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DICKENS ON CHILD ABUSE



A FEW YEARS ago a proud high school student gave me an essay he'd written on *Great Expectations* (1861), a novel set in the late-Georgian period. He'd received top marks for arguing the novel was about child abuse. What struck me was the way his argument assumed Dickens shared our twenty-first-century views on the subject. Wanting to support any student showing an interest in literature, I didn't mention Dickens had other things in mind, even if the novel does contain what we now construe as child abuse; for example, Pip gets bullied and beaten a lot, mostly from his older sister, and, if one of our child welfare agencies were to interview Miss Havisham, and inspect her weird home, Estella would probably be removed from her care.

I still wonder how much of the essay came from the student and how much can be traced to his teacher. While I suspect the context of the novel hadn't been taught—a suspicion that may be unfair—links between our constructions of child abuse and what Dickens had in mind have been floating around in my mind ever since. There are challenges whichever way we go.

If we argue that *Great Expectations* is about child abuse, as we now construct it, we need to account for the preternatural protagonist in the nineteenth-century novel, who was expected to act as an independent moral agent from a young age. Childhood was constructed differently then. Once a child reached the age of reason, at around seven or eight years old, he or she was absorbed into a complex adult world where Pip's older sister and Miss Havisham didn't seem out of place. Once we allow for the preternatural protagonist, and the age of reason, it becomes difficult to project our constructions of child abuse onto a novel set in the early nineteenth century, unless the projection is clearly demonstrated from the inner workings of the novel itself.

If we argue Dickens had something else in mind, say, the getting of wisdom in the early nineteenth century, we need to convince those who believe Dickens was

simply a gifted storyteller; those who resist seeing him as a post-Enlightenment commentator, like his contemporary George Eliot, or like twentieth-century authors such as Iris Murdoch, both of whom have more clearly established credentials as post-Enlightenment commentators. Is Dickens an early modern author, looking back on the wide-ranging consequences of neoclassicism and romanticism, with their different approaches to reason and feeling? It's still unclear how authors absorb and process the concerns of their age, whether consciously or unconsciously, and any proposal that Dickens is

a commentator, like Eliot and Murdoch, also needs to be clearly demonstrated from the inner workings of the novel itself.

When considering links between our constructions of child abuse and what Dickens had in mind, it's necessary to notice the central but easily overlooked role of Jaggers, a prominent London lawyer, whose importance isn't widely understood since he's often in the background. After giving an overview of the novel's most significant symmetry—the parallel stories of Pip and Estella—this article brings Jaggers to the foreground, looks at the boundaries separating his professional and private personas, and how his private beliefs influence his professional actions. Behind all this is the suggestion that Jaggers isn't simply a character in a story. He's a trope in a discourse which moves between literature and philosophy.

GROOMING PIP AND ESTELLA

ESSENTIALLY, *Great Expectations* is about Pip and Estella, each of whom is groomed from childhood to lead different lives than those available to them had they remained in their birth families. The symmetry of their parallel stories will appear obvious once the reader considers who's grooming them, why they're being groomed, what they're being groomed for, and their different responses

LITERATURE

to their grooming, as a male and female interpreting and adapting their individual circumstances.

At the beginning of the novel, Pip is around seven years old, which means he's at or near his age of reason. Because his mother died in childbirth, he lives with his shrew of an older sister and her blacksmith husband, the forbearing and saintly Joe. He meets an escaped convict, Magwitch, on the marshes and brings him food and a file. The convict is captured and deported to Australia for the term of his natural life. If Magwitch ever returns to Britain he'll be committing a felony.

Pip is hired by a wealthy woman, the angry and bitter Miss Havisham, as a companion for her adopted daughter, Estella, and herself. Although he's young, he falls in love with Estella, because she's beautiful, and because he's seduced by the wealthy setting she's being groomed to move within, which Dickens repeatedly refers to as a "ruined garden" or "ruined place". From

then on, Pip is filled with desire for the beauty among the ruin, and becomes dissatisfied because he hasn't the means to achieve his desire. Instead, Miss Havisham pays for his indentures, allowing him to become apprenticed to Joe. Around this time, his sister is attacked by an unknown assailant, becomes an invalid, and receives constant nursing from a young woman, Biddy, who along with Joe is a benchmark against which Pip's moral development is measured.

