

**The Recognition of Misrecognition:  
Identity Formation in Austen's Northanger Abbey and  
Dickens' Bleak House  
Asst.Inst. Zainab Abdul-Karim Musir  
University of Baghdad/College of Education Ibn-Rushd**

**Abstract:**

This research paper argues that the conditions of identity formation in both *Northanger Abbey* and *Bleak House* are determined by the dialogue between the misrecognition and recognition of certain objects, events, and characters. The paper also answers questions like what is the identity of the individual and how can it be integrated into the identity of a group of people? What is negative and positive identity?

**Key words:** The Recognition, Austen's Northanger, Bleak House, Northanger Abbey.

**الاعتراف بعدم الاعتراف  
تشكيل الهوية في دير نورثانجر في أوستن و  
ديكنز البيت بليك  
م.م. زينب عبد الكريم مسير  
جامعة بغداد / كلية التربية ابن رشد للعلوم الإنسانية**

**المخلص:**

يناقش هذا البحث ظروف تكوين الهوية في روايتي (نورثانجر ابّي) لجين اوستن و (المنزل الكئيب) لتشارلز دكنز حيث تتكون الهوية في الروايتين وفقاً للاعتراف وعدم الاعتراف بأشياء معينة أو أحداث أو أشخاص معينين. يجيب البحث ايضاً على بعض الأسئلة مثل : ماهي هوية الفرد؟ وكيف تتداخل هوية الفرد بهوية مجموعة من الأفراد؟ وماهي الهوية الأيجابية والهوية السلبية؟  
**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاعتراف، نورثانجر ابّي، المنزل الكئيب، لتشارلز دكنز، لجين اوستن.

**Introduction:**

Jane Austen completed work on *Northanger Abbey* in 1803, a full fifty years before the first publication of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Written at the outset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Northanger Abbey* locates the city of London only at several points in the novel, and most noticeably when Catherine recalls the unknown and shocking news soon to come out of the capitol. *Bleak House* begins where *Northanger Abbey* is geographically absent, with the city of London. Here the British countryside is no longer the idyllic environment of Bath, but has become, in the case of Chesney Wold, the location of the unknown and shocking mystery behind the lives of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson. Whereas the news soon to come out of London amounts to nothing but a circulating library in Austen's work, what we uncover in *Bleak House* is, to some extent, what Catherine had initially feared, namely murder. (Caserio and Haws, 78) In this case, where Austen is geographically absent, Dickens is present. Likewise, what Austen alludes to in passing or in jest, Dickens develops into a complete narrative. Yet if we are to explore the relationship between *Northanger Abbey* and *Bleak House* one must also ask: what central concern makes possible such a realization of this critical moment in Austen's novel? What is it that Austen and Dickens seem to be invested in when offering us the example of a circulating library on the one hand, and the mystery of Esther Summerson's past on the other?

To help answer these questions we must consider the problem of identity as it is articulated in both novels. Identity refers to an individual identity but also the identity of a collective group of individuals. The organizing consideration in the following discussion will be to ask how it is that an individual identity can be integrated into the identity of a larger group. In doing so, what kind of identity is rendered phobic or unaccountable? The following paper will argue that *Northanger Abbey* constructs a type of identity formation that permits and promotes the integration of an individual into a collective body. At the same time, Austen's novel also looks ahead to issues of identity found in *Bleak House* and makes possible a different type of identity politics located in Dickens' narrative. By the time we reach *Bleak House*, identity formation has changed from a shared activity founded upon mutual similarity to a practice contingent upon establishing difference. (Levine, 34)

First, let us consider the difference between positive and negative identity. Positive identity means the process of mapping similarities with other people in order to imagine or configure an individual and group consciousness. It is to ask the question: how one is similar to his fellow neighbor and how does this similarity make us a group of like-minded individuals? Negative identity plays a variation on the previous question,

and asks: how am I not similar to my fellow neighbor? By enabling this form of questioning, negative identity establishes difference as a means of marking an exclusive place in the world. At a more theoretical level, these two types of identity formation draw upon the distinction between universal and particular, and in this case, as it relates to a group consciousness and the simultaneous difficulty of labeling oneself as a unique individual. (Simmel, 2) In order to posit such categories of identity it is necessary to trace the means by which identity is constructed. We will argue that the conditions of identity formation in both *Northanger Abbey* and *Bleak House* are determined by an ongoing dialogue between the misrecognition and recognition of certain objects, events, and characters. In *Northanger Abbey* this relationship is most evident in the dynamic not only between Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney, but also in the multiple descriptions of General Tilney. With *Bleak House* we must consider the distinction Dickens draws between visual spectacle and cognitive understanding, as figured through the identities of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson. (Claire, 20)

