thawed snow with the face of a loving mother, and then with the image of her own mother dead. Arguably, the comparison can be read at two levels: the thawed snow could be related to Lady Dedlock slowly fading away, because the snow is progressively disappearing, as much as Esther believes the chances to see her mother alive are. At the same time, the cold image may refer to the coldness of the emotionally dead mother, in sharp contrast with the landlady's motherly affection towards the daughters, which Esther never knew in her life. Moreover, this association may have occurred because of Esther's focus on the face, which featured as a predominant uncanny feature in the various meetings and associations between Lady Dedlock and herself. In parallel, the image of the thawing snow recurs at Chesney Wold, where Sir Leicester is recovering from a stroke following the discovery of the Lady's secret. There, the melting snow is 'falling still; upon the roof, upon the skylight; even through the skylight, and drip, drip, drip, with the regularity of the Ghost's Walk, on the stone floor below' (701-702). Throughout the narrative, Lady Dedlock has been described many times absorbed in her bored-to-death and freezing attitude watching from her window the monotonous falling of the rain in the terrace of the Ghost's Walk, making the same regular sound 'drip, drip, drip' (cf. 2.1). What was a filler, a boring and regular repetition of the everyday, here becomes a personification of the Lady: her freezing mood is progressively melted, and it is not the bored-to-death Lady who watches the raindrops from her room, rather it is her coldness to be progressively thawed and to fall upon that same terrace. From both the third-person and Esther's perspectives, the thawing snow runs parallel to the Lady's life beginning to fade away, and to the abdication of her apparently detached aura due to the spreading of her secret. Emotional and environmental coldness continue to characterise Lady Dedlock, and the mother-and-daughter bond, until the end of her journey.

Before analysing the relation between cold and Lady Dedlock in her final moments, there are two other interrelated aspects of Green's 'Dead Mother complex' which are discernible in the behaviour of the two women. For what concerns the mother, Green states that:

The mother's bereavement modifies her fundamental attitude with regard to the child, whom she feels incapable of loving, but whom she continues to love just as she continues to take care of him. However, as one says, 'her heart is not in it'. (151)

Lady Dedlock did not physically nurture Esther, first because she thought her dead, and then because she put her family honour before her. However, some affection towards her remains. When Esther reads her farewell letter, there are some words for the daughter:

I came to the cottage with two objects. First, to see the dear one, if I could, once more – but only to see her – not to speak to her, or let her know that I was near. The other object, to elude pursuit and be lost. [...] Cold, wet, and fatigue, are sufficient causes for my being found dead; but I shall die of others, though I suffer from these. [...] I should die of terror and my conscience. [...] The place where I shall lie down, if I can get so far, has been often in my mind. Farewell. Forgive. (709-710)

This lengthy letter opens with the Lady's wish to see her daughter for once last time, without letting her know. This exemplifies the way the Lady has been a dead mother to Esther: alive, but absent in the cares for her daughter, because her heart could not be in it. The only thing she could do was hoping to catch sight of Esther from the distance, thinking about her, but incapable of loving her as a mother should do. Moreover, she knows that coldness and shame will kill her, and to some extent the two issues are related: emotive coldness metaphorically killed Esther's mother, who asked her daughter to consider her dead; now, environmental coldness is going to physically kill Lady Dedlock. The place that she hopes to reach is Nemo's grave, where Bucket and Esther are now going to, joined by Mr Woodcourt. The way that Esther is interrelated with Green's complex is by a blurring that also recurs in Freud's theorisation of the uncanny: that between reality and phantasy. To this purpose, the French scholar argues that the subject:

feels the need to cling to the presence of what is perceived as real and untouched by any projection, because he is far from sure of the distinction between fantasy and reality, which he does his utmost to keep apart. [...] When reality and fantasy are telescoped together, intense anxiety appears.<sup>203</sup>

Freud classifies the blurred boundary between reality and fantasy as source of the uncanny, because it originates, similarly to the omnipotence of thoughts, from an ‘excessive stress that is laid on psychical reality, as opposed to material reality’.<sup>204</sup> While searching for the mother, Esther suffers from this ambivalence various times: at the beginning of the quest, she recalls that ‘I was far from sure that I was not in a dream’ (676), then, at the brickmaker’s house, she becomes more confident on material reality: ‘I was just beginning to arrange and comprehend the occurrences of the night, and really to believe that they were not a dream.’ (679). However, she also recounts to never be free from anxiety: ‘I seemed, in a strange way, never to have been free from the anxiety under which I then laboured’ (687). At last, when Esther, Mr Bucket, and Mr Woodcourt, who joined them in the meanwhile, reach Nemo’s grave, Esther’s psychical reality definitely holds sway over the material:

I recollect that it was neither night nor day; that morning was dawning, but the street-lamps were not yet put out; that the sleet was still falling, and that all the ways were deep with it [...] that the stained house fronts put on human shapes and looked at me; that great water-gates seemed to be opening and closing in my head, or in the air; and that the unreal things were more substantial than the real. (712-713)

This passage marks Esther’s confusion in perceiving her surroundings: the human blurs with the nonhuman, fantasy blurs with reality, day mingles with night. However, there is a feature that brings the focus back on coldness: the falling sleet. All around, it is a mixture of snow, ice, and wet, and indeed this context anticipates Esther’s first discovery:

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<sup>203</sup> Green, pp. 157-158.

<sup>204</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 151.

On the step at the gate, drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere, I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying – Jenny, the mother of the dead child. (713)

While Inspector Bucket and Mr Woodcourt understood that the dead woman was not Jenny, rather she was Lady Dedlock, Esther's anxiety does not allow her to consciously recognise that the woman humbly dressed is her mother. This scenario fulfils the Lady's farewell letter: she died because of snow and wet, and she died in the place linked with her shame and sexuality, her lover's burial ground.

However, the most striking passage for its coldness comes shortly later, and originates from the contrast between the end of this chapter and the beginning of Chapter 60. Before that, it should be stressed that Esther discovers Jenny's body with a 'cry of pity and horror', and that Mr Woodcourt asks her in tears to listen to Inspector Bucket, before running towards the woman's corpse. Bucket tells her that the two women changed their clothes at the cottage, but Esther does not understand what his words mean: 'I knew what they meant of themselves; but I attached to meaning to them in any other connexion' (713). Thus, the moments in front of Nemo's grave are soaked with emotions, and with snow and cold in the background. At last, Esther moves closer to the dead body. Her words are telegraphic:

I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face.

And it was my mother, cold and dead. (714)

Environmental, physical, and emotional cold intertwine with each other: Lady Dedlock is cold because of the nights and days passed under the inclement weather, but most importantly she is cold because she is a dead body. The emotionally dead mother now becomes literally a dead mother. Coldness strikes one last blow to the mother-and-daughter plot via Esther's opening of the next chapter:

I proceed to other passages of my narrative. From the goodness of all about me, I derived such consolation as I can never think of unmoved. I have already said so much of myself, and so much still remains, that I will not dwell upon my sorrow. I had an illness, but it was not a long one; and I would avoid even this mention of it, if I could quite keep down the recollection of their sympathy.

I proceed to other passages of my narrative. (714)

What surprises, arguably, is the position of this passage within Esther's narrative, rather than what she actually says: indeed, if in discovering Jenny she reacted with a scream of horror and pity, in discovering that the dead body was her mother's, she avoids any mourning or sign of deep distress that this death should arise. She only dismisses the mother's death as one of the many passages of her narrative, and she does so by going on with the story of her own life. The atmosphere of the Lady's quest was permeated by the coldest environment in the whole novel, and this is arguably one of its metaphorically coldest passages. Indeed, when in Chapter 36 the Lady left Esther with the request to consider her dead, that passage came following an excursus into Lady Dedlock's troubled mind and position. In Chapter 60, what is left of the mother-and-daughter plot, and of the quest for the mother, is the reiterated desire to carry on with life, superseding any mourning. This time, it is not known why Esther does not mourn the mother, but some suppositions can be done. Esther's coldness may be a reaction inscribable to the 'Dead Mother complex', a defence mechanism by decathexis of the maternal object, and of unconscious identification with the dead mother:<sup>205</sup> Lady Dedlock revealed herself as Esther's mother but rejected to take up this position, and Esther mirrors her choice by trying to save her mother, but by ultimately refusing to mourn her. At last, she translates to reality the fiction of considering the mother dead, yet she never mourned her from the moment of their reunion. Moreover, she will not mention the mother anywhere in her remaining narrative, only Mr Jarndyce will once. The dichotomy between affection and unmourning strikes a chord with Esther's behaviour towards her aunt, in her childhood memories in Chapter 3. Both narratives are similar because they are pervaded by the contraposition of Esther's affection in contrast with the coolness of the maternal counterpart, and both maternal deaths are unmourned. This is why it can be argued that Esther's real feelings towards the aunt and the mother may be cold and indifference of the unmourning scenes, rather than the affection she often boasts. Moreover, considering that Green's complex may leave behind a screen memory, which in Freud's terms can arise by the juxtaposition of similar experiences, it might be argued that the emotions she

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<sup>205</sup> Green, pp. 150-151.

recounts to have experienced as a child at her aunt's may be a screen memory of the conscious and grown-up feelings she experienced later in her life with her mother.