Pip changes dramatically when he's told an anonymous benefactor wants him to be trained as a gentleman who'll eventually come into substantial property. His reasoning becomes distorted by wishful thinking, as he constructs a romantic vision around his great expectations. He casts himself in the role of forbearing chivalrous knight, who'll rescue the beautiful lady among the ruin, some day, after enduring the requisite trial of unrequited love over a long period of time. He assumes Miss Havisham is his benefactor, grooming him to become Estella's husband, and repairer of the ruin, because that assumption reinforces his romantic vision. He begins to act patronisingly towards Joe and Biddy, while they maintain their dignity and magnanimity towards him. During his years in London, as a gentleman-in-training, he squanders his large allowance and chucks up heavy debts.

As far as Dickens is concerned, these things—allowing his reasoning to become distorted, assuming things he shouldn't assume, patronising people who are truly good, and failing to manage his large allowance responsibly—are the crux of Pip's moral dilemma. His roman-

tic vision lies at the heart of the dilemma. He needs to learn what's wrong with his romantic vision without abandoning the noble feeling that inspired it. Is there an early modern commentary on romanticism happening here? And on neoclassicism as well?

Pip's benefactor isn't Miss Havisham but Magwitch, who's worked hard in Australia, once his sentence is served, and become a wealthy settler through sheep farming, stock breeding, and other trades. While Miss Havisham isn't old money, Dickens clearly distinguishes between her inherited wealth, emblematic of the ruin around her, and Magwitch's colonial wealth, which is increasingly driving the engines of change back in Britain. For Dickens the capitalist, there are moral as well as social and economic imperatives attached to wealth, regardless of where it comes from.

Since his deportation, Magwitch has remained fixated on Pip, but his motives are mixed, as motives usually are. He wants to help the boy who once helped him; he also wants to prove a point: he wants to make Pip the gentleman he never was and can never be. So his fixation has positive and negative aspects; philanthropy and altruism mingle with resentment and revenge. Complicating this, Pip may also be a substitute for the daughter Magwitch once loved and lost.

Magwitch commits a felony by returning to Britain, but he wants to share the life of the young man he's been grooming since childhood. While this is understandable, it becomes his undoing, and Pip's undoing too, although Pip has been contributing to his own undoing for a long time. If Magwitch is caught, his estate will be forfeited to the Crown, and Pip's great expectations will evaporate, leaving the young man with another kind of wealth: experiences that contribute to his moral development.

Estella's parallel story has a consistently darker and more nightmarish quality about it. Miss Havisham knows Pip suspects her of being his benefactor, but she never tells him the truth, since she's deranged by her own romantic vision and wants to see him as disappointed in love as she's been. Many years earlier, she was jilted at the altar by Compeyson—a man conspiring with her half-brother to rob her of her fortune—who happens to be an enemy of Magwitch. From the moment of her jilting, she never removes her bridal gown, even though it's rotting on her body; her life stands still, among the ruin; she's never seen to eat, preferring to feed off her anger and bitterness publicly, while grooming Estella to become her revenge upon men. Towards

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the end of the novel, she's forced to admit the vanity of her derangement and apologises to Pip. That same evening, her rotting dress catches fire and she eventually dies from her injuries. But her legacy, Estella, lives on.

As Estella's never been taught to love, she can't love Pip, or Miss Havisham either. That doesn't mean she's unaware of her nightmarish situation as Miss Havisham's adopted daughter; indeed, apart from not knowing the identity of her birth parents, her self-awareness distinguishes her from Pip and she repeatedly warns him against hoping for her love. Eventually, Estella marries Bentley Drummle, a thick and brutish man with nothing but the prospect of wealth and a title to recommend him. Their marriage is unhappy, and probably abusive, as he forces her to relinquish Miss Havisham's inheritance, little by little. When he dies, fairly young, she's left a widow. Her last remaining possession is the land under the ruin: "It was the subject of the only determined resistance I made in all the wretched years."

