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“A Bad Set of Fellows”:
Great Expectations and Victorian Views of Children

During an early visit to Miss Havisham’s house, Pip encounters a stranger upon the stairs who, without knowing him, remarks “Well! Behave yourself. I have a pretty large experience of boys, and you’re a bad set of fellows” (76). This prejudicial comment is seldom quoted in discussions of *Great Expectations*, for compared to more memorable passages of both mirth and woe, it seems insignificant. However, represented here is one of the prevalent views of children in Charles Dickens’ day—one which he countered with a scathing satire of parents and guardians.

Although by the twentieth century it was usually taken for granted “that the faults of children were certainly caused by the failings of their parents”—or of their society—some Victorian writers, among them Dickens, actually did something revolutionary in indicting bad parents (Grylls 42). As Angus Wilson notes, Dickens both shaped his age and was influenced by it. His “close and emotional focus on children [and their] centrality in his books” were actually quite new (Grylls 133).

Consider for a moment the precarious position of children when young Dickens began his career. According to historians Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, only in the nineteenth century did statutory protection become a part of the debate in English society, where the rights of children to adequate food, clothing, care, and protection from abuse were recognized (347). In pre-industrial England, most parents loved their children, of course, but the interpretation of how to love varied. When times were hard, there was little attempt to soften life for children, who were supposed to accept responsibilities as little adults. In fact, they were often dressed as adults, working the same hours (or schooled, if prosperous)—that is, about 11-12 hours per day. Until the nineteenth century there were no laws against the cruelty of parents and schoolmasters. The poor were exploited through labor, and the rich through contrived marriages (347).¹ In all circumstances, children were considered as assets for their parents, not as their sacred responsibility.

The opening of *Great Expectations* portrays Pip as observing the graves of his five little brothers, thus illuminating another facet of the Victorian attitude about children: they were prone to dying and thus replaceable. Half the children born in 1831, one year before Dickens’ birth, died before their fifth birthday, and most before the age of two. By comparison, of the 1,000 children born alive in 1851, 522 had reached the age of 5 years, as reported to Parliament at about the time *Great Expectations* was being released to the public. The point of the report was that infant mortality was down considerably (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 349-50). In our view, of course, the death of half of all children before their fifth birthdays is appalling, but it may explain in part why parents did not automatically invest emotionally in their offspring.

Moreover, cruelty, indifference, and ignorance about children had actually been sanctioned by the Calvinist views of Wesley in the eighteenth century. Children were believed to be evil by nature and “pious and prudent parents must check their naughty

passions in any way they [have] in their power” (quoted in Pinchbeck and Hewitt 351). Nineteenth-century evangelicals often inherited Wesley’s views, as did the state. Early in Dickens’ lifetime, it was not at all unusual for children to be imprisoned and executed, in fact.

During the decade of *Great Expectations*, however, reform was indeed taking place. In particular, working class parents who had sent their children to work twelve-hour days in the small spaces of the mines and chimneys found that Parliament was responding to reports that claimed “Amongst no persons do the children of both sexes need so much protection as against their parents” (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 355).²

At the heart of the debate now was the question of whether parents had absolute responsibilities and rights, and the family was to be preserved at all costs; or if the state had the responsibility of caring for children, even if it meant undermining the principle of parental responsibility for the feeding and care of children (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 358). When an older sister, Jane, seeks to protect Baby Pocket from pretentious Mrs. Pocket’s inattention to its playing with a dangerous nutcracker, Dickens comically satirizes this societal debate through Mr. Pocket’s exasperated cries:

“Belinda,” remonstrated Mr. Pocket. . . . “Jane only interfered for the protection of baby.”

“I will not allow anybody to interfere,” said Mrs. Pocket. “I am surprised, Matthew, that you should expose me to the affront of interference.”

“Good God!” cried Mr. Pocket, in an outbreak of desolate desperation.

“Are infants to be nutcrackered into their tombs, and is nobody to save them?”

