Interpreting sympathy in The Eustace Diamonds

Anthony Trollope's The Eustace Diamonds (1872) is a novel plagued with questions about interpretation. The plot centers on a young widow's refusal to return a valuable diamond necklace to her husband's family after his death; she considers the necklace a gift that she is entitled to keep as her own. The liminal status of the necklace renders her own position indeterminate: is she an owner or a thief? To what extent, as a widow and the mother of an infant heir, is she still a member of the Eustace family? These questions become engines of narrative production, generating various accounts of the circumstances under which her husband gave the diamonds to her, and a number of competing stories about how they mysteriously vanish. As the narrative becomes increasingly sprawling, encompassing numerous sub-plots and minor characters, the novel's generic status likewise becomes uncertain, representing a fusion of sensation fiction, detective novel, and legal critique. (1)

Such textual ambiguities, resulting from the absence of a single readily legible meaning, serve as a mechanism for generating a sympathetic epistemology--one in which ways of knowing are multiple, not singular. That The Eustace Diamonds relies on the liminality of fact and fiction and of lies and truth is something of a critical commonplace. What has been less discussed is that the liminality does not work towards resolution. The questions Trollope's text raises about what kind of objects the diamonds are, what kind of person Lizzie is, and what sort of novel is employed to tell her story preclude the possibility of arriving at any fixed, definitive conclusion. None of these dilemmas are resolved by the novel's end, which is marked by a frustrating lack of unifying closure. The diamonds are neither restored to the Eustace family nor retained by Lizzie: after driving the momentum of the plot through three volumes, they are never retrieved. Instead, they are now "adorning the bosom of a certain enormously rich Russian princess" (571), and "this was the end of the Eustace diamonds as far as anything was ever known of them in England" (574). Lizzie likewise does not meet with any specific consequences for her lies and deception, but neither does she succeed in asserting her own will. Her marriage to Mr. Emilius is darkly foreshadowed as an arrangement in which "he will have his own way in everything" (583). In the novel's final lines, the central conflict is reducible to a set of facts so sparse that all prior action appears meaningless: "she has told a lot of lies and lost a necklace" (587).

This anticlimactic conclusion sounds the final note in a pattern of ambiguity that functions to resist definitive interpretation. Four narrative sites highlight the difficulties emerging from questions of interpretation: how to understand the necklace (as personal property or as family heirloom), how to understand the diamonds (as material objects or as sites of symbolic meaning), how to understand Lizzie (as naive and foolish, or as cunning and manipulative), and how to understand the generic...