Esther's unmourning of the mother's death does not mark her as a cold being. Rather, the event frees her from the 'Dead Mother complex', in the sense that love is not frozen to her anymore. Indeed, John Jarndyce, who previously successfully asked Esther to marry him, understands that she wishes to be Mr Woodcourt's wife, and he arranges their marriage by telling her, on 'a most beautiful summer morning' (750), that one of the reasons why he did that was because 'Allan Woodcourt stood before your father when he lay dead – stood beside your mother' (753). Thus, the death of the mother results in Esther marrying the man she loved. In the last chapter of the novel, she is at her seventh year of marriage with the middle-class physician, and mother of two daughters. Thus, following Lady Dedlock's death she has been able to fully explore love, by marrying the man she liked from the beginning, and by becoming a real and loving mother. The coldness of the dead mother disappears from her life, replaced by love— however, the last page of the novel focus on two elements that have often recurred in the narrative. Esther is sitting in the porch of their house, when Allan comes home:

'The moon is shining so brightly, Allan, and the night is so delicious, that I have been sitting here, thinking [...] about my old looks – such as they were' [...]

'My dead Dame Durden,' said Allan, drawing my arm through his, 'do you ever look in the glass?'

'You know I do; you see me do it.'

'And don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?'

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing ---  
(770)

The middle-class ending of the novel closes with Esther's incomplete thought. However, alongside this slightly eerie interruption, it should be noted that Esther's last thought of

her narrative originated by looking at the moonlight and thinking about her old face. These elements can be related to Esther's mother: while the moon often featured in *Bleak House*, it predominantly recurred in the chapters where Tulkinghorn discovered Lady Dedlock's secret, the Lady behaved in a motherly way towards Rosa, and the lawyer was murdered. So, the moon is a feature both motherly and haunting, and here it is associated with Esther's uncanny disfiguration: while the main responsible for her scarred face were the environmental agents spreading from the toxic London areas, her face originated an uncanny feeling on Esther because, at first, it was less familiar than the Lady's face, at the time only a new acquaintance to her. As a grown and married woman, Esther can look at herself in the mirror and be happy with the woman she has become – yet, the environment which has featured so predominantly in the mother-and-daughter narrative is still there, to remind her of the hardest and uncanniest moments of her life.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has aimed to analyse ‘what connexion can there be’ (197) between environment and psychoanalysis in *Bleak House*, by focusing on the two forms of the uncanny and other correlated concepts in the mother-and-daughter plot. First, both concepts are relevant in the novel, as sometimes they appear to intertwine with each other, and, other times, only one is aroused. For what concerns the Freudian uncanny, its many shapes were relevant in every chapter of this work. The same holds true for the environmental uncanny, and its different shapes were concerned with the various ways that the natural world can be endowed with agency: namely, Ghosh’s dichotomy between fillers and uncanny, or notions by John Parham and Troy Boone, who respectively focused on the dangerous agency of waste products of industrialization and of environmental conditions, and on nonhuman powers. Indeed, the environmental uncanny was theorised by Ghosh in 2016, on the verge of the climate crisis, whose origins relate to the massive consequences posited by industrialization, a topic with which *Bleak House* and the England of Dickens’s times were familiar, as pollution and sanitary issues demonstrate. Moreover, the environmental and the Freudian uncanny are often linked to André Green’s ‘Dead Mother Complex’, which has provided a psychoanalytic framework to the mother-and-daughter plot, and reverberated in many environmental descriptions. So, the two versions of the uncanny mutually engaged in the narratives of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson, and resulted in a variety of outcomes, depending on the shape of the uncanny.

Chapter 3 provided the closest intersection between Freudian and environmental uncanny. This does not mean that their relation is undetectable in the other parts of the narrative, rather it means that the close association between these two forms of the uncanny became more apparent when mother and daughter were drawn together. This happened for the first time in Chapter 18, at Chesney Wold. Indeed, it has been suggested that the Freudian and the environmental uncanny shared a common framework: prior to the first maternal encounter at the church, the sun was shining, and the surroundings of the house, in Esther’s narrative, looked beautiful. Once she got into the church, just a few moments before the appearance of Lady Dedlock, Esther’s perception of the surroundings changed in a darker way: the church ‘smelt as earthy as a grave’, and the dark atmosphere