“I will not be interfered with by Jane,” said Mrs. Pocket. . . . “I hope I know my poor grandpa’s position. Jane, indeed!”

. . . “Hear this!” [Mr. Pocket] helplessly exclaimed to the elements.

“Babies are to be nutcrackered dead for people’s poor grandpapa’s positions!” (180)

Thus, not only did religious attitudes negatively affect the welfare of children, but the stubborn philosophy of absolute parental rights did so as well. In this passage we also see that within the family, Mr. Pocket submits to the authority of his wife, as does Joe Gargery in his household. This submission of husband to wife when the children’s welfare is at stake is puzzling in an age where fathers’ rights were paramount over the mothers’. The neglect of the Pocket children and the abuse of Pip by his maternal guardian are exacerbated by the spinelessness of the paternal authorities who by law actually had the power to protect. However, in truth, paternal rights were generally fleshed out in terms of ownership rather than in nurturing. In this context, Dickens seems to be asking, “Is *nobody* to save them?”

The Victorian response to children was, as mentioned before, influenced by the intellectual tradition of John Wesley, whose Calvinist philosophy held that because of original sin, children had an incapacity for good. Countering that view was Rousseau’s, that they were essentially innocent and had an incapacity for evil. Rousseau also believed in bringing up children not as little adults but rather in line with their natural development (Grylls 23-33). Victorians seemed to take to extremes of both views, with Dickens more in line with Rousseau’s than with Wesley’s.

Dickens' novels thus present valuable evidence about changing attitudes towards parents' and guardians' care for children. His age saw a distinct movement from Puritanical and Wesleyan views to more Romantic views reflecting those of not only Rousseau, but of Blake and Wordsworth. His views were also informed by his unhappy childhood, as well as his bringing up nine children of his own.

To be sure, the adults do not come off well. As David Grylls has observed, just as few husbands and wives are happy in the novels, such is the case with parents and children (132). Of course, Dickens' basic distrust in moral authority strengthens his indictment of parents, not children, as reprobates. Although he is basically optimistic about the outcome of his children in literature, his attitude towards parents aligns with a letter in 1844 in which he said "that to him most parents seemed selfish with their children" (Grylls 147).

It is thus no accident that "the adults are often 'placed' by their attitudes to the young" in Dickens. Such placement is "the soundest test of a character's moral standing" (Grylls 140). Pip clearly speaks for Dickens when Pip suffers terrible humiliation after his first meeting with Estella, who berates him:

My sister's bringing up had made me sensitive. In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice. It may be only small injustice that the child can be exposed to; but the child is small, and its world is small, and its rocking-horse stands as many hands high, according to scale as a big-boned Irish hunter. . . . I had cherished a profound conviction that her bringing me up by hand gave her no right to bring me up by jerks. (57)

This passage is instructive for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the consequences of one's upbringing in the home upon his or her ability to suffer the injuries of the world. In the text, Pip articulates his realization of his sister's injustice, only after he has known the injustice of someone outside his home, Estella. Dickens also clearly refutes the notion that children are little adults, needing no more special shielding from the darts of the world than adults. An otherwise small assault is huge to a small person. Moreover, Pip's observations about the injustice of his sister are drawn from not only experience, but also intuition. Despite his culture's teachings that he should be grateful to his sister, his heart tells him that she has treated him unjustly. Finally, the spirit that impels Pip to kick "my injured feelings" into the brewery-wall, clean his face, and come from behind the wall signifies the spirit with which Dickens views children despite their hardships: he is optimistic about their potential. Critic Jack Rawlins observes: "In most literature, children are things for moulding and shaping; in the opening chapters of *Great Expectations*, this child is a thing for defending—a thing that must battle with guts and spite against the adult forces that constantly demand a renunciation of the self" (83).

