

“SYMBOL OF KINDNESS AND FORGIVENESS – ESTHER SUMMERSON”

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Charles Dickens (1812–1870) was a renowned English writer of the Victorian era whose works focus on social issues and injustice. In particular, he addressed the problems of poverty and the lives of ordinary people. Dickens's novels often aimed to encourage reflection on the nature of society and on the great virtues of kindness, honesty and compassion. One of his most recognised literary works is *Bleak House*, first published in 1853.

Despite the many social issues explored in the novel, one of the most striking characters is the heroine, Esther Summerson. Unlike many traditional heroines, Esther is neither proud, selfish nor keen on riches; instead, she is kind, humble and always inclined to prioritise others' happiness before her own. Throughout her childhood she grows up neglected; her aunt continually tells her that she should never have been born. This harsh experience leads Esther to believe that she is unimportant. Yet rather than becoming embittered, she grows compassionate towards others. In other words, Dickens shows that suffering can make a person either cruel or compassionate, and Esther chooses compassion.

The most prominent feature of Esther's character is her ability to forgive. After she finally discovers that Lady Dedlock is her mother, she has to come to terms with the reason for her abandonment — fear and Lady Dedlock's commitment to social propriety. In many cases, being abandoned would lead to resentment towards a parent; Esther, however, sympathises with her mother, believing that she must have endured a long and bitter life. Through their reconciliation, Dickens suggests that one should always consider the feelings of others and that sympathy is a stronger force than bitterness.

The proposal of marriage from John Jarndyce, Esther's guardian, is one of the most surprising decisions in the novel. Esther has great respect for him, as he has given her a home, an education and care — something she had never really received before. She agrees to marry him because she feels this is a way of repaying his kindness and ensuring his happiness. In this instance, love is replaced by duty, respect and gratitude. Dickens subsequently shows, however, that gratitude is not the same as love. John Jarndyce understands Esther's affection for Allan Woodcourt. Knowing that Woodcourt loves her, and because he is genuinely concerned about her happiness, he decides against marriage with Esther and asks her to follow her own heart. This scene is one of the most memorable in the book, as it demonstrates selfless love: Jarndyce sets aside his own feelings and prioritises Esther's future happiness.

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Ultimately, Esther marries Allan Woodcourt because he shares an affection for her that is equal and based on respect and honesty. By allowing Esther to choose love over duty towards Jarndyce, Dickens conveys the idea that one should never deny oneself happiness merely out of obligation and gratitude. At the same time, Esther never for a moment forgets what Jarndyce has done for her and continues to respect him.

Charles Dickens has created an ideal woman in the figure of Esther Summerson — kind, humble, forgiving and emotionally strong. She never becomes hardened despite experiencing abandonment, illness and the pain arising from her complex past. Through her character the novelist portrays how love, compassion and the practice of forgiveness, rather than riches or status, constitute true happiness. Esther can be regarded as one of the most inspiring heroines in English literature, as she demonstrates that kind and sympathetic hearts are not necessarily weak but can be remarkably strong.