of the church rendered the sunshine 'inestimably bright' (72). Following this darker depiction of the mansion, the first meeting between mother and daughter happened: then, the stress laid on the Freudian uncanny motif of the familiar: the Lady's face produced an uncanny reaction to Esther because she looked too much familiar, as if she had already seen her face during her godmother's days, although she was a stranger to her. Following that, the environment returned sunny, resembling the role of a filler in the narrative: for the whole week, the weather had been bright and blue, and Esther spent her days doing activities in the open air. Regular, everyday life. However, the weather soon changed again: a heavy storm came, and Esther, in awe with the tremendous powers of nature, and her companions took shelter in a lodge, where the second uncanny meeting with the mother occurs. There, the uncanny motif originated from Ada, who mistook the Lady's voice for Esther's, to the latter's disbelief to discover that their voices were indeed similar, as much as their face were. At last, the sky turning blue again marked the end of this last encounter. Something similar to the meeting in the church occurs later, in Chapter 36, where mother and daughter reunite. It was not specifically the weather to change in uncanny ways, rather it was Esther's perception of her surroundings to mirror her mental state, first calm and then shaped by the guilt as daughter of the 'Dead Mother': prior to the meeting with the mother, she often enjoyed the 'lovely view' of the 'bright sunny landscape' (447) around Chesney Wold, in particular of a 'picturesque part of the Hall', the terrace of the Ghost's Walk. Following Lady Dedlock's revelation of their bond, the perception of her surroundings changed completely: the series of sunny and bright days turned into 'a gloomy evening, overcast and sad' (453), and the picturesque Ghost's Walk was suddenly defined by its dreary legend, to the extent that Esther believed to be the haunting ghost bringing the Dedlocks to their doom. However, a few hours later she starts envisioning the reunion with Ada the next day: coherently with her happiness, Esther feels that 'the darkness of the morning' (455) faded away, and that, on the verge of the reunion with Ada, Chesney Wold and its park seem 'in its prettiest condition' (455). What for some hours became threatening and unfamiliar to Esther, at the thought of the reunion with Ada returned to be comfortable and familiar. Overall, these passages from the fourth chapter show that environmental and Freudian uncanny are closely related to each other, as both shape the first encounters between mother and daughter. Moreover, the child of the 'Dead Mother' complex perceives her surroundings in different ways, depending on

the extent to which she feels guilty of the mother's coldness, and the environment is perceived in uncanny ways because of the interplay between familiar and comfortable, and unfamiliar and threatening.

Chapter 3 analysed another shape of environmental agency and its impact of the Freudian uncanny moments of the narrative: that originating from pollution and contagious diseases spreading from London's most toxic areas, as the fictional Tom-All-Alone's is. This form of agency was developed by mainly referring to Ghosh's and Parham's theorisations of nonhuman agency, which in this case affected the mother-and-daughter plot by disfiguring Esther's face. Indeed, the impact of industrialization, pollution, and economy endowed the environment with this toxic power. The environment played an uncanny role because of its agency, enacted just prior to a key moment for the development of the mother and daughter bond, as if it were aware of what was about to happen. This is a similar feeling aroused by the role of the environment in Chapter 18, where it foresaw the uncanny encounters between the two women. Thus, what struck Esther's face was not only the physical contact with Jo, rather the horrific sanitary condition of the slum, and the role of miasma theory, by which Victorians believed that contagious diseases spread via particles of decomposing matter in the air, endowing agency to natural elements. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the disfigured face split Esther's self, a feeling which she had already experienced a few nights before, when, by looking at the night sky, she felt herself to be a different person from her old self. Via the scarred face, she really became a different self. This shaped the encounters with the mother, because Esther's face looked less familiar to her than the Lady's one. However, shame and displeasure for her scars were put aside when the Lady told her about their bond: indeed, Esther's guilt as the child of the emotionally dead mother returned to characterise her, and she thanked Providence for her disfigured face, so that she would not endanger the Lady by any physical resemblance. Yet, their different appearance is not enough to recreate the maternal bond, because the Lady shortly after asks Esther to consider her dead. Thus, it is argued that environmental and Freudian uncanny shaped also this important moment of the mother-and-daughter narrative, and Esther's life specifically, because her last thought of her narrative originated by looking at the night sky and the moon, which made her think about her old and untouched face.