Pip's record of his own abuse and neglect is, of course, the most developed argument on behalf of children in the novel. His being "undersized, for my years, and not strong" (2) results from his being literally and metaphorically squeezed out from the table by churchgoers, such as those on Christmas Day (22). Joe spoons extra gravy onto his plate and furtively promises him pork pie like the others, but allows him to be dehumanized as he is called a "little monkey" (7) a "squeaker" (24), and a "sixpennorth of halfpence" (22). Pip is also goaded like "an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena"

(22). Mrs. Joe gives Tickler (her rod of punishment) a name, but Pip has one only when he gives it to himself. Dorothy Van Ghent associates this “picture, in which the qualities of things and people were reversed,” with an environment of dehumanization in the age of industrialization (128). This may be true, but as we have shown, the devaluation of children was ingrained into the society long before Dickens highlighted it.

Years later, when Pip returns home to attend his sister’s funeral, his consciousness of his sister’s cruelty has grown: “As I walked along, the times when I was a little helpless creature and my sister did not spare me, vividly returned” (260). Fittingly, she is now devalued as he once was. Speaking of her remains, he says: “[I] began to wonder in what part of the house *it*—she—my sister was” (261, emphasis mine). When the undertakers bear his sister’s body to the grave in typical Victorian ceremony, “the six bearers must be stifled and blinded under a horrible black velvet housing with a white border, the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human legs, shuffling and blundering along” (262). The cruelty of parents and guardians to the children in their homes dehumanizes both the children and the adults, it is implied.

As mentioned earlier, the prevalent view of children in Victorian England was that they were reprobates by nature. Pip’s sister sees him as a young offender “to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law . . . born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality” (20). Under the burden of guilt for aiding the convict, Pip wonders if even the Church is “powerful enough to shield” him (20-21). After all, the church and state—as suggested when Pip sees the upside-down church in the graveyard—are upside-down in relation to Pip’s intuitive sense of fairness. What seems wrong to Pip is held to be right by his culture. As Jack Rawlins asserts, “The novel begins with Pip caught in Dickens’ own childhood nightmare; he looks at the world and sees everything out of joint, corrupt and unfair, but the adult world assures him that everything’s fine” (81). After all, the community thinks Mrs. Joe is an admirable housewife and guardian, and that Miss Havisham is simply eccentric, not cruel and perverse. “When the church came to itself” (2) in the opening scene, the Church and state and Victorian society had not yet done so.

Dickens had little patience with parents who, like his own, were unsympathetic with the desire of children to learn. When Pip asks repeatedly about the prison ships that everyone is talking of, Mrs. Joe reprimands him and finally exclaims, “People are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad; and *they always begin by asking questions* [emphasis mine]. Now you get along to bed!” (12). Dickens thus condemns guardians who fail to educate the young, and also satirizes the Victorian belief in criminals having been born with evil predispositions.

In light of reports from contemporary Victorian criminologists, Mrs. Joe’s attitudes toward education are markedly ironic. In 1853, *Crime: Its Amount, Causes, and Remedies* was published by Frederic Hill, who according to the title page, was “Barrister-At-Law, Late Inspector of Prisons.” Hill enumerates the chief causes of crime in Great Britain, and heading the list are “bad training and ignorance.” Then he lists remedies, and leading the list are the spread of knowledge and a good education (34). By his own record, Hill had reported in 1845, “One plain fact showing the extent to which crime is caused by the neglect of children, is the large number of orphans always to be found in prison . . . and the greater portion of the parents who were living were not of good character” (36-37). He added that being able to read and write shielded children from

crime; most prisoners were illiterate (40). Hill proposed altering the law to make “a parent really responsible, till his offspring arrive at years of discretion, for his child’s maintenance and conduct” (50). Hill’s lengthy volume, written less than a decade before the novel discussed here, actually contains some six pages of reports and case studies with headings of “Neglect of Parents” and “Parental Responsibility” (51).³ Dickens’ novel of reform was thus working in tandem with other daring voices of reform in his culture.⁴

Pip’s education, such as it is, is at the substandard school of Mr. Wopsle’s aunt. With what little he learns he wants to educate Joe, but the two must engage in writing on the sly because Mrs. Joe “ain’t partial to having scholars on the premises . . . for fear as [Joe] might rise” (44). Thus, as Pip inwardly questions his sister’s right to beat him and to deny him an education, Joe defends her. As one critic has noted, “Joe cannot rage, and so reinforces the lesson of the Pumblechookian perspective: a good person wouldn’t feel what Pip is feeling” (Rawlings 81).