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* has been commonly read as a parody of gothic literature insofar as Catherine Morland is unable to separate the fiction of Radcliffe's novels from the reality of her immediate surroundings. (Worsley, 12) In order to parody the gothic, Austen must create the standards and norms with which to measure against Catherine's own apprehensions. This is, in part, accomplished through the character of Henry Tilney. This form of critique questions the literary efficacy of both gothic literature (Radcliffe) and gothic reading (Catherine) but fails to address the conditions and means by which such standards are brought into existence. Luckily, Austen invites us to perform a second form of critique, one that investigates the means by which we are able to construct the standards of evaluating the gothic. Consider the moment when Catherine tells Henry her reaction to Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Her initial evaluation is to call the novel "the nicest book in the world" for which she is reprimanded first by Miss Tilney for incorrectly using the English language (Austen, 89). Following, Henry Tilney intervenes, and we discover that it is not incorrectness that is at issue, but rather the inexactitude of word choice. Henry, who like Catherine has also read *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, agrees that the novel is a "nice" work but laments the generality that the word "nice" has taken on. The metafictional quality of this scene not only reveals Henry Tilney's critical approach to reading a text, but also enables us to review the means by which we interpret the novel's own attempt at gothic parody. (Kelly, 63) If the inexactitude of description is indeed the central concern both in this example and with the novel itself, then we must perform our own evaluation of Henry's

evaluation; we must ask: is Henry's reprimand of Catherine for being inexact itself rearticulating a similar problematic? Does this inexactitude enable a positive identity politics to take place?

Henry concludes his lesson by offering a counterexample to Catherine's use of the word "nice". Instead of a noun Henry opts for a verb, and argues for the synonymous use of the verbs "to torment" and "to instruct". According to Henry, Catherine's torment over the proper use of English grammar becomes an opportunity for instruction, and the accompanying transition from noun to verb only underscores the primacy of Henry's didactic action. Moreover, Henry justifies his decision by drawing upon the educational tradition of a "civilized state", referring in this case to his own English upbringing. Henry, by first diagramming Catherine's grammatical mistake, is then able to authorize his own attempt at producing a linguistic linkage between two seemingly different verbs. That such a linkage is also contingent upon a national standard of high civilization foreshadows Henry's call for being English at the end of the novel. This operation of linking through instruction, pertaining to both grammar and nation, pervades much of Henry's discourse and represents the primary attempt at constructing an identity based on mutual similarity, justified by reference to the English nation. (Lynch, 201)

But if we are to take Henry's words at face value, then we must consider Catherine's torment over the deceptions of General Tilney as a type of genuine instruction. After all, by the end of the novel Catherine's reading of General Tilney as an evil man is not entirely far-fetched. Though Catherine's initial fear of the General and the mystery of his deceased wife was previously influenced by her Gothic readings, by the end of the novel Austen is careful to note that the evil of General Tilney is now firmly divorced from a type of Gothic indebted to Radcliffe. At the same time, some form of evil clearly remains:

"How different now the source of her inquietude from what it had been then – how mournfully superior in reality and substance! Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion; and though the wind was high...she heard it all as she lay awake..." (Austen, 190)

Appropriately, this passage not only validates Catherine's previous concerns, but also invalidates Henry's harsh criticism of Catherine for entertaining the "dreadful nature of [her] suspicions". Indeed, Henry's previous admonishment stands in direct contrast to the passage above: "Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your

own observation of what is passing around you...” (Austen, 164) Nonetheless General Tilney is not a murderer and the care he provides his dying wife helps temper the seemingly resolute baseness of his character. Given this deliberate ambiguity of the word “evil”, we can say that Catherine is not entirely incorrect in her interpretation of the matter; she is, much like Henry Tilney, inexact in her own judgment. She must therefore misrecognize the characters of General Tilney and Mrs. Tilney in order to recognize not only the inexactitude of her previous judgment, but also the inadequacy of Henry Tilney’s civilized education. In *Northanger Abbey* the moment of recognition is already embedded within the moment of misrecognition, to the extent that Catherine is both right about General Tilney’s baseness, and wrong about his history as a murderer.