In Chapter 4, the moon featured predominantly in the uncanny moment of the Lady's past turning from secret and concealed, thus canny, to exposed, uncanny. The moon has been related to Lady Dedlock and the maternal: for instance, Mr Tulkinghorn employed a metaphor to indicate the Lady's fall from her position as the wife of Sir Leicester, that of the full moon, hovering behind them, falling from the sky. Furthermore, the moon was the sole witness of the Lady's murderous thoughts towards Mr Tulkinghorn, as these were often aroused in passages where the moon featured. The uncanny may arise here by the Lady's apparent 'omnipotence of thoughts': she wished the lawyer dead so many times in a brief period of time, that at the end it became reality. In the passages where Tulkinghorn is shot, the third-person narrator focuses on both characters, and on their gazes and thoughts on the moon, who hovers in the background of the lawyer's final moments. Moreover, Chapter 4 fulfilled many of the issues opened in Chapter 2. For example, in the latter it has been argued that environmental agency differed from Chesney Wold to London: in the first case, it embodied the coolness and stillness that characterised Lady Dedlock; in the second, it was perceived via Esther's amazed gaze at the sight of the urban city for the first time, although beyond the surface lurked the deadly powers of its environmental agents, most notably fog and smoke. Both natural descriptions referred to deadliness, although in different ways: the deadened environment of Chesney Wold mirrored the dying aristocratic world, and the stagnant status of the Dedlocks; by contrast, the deadliness of the London environment mainly related to pollution. Furthermore, Esther's childhood memories, prior to her arrival in London, were embedded in a dichotomy between hot and cold: the last sight she had when she left the godmother's house was that of the hearthrug, tapestry for the familiar and canny Victorian hearth, hanging useless in the frost and snow. All these elements returned in the final quest for Lady Dedlock, explored in Chapter 4. London became a dreary and deadly place, to the extent that even Lady Dedlock was aware that cold, wet, and fatigue would have killed her. Thus, the cold that was the last sight of Esther's childhood life returned many years later, to characterise the death of the mother. Moreover, it should be noted that the natural element that permeated the Lady's last journey was the one which characterised Green's 'Dead Mother' and her daughter. Indeed, in Chapter 2 of this work Lady Dedlock was considered as shaped by a cold appearance because of depression and melancholia which, according to Green's theory, originated from incomplete mourning

of her child, whom she was told to be dead, but of whom could never see the body. However, following the discovery of her daughter to be alive, and their reunion in Chapter 36, Lady Dedlock was still inscribed within the 'Dead Mother complex': this became apparent when she told Esther to consider her dead, putting family honour before her daughter. At the same time, André's complex marked the daughter, Esther, as characterised by frozen love, which is melted once the mother died: Esther's unmourning was the last recurrence of coldness in their plot, and from that moment Esther could develop in a loved wife and loving mother. Thus, these findings show that psychoanalysis and environment engaged with each other in permeating the aspects of the mother-and-daughter plot with coldness, which defined Lady Dedlock's attitude in life as well as being a cause for her death.

A psychoanalytic consequence of the 'Dead Mother Complex' is that this system may leave behind a screen memory to the child.<sup>206</sup> In Chapter 2 and 4, it was argued that the overlapping frameworks of Esther's behaviour towards the aunt and the mother might be hints to a screen memory. Indeed, in both narratives Esther expressed affection towards the maternal, in sharp contrast with the tough behaviour of the aunt and of the mother's cold one. Moreover, once the maternal deaths occurred, Esther did not mourn any of them, rather she went on immediately with the narrative of her life. Due to the fact that Freud's screen memories may arise from 'thoughts and impressions from a later period', and that their content 'is connected with these by links of a symbolic or similar nature'<sup>207</sup>, it might be proposed a view by which some of Esther's memories of her aunt – for instance, Esther's behaviour towards her – actually were screen memories from the experiences she witnessed later in life with her mother, which deeply influenced her. Moreover, the last environmental perspectives on these two periods of Esther's life recalled each other: as a child, she remembered seeing the hearthrug, who seemed to her 'the first thing in the world' she had ever seen, 'hanging outside in the frost and snow' (23-24). As a growing woman, when she heads towards the dead body lying on the steps of Nemo's grave among wet and snow, she discovers that 'it was my mother, cold and dead' (714): the same mother who actually was the first thing in the world she had ever seen. To conclude, this dissertation has shown that there is a connection between environmental and

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<sup>206</sup> Green, p. 159.

<sup>207</sup> Freud, 'Screen Memories', p. 15.

psychoanalytical uncanny in *Bleak House*. This connection originates because of the constant interplay between these two different concepts, and the way that one can shed a new light on the other, and vice versa. For instance, the environment seems to prefigure many times the Freudian uncanny encounters between mother and daughter, and pervades the narrative with its presence. At the same time, it is mutually influenced by Lady Dedlock's and Esther's moods as the mother and daughter of Green's complex, and in turn it provides the novel with environmental images which properly depict and characterise the physical and psychological bond between the two women.

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