In the lengthy exposition, then, of *Great Expectations*, Dickens continues to ask “Is nobody to save the children?” Ironically, the one who most clearly protects Pip is the convict Magwitch. His false, protective claim that he stole the pork pie entitles him to become “my convict” to Pip—a role that will enlarge so that he is eventually the tale’s hero, according to critic John Irving (xxvi). Magwitch will in fact risk more than Joe or any other character—his very life—to pay paternal attention to the adult Pip.

Magwitch’s history reflects the Victorian debate of nature versus nurture. When Pip asks him “What were you brought up to be?” Magwitch replies, “A Warmint, dear boy.” Dickens records: “He answered quite seriously, and used the words as if it denoted some profession” (306). Like Pip, he knows little of his birth, having only a vague memory of someone abandoning him. “When [he] was a ragged little creetur as much to be pitied as ever I see,” he gained the reputation of being “hardened.” Society “measured” him and gave him speeches and tracts that he could not understand. Nameless persons—presumably religious ones—spoke of the devil to him. When Compeyson spotted him, he was ready to be used for mischief (321). Although some would say Magwitch was born evil, it is clear that society has nurtured him to err. Dorothy Van Ghent posits: “We are led to identify Magwitch’s childhood with Pip’s; the brutality exercised toward both children was the same brutality, though the ‘parents’ in the one case were private persons, and in the other, society” (135).

Like many victims of abuse, Joe denies that those he has loved—his wife and his father—have done him ill. When Joe discloses his history to Pip, we learn that in this case, too, lack of education is part of the picture. Joe did not go to school because of his father’s abuse, and ran away repeatedly along with his mother, in order to escape abuse. But “My father were that good in his hart, don’t you see” to find them, beat them, and take Joe out of school. Pip, with more insight into injustice than Joe, does not see goodness in Joe’s father. Somehow Joe transfers his sympathy for his “poor mother” to the rampaging Mrs. Joe, and fears abusing her so much that he suffers her abuse—and allows Pip to suffer it. He rationalizes his failure to protect Pip with an apology: “I wish there warn’t no Tickler for you, old chap . . . I hope you’ll overlook shortcomings.” Pip admires Joe, his “equal,” for this disclosure, but alas, Pip thus has no protector (45).

Significantly, after Joe’s sincere rationalization for his allowing Mrs. Joe to abuse both himself and Pip, Pip looks at the stars and “considered how awful it would be for a

man to turn his face up to them as he froze to death and see no help or pity in all the glittering multitude” (45). Dickens suggests, if adults on earth abscond from their responsibility for the young, is there no hope from the heavens as well?

The very hierarchy that keeps Pip under the absolute authority of his guardian, Mrs. Joe, who is twenty years older, fails to protect him because Mr. Joe does not assume the traditional role in that hierarchy. He is “a larger species of child, and . . . no more than my equal.” Moreover, Mrs. Joe uses Pip as a “connubial missile” (7). Thus Pip is beaten severely, and while still crying and rubbing himself, he is thrown at Joe. Joe worries if he thinks Pip eats too quickly, and spoons on extra gravy at Christmas, but he is incapable of saving Pip from unrelenting abuse.

At the end of the novel there is, of course, hope for Pip to be a noble character despite his harsh treatment at the hands of Mrs. Joe. His moral downfall seems to have been more of his own making than of hers. Similarly, Biddy is very bright and good—in fact, a perfect woman—despite her “hopeless circumstances” (118) as an orphan also “brought up by hand” (40). She reflects the Wordsworthian, romantic view of children born wise beyond their years, with heavenly wisdom—what David Grylls calls the “cult of juvenile innocence” (133). Herbert, judging by Pip’s observations of the Pocket children’s “not growing up or being brought up, but . . . tumbling up” (172), is nevertheless a good person, even if he does seem to absorb some of the ineptitude of his parents.