With Catherine’s misrecognition of General Tilney we also have the beginnings of an identity formation founded upon difference. In the previous example concerning grammar, Catherine and Henry show a predilection for using synonyms. Their linguistic operations rest on similarities and it is this attempt at synonymous linkage that conditions the formation of national identity. Contrast this to Catherine’s characterization of the General, whose actions represent a disconnect between what is said and what is meant:

“But the inexplicability of the General’s conduct dwelt much on her thoughts... But why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood? Who but Henry could have been aware of what his father was at?” (Austen, 176)

It would be inappropriate to associate the General with a non-synonymous type of grammar. Instead, the issue at hand lies with the referential problem of language, or the representational difference between sign and signifier. By directing us to this mimetic fallacy on the General’s part, Austen is locating a new critical space where the standards of English grammar cannot apply. This looks ahead to the same problem of semiotic understanding in *Bleak House*, where the issue of language will be reconfigured as a referential problem of visuality and handwriting. In the case of Austen, inexactitude and the issue of referentiality are two distinct entities. For though we may fault Catherine for being inexact, we also see that Henry Tilney and all his accompanying speeches concerning English civilization serve as a narrative counterbalance to her own imperfections. However, the General seems to have no dialogical figure in the novel; we only learn later that he is not evil by way of a Radcliffe novel. To put it differently, there is no individual or no object available to recuperate a moment of recognition from his misrecognition of Catherine’s wealth. His identity is thus constructed through a process of differentiation from that

which it is not; for such a character to be held “unaccountable” is indicative of only a residual trace of negative identity in Austen’s work. What we do have accounted for by the last page of the novel is the marriage between Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland. Indeed, their marriage can be read as a symbolic linkage between the verbs “to torment” and “to instruct”, insofar as Catherine’s previous suffering has given way to Henry’s elucidating instruction. At the level of Henry’s instruction to Catherine, the call for being English and Christian entails a participation in and understanding of the group identity that is being formed. In this sense, the novel can be interpreted as an attempt to authorize a national identity by rendering unacceptable or unaccountable the unknown evil of General Tilney and the Gothic influences of Ann Radcliffe.

Additionally, if Catherine and Henry are, by the end of the novel, both inexact in their judgments concerning the General, then it may be that the synonymous nature between the two newlyweds is one founded upon a *shared* inaccuracy. As if to underscore this point, Austen concludes her novel with a subtle interrogative (“I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience”) (Austen, 213). In so doing, the actions of General and Henry Tilney are left unevaluated and by consequence, we find ourselves without the complete normative standards with which to judge our protagonist. Austen’s suspension of ethical closure at the end of the novel invites us to think about the limitations of an identity formation founded upon similarity. Fifty years later, with the first publication of Dickens’ *Bleak House*, such considerations can be explored to their full potential.

In *Bleak House*, knowing one’s identity is different than seeing one’s image. The correspondence between the visual and the cognitive is always subject to the possibility of a failure of representation or comprehension. Disguise, darkness, and hidden objects all perform a mediating function with which to distort the correspondence between what is seen and what is truthfully understood. This form of mediation is immediately exemplified at the beginning of the book, as depicted by the omnipresent fog and mud of London. Disguises such as clothing, veils, and jewelry allow for the misrecognition of identity to take place. Consider the death of Lady Dedlock, when Esther confuses the dead body of her mother for Jenny. (Dickens, 915) In this scene clothing is the identifying, and ultimately incorrect marker for establishing the explicative difference between Jenny and Lady Dedlock. Nonetheless the proper recognition of identity also occurs in the novel – Inspector Bucket recognizes Esther’s marked handkerchief, Lady Dedlock discerns Captain Hawdon’s handwriting, and Esther even learns to accept her new physical appearance after being

scarred from disease. Unique markings and exclusive handwriting, we argue, help to recover moments of misrecognition into recognition and in so doing, are necessary to any identify formation taking place in the novel. Given this requirement we can say that in *Bleak House* handwriting and identity represent one and the same thing, that is, an exclusive set of markings designed to locate and designate a specific individual as distinct from everybody else. This type of identifying pattern stands in stark contrast to gowns or bonnets – objects that can be passed around or circulated among other people. The difference in *Bleak House* between individual signature and objects as exchanged within a collective body makes possible the move from positive to negative identity to the extent that the process of establishing mutual similarity has been refashioned as a fear of losing one's identity through the exchange of traits or objects among other individuals.