The doctrine of natural goodness in Victorian times held that it was wicked to rob children of their childhood, and that spoiling them was less harmful than making them assume adult hardship (Grylls 140). Miss Havisham, according to Herbert, was a “spoilt child,” a motherless girl whose father denied her nothing (166). She inherited his riches and pride, and now she is guardian of a “spoilt child” of her own, Estella.

Far from being harmless, however, she is perhaps the most evil character in the novel in that she “is guilty of aggression against life in using the two children, Pip and Estella, as inanimate instruments of revenge for her broken heart—using them, that is, as if they were not human but things” (Van Ghent 131). Jaggers, who represents civil law, has placed Estella in harm’s way by placing her with Miss Havisham. Even play is a “sick fancy” of hers, by her own admission, and she spoils and manipulates Estella with jewels and with lessons on how to “break [Pip’s] heart” (54). Dorothy Van Ghent calls the scene where she orders the two children to play a “potent symbol of childish experience of adult obtuseness and sadism” (128).

Estella is about Pip’s own age, but when he meets her she is “as scornful of me as if she had been one-and-twenty, and a queen.” She ruefully calls him “boy” (52). Miss Havisham has not only deployed a scheme to “wreak revenge on all the male sex” (164), but has abused Estella by robbing her of innocence and childhood. Miss Havisham’s “pride and hope” are in a girl whom she will fashion to have no mercy, like herself (88). John Kucich, in “Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel,” recalls that “Jaggers . . . presents Pip with a chilling vision of all the children in the world being ‘so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net—to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, bedeviled somehow.’” Yet Jaggers actually credits himself for sparing Estella—“one pretty little child out of the heap who could be saved” (229). The blind arrogance of one empowered to effect change may outrage readers.

G. K. Chesterton defended Charles Dickens' so-called caricatured characters, some of whom we mention above, by saying that "England was a much more amusing and horrible place than it appeared to the sort of man who wrote reviews" (quoted in Irving xii). In our age we may think that Dickens exaggerated the treatment of children in his novels, but if we place ourselves within his social milieu, we understand that he actually showed some amount of restraint along with his outrage.

In the mid-nineteenth century many philanthropic organizations "sprang up [and] showed all too clearly how many children were in fact still neglected and maltreated by irresponsible and malicious parents." Indeed, a new social conscience seemed to arise in regards to the responsibilities of parents, so that late in the century, specific legislation was at work (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 385).

In spirit and in body, children had always suffered at the hands of neglectful or abusive guardians. To recall the opening scene of *Great Expectations* is to recall, however, that now Dickens—and others in his society—were positing that the suffering and death of children should be *significant* to those empowered to reform. Rather than creating a novel of manipulative sentimentality, Dickens was actually raising his culture's awareness of the young and presenting the challenge ironically suggested by the ineffectual Matthew Pocket: "Is nobody to save them?"

Notes

¹ "Not until 1929 was the age of consent [for marriage] raised to sixteen," according to Pinchbeck and Hewitt (349).

² In 1863, Charles Kingsley wrote of chimney sweeps in *Water Babies*—little children who were suffocated, beaten if resisting their task, and even forced to climb up into chimneys by fires lit beneath them (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 349). Kingsley's novel, of course, is reminiscent of William Blake's "Chimney Sweep" in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, who resolves his misery by accepting his life and looking forward to one in heaven.

³ Hill's volume is replete with case studies, such as this report: "The chaplain of the Glasgow prison says 'Of the youthful criminals of both sexes . . . I have not known more than three or four cases where the culprits were living under the roof of religious and moral parents, and had received a good education, where they have fallen into a course of crime'" (51).

⁴ Also note that education is a theme and indeed a satirical feature of Dickens' work from the 1830s and 1840s, as in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

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