That Dickens first associates the confusion of London with the character of Jo is relevant to our discussion. It is Jo, after all, who confuses a disguised servant for Lady Dedlock. His role in the narrative and his inability to accurately discern from disguise to disguise are symptomatic of a greater disquietude – the thematic of sight and seeing as a form of inaccessibility:

“From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams – everything moving on to some purpose and to one end – until he is stirred up, and told to ‘move on’ too.”  
(Dickens, 315)

The sublimation of the church cross against the visual perspective of the diminutive child helps produce not only the atmosphere of the vast city, but also a sense of helplessness. Jo is simultaneously our window into that which sits beyond visual reach but also our reminder of the urban horror that pervades the city and invades the body. Consider the nature of the emblem. The sacred cross is metonymically attached to the confusion of the city and sits just above the cloudy fog of London. Yet the child Jo is our only means of access to such a lofty sight. Likewise, we first encounter traces of Lady Dedlock's past identity at Tom-All-Alone's – Jo's place of residence and neighborhood. Again, it is Jo who allows us access into Lady Dedlock's past and her previous relationship with Captain Hawdon. If the cross metonymically signifies confusion, then Lady Dedlock's identity produces a similar sentiment:

“‘Cos,’ says Jo, with a perplexed stare, but without being at all shaken in his certainty, ‘Cos that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the

gownd. *It is her and it an't her.* It an't her hand, not yet her rings, nor yet her voice. But that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd..." (Dickens, 364) (my italics)

According to Jo the woman in question is Lady Dedlock insofar as her clothing and accoutrements match up with what he has previously seen, and hence the phrase: "it is her". Such objects are not only subject to exchange but also duplication. In contrast markers such as the hands, rings, or voice help to differentiate between two disparate individuals and thus the phrase: "it an't her". We have, at this moment in the novel, the first distinction between positive and negative identity. According to the passage above, appropriate identity reveals itself through the process of negation ("it an't her hand, not yet her rings not yet her voice"). Likewise, affirmation in the form of "there is" effects an improper identification. We must also recall that Mademoiselle Hortense, the figure in question, is veiled in this scene, in contrast to the initial depiction of Jo's visage quoted earlier. That her face is unknown speaks to the ambiguous quality of her identity, both as a disguised Lady Dedlock, but also as the revealed murderer of Mr. Tulkinghorn.

Revelation and veiling play an equally important role in Esther Summerson's own narrative. (McLaughlin, 879) In this case, as the identity concerns only one individual, an examination of negative and positive identity must take place diachronically. After recovering from her disease we learn that Esther has suffered physical changes to her face. Much as the General by the end of *Northanger Abbey* is no longer evil in the strict Gothic sense of the word, we learn that Esther is no longer the same individual described in the first half of the novel:

"I let [my hair] down, and shook it out and went up to the glass upon the dressing-table. There was a little muslin curtain drawn across it. I drew it back; and stood for a moment looking through such a veil of my own hair, that I could see nothing else. Then I put my hair aside, and looked at the reflection in the mirror...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 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." (Austen, 572)

The General, fortunately, has no mirror with which to examine his own visage, and Austen seems to stress this point by offering only a brief glimpse into the General's convoluted and narrow thought processes. (Austen, 176) In the case of Dickens, Esther's own recognition of her new



appearance is contingent upon the physical reflection of her face on the dressing-table mirror. Unlike *Northanger Abbey*, where the General's evil is held unaccountable or unacceptable, Esther's own defamiliarization is immediately recuperated into the familiar, and in this case, as a personal improvement.<sup>1</sup> Her new face is nonetheless still associated with a moment of negation for it is "not like what I had expected" and is "nothing definite". Yet the inability of Esther to properly understand a situation becomes her unique and marking trait throughout the rest of the novel. Her role is to familiarize, to accept, and to ultimately recognize, but not to uncover an accurate meaning. The novel's closing paragraph ("I did not know that. I am not certain that I know it now") reinforces this characteristic despite the formation of a new Bleak House and her marriage to Mr. Woodcourt. (Dickens, 989) Like Esther's own development, we can trace the movement from the old Bleak House to the new Bleak House as a similarly arranged formation of identity, in this case, the identity of a new household.

That this new identity is officially unveiled with the writing of the phrase "Bleak House" recalls the importance of script alluded to earlier in the discussion. Moreover, through the personal arrangement of household objects, the new Bleak House exists as an extension of Esther's own persona: "I saw, in the papering on the walls, in the colours of the furniture, in the arrangement of all the pretty objects, *my* little tastes and fancies, *my* little methods and inventions...my odd ways everywhere." (Dickens, 963) (author's italics) The repeated use of the possessive in this example also parallels the reference to Lady Dedlock's handwriting ("Whose writing is that? It was my mother's."). (Dickens, 909) In both cases it is not so much the mere objects that count but rather is the method in which such objects are appropriated into a unique pattern or signature. Like a letter or bonnet, furniture can be exchanged or passed along from individual to individual; however, little tastes and fancies – whether produced through furniture arrangement or handwriting style – all signify telltale markers of one's identity. This raises the question: in what ways are negative identity and the possession of objects, both material and immaterial, coextensive? After all, at the end of the novel the now-married Esther again employs the use of the possessive: "my dearest little pets...my darling...my husband...my

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<sup>1</sup> We see a similar moment when Esther meets her mother for the first time: "I had been looking at the Ghost's Walk lying in a deep shade of masonry afar off, and picturing to myself the female shape that was said to haunt it, when I became aware of a figure approaching through the wood. The perspective was so long, and so darkened by leaves, and the shadows of the branches on the ground made it so much more intricate to the eye, that at first I could not discern what figure it was. By little and little, it revealed itself to be a woman's – a lady's – Lady Dedlock's." (*Bleak House*, 576)

guardian”. (Dickens, 989) Can we go as far as to assume that negative identity is a function of what one possesses? Austen herself seems to hint at this problem in *Northanger Abbey*, for what is really taking place in London is the founding of a new circulating library – a collection of individual writings predicated on only temporary and shared possession.

Our analysis thus far has relied primarily on the novels themselves in order to ascertain what each text is doing to the notion of identity. Implicit in my discussion has been the work of Georg Simmel and his exploration of the individual in the metropolis. In his essay entitled “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Simmel begins his investigation by distinguishing between the intellectual organization found in a metropolis and the “slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence”. (Simmel, 13) Simmel goes on to state that the type of individual we see emerging in the nineteenth century no longer involves the “general human quality in every individual but rather his qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability that now [becomes] the criteria of his value.” (Simmel, 6) From this perspective, Simmel’s analysis typifies the movement of identity formation we have seen from Austen to Dickens to the extent that an overpopulated city, as found in Dickens’ characterization of London, prioritizes the uniqueness of an individual and her identifying signature over any collective body beyond the household. Thus we see very little emphasis on the idea of national identity in *Bleak House*, aside from Mrs. Jellyby’s frequent and comical trips to Africa. Moreover, according to Simmel a qualitative uniqueness emerges when an individual must confront a culture that removes objects from their innate spirituality and worth. Facing this impersonalization of culture, the individual must react by reasserting personal value:

Life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress peculiar personal interests and incomparabilities. As a result, in order that this most personal element be saved, extremities and peculiarities and individualizations must be *produced* and they must be over-exaggerated merely to be brought into the awareness even of the individual himself.

(Simmel, 338) (my italics)

Given Dickens’ consistent emphasis on the possessive pronoun at the end of *Bleak House* and the detail with which he describes Esther’s furniture arrangements, we can say that the novel is very much tied to the notion of producing extremities and peculiarities in order to recover a personal element in the individual. This is, quite simply, the process of producing negative identity. Indeed, we can align Esther’s own scarring as a type of physical peculiarity necessary to the production of the protagonist and to

the development of the narrative as a whole. Though Simmel spends much time discussing the materiality of both money and object, he for the most part ignores the importance of material possession in relation to the individual. Dickens helps to supplement this discussion by bringing us back to the language of possession through the use of the possessive. But can we say that Esther becomes aware of her own individuality by the end of the novel, given her ownership of property and marriage to Mr. Woodcourt? Simmel would have us believe that the teleology of the metropolitan individual is to recognize her own individuality; however, Dickens' closing line and accompanying epistemological suspension of Esther's own aesthetic beauty points to an incommensurability with Simmel's argument, for her individuality is still tied to the recognition of other objects and other people, but ultimately not herself.

### **Conclusion**

The deepest problems of modern life come from the individual's attempt to maintain individuality against potentate powers of society.

Austen and Dickens articulate a type of identity formation in order to point out its own limitations. To be sure, a comparative reading of Austen and Dickens helps illustrate the change in thinking about identity formation from the early to mid-nineteenth century. That this movement sometimes finds itself inadequate to its own standards suggests that we must constantly remain attentive to the manner in which such standards are brought into literary existence.

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