JAGGERS AS THE LAW

IN CREATING JAGGERS, was Dickens making a statement about the law in the early nineteenth century? The question is worth considering, since the law was part of a shadow cast over Dickens's youth, which coincided with the period of Pip's guardianship. When Dickens was twelve years old, his father was arrested and convicted and sent to debtor's prison, forcing Dickens to work ten-hour days in a blacking warehouse to help support his family. As an adult, Dickens held strong views about the law, during a period of change in the law and the way it engaged with the community it served.

Magwitch and Miss Havisham hire Jagers to look after their separate legal affairs, because he's a prominent lawyer famous for getting results. Pip first meets him in the dark, groping down the staircase at Miss Havisham's, without knowing who he is. His first appearance in the light is at the Three Jolly Bargemen, a pub in Pip's village, where he's a stranger from London come to tell Joe and Pip of the latter's great expectations and of his new role as Pip's guardian.

Before Jagers can do this, he interrupts an attempt to manipulate public opinion and pervert the course of justice. The parish clerk and second-rate actor, Wopsle, is at the pub, declaiming from a newspaper, dramatically promoting the guilt of a murder suspect to acquiescent locals, including Joe and Pip. Jagers, a first-rate actor in his profession, takes charge of the situation and makes his own declamations: the law presumes every man innocent until proven guilty; so far no witnesses have been cross-examined; and, according to the article

in Wopsle's hand, the defendant has been instructed by his legal advisers to reserve his defence for his trial. In this scene, Dickens suggests what kind of place Britain would be without men like Jagers representing the rule of law. To reinforce this suggestion, Dickens locates Jagers's practice in a part of London called Little Britain.

Having ventured forth from Little Britain, and asserted the rule of law, Jagers takes Joe and Pip aside and suggests they retire to a more private place. Later, in their parlour, he tells Joe and Pip that the unusual business he's about to transact with them—of Pip's great expectations from an unknown benefactor—does not originate from him; he's acting under instruction, against advice he would have given had his client asked for it: "I tell you at once, I am paid for my services, or I shouldn't render them." This is a recurring theme; Jagers charges top dollar, and is value for money, as he usually gets judgments that favour his client.

This doesn't mean Jagers is mercenary and never represents poor clients; for example, he brushes off one worried client, Amelia, when she approaches him about her bill, telling her it's in good hands; the exchange is ambiguous and could mean he's willing to see the bill unpaid. Neither does it mean his professional ethics are easily discerned or consistently applied; for example, in one instance we see his clerk either grooming or suborning a witness, Spooner, in his presence and with his authority, although the manner in which the grooming or suborning occurs will allow him to deny it under oath if need be. Under Jagers, then, it's hinted the law is a dirty game.

Jagers finds the legal game dirty, literally as well as metaphorically, which is why he washes as often as a surgeon or a dentist would. His practice is fitted out with a washing closet, which he uses whenever he dismisses a client or returns from court. Whether he washes his hands, or his hands and face, and gargles and cleans under his nails, depends on the darkness and complexity of a case. He has strong boundaries between his professional and private lives. He's a bully who intentionally intimidates in his professional life; his suspicious manner makes even innocent people feel dejected and guilty, as if they've committed a felony and forgotten about it. He's guarded about his private life, but he's neither pretentious, nor a snob, nor what we would now call aspirational. He lives well, if modestly, in a stately but dingy and largely unused house in Soho. He's a generous host, provides a comfortably laid table, and serves good wine. He's unmarried and lives alone with a housekeeper, Molly, who's around forty years of age. We don't know whether he's celibate.

Near the middle of the novel, Jagers hosts a dinner, attended by Pip and Drummle, during which he orders his housekeeper to expose her seamed and disfigured

wrists, against her will, while asking his guests to notice how powerful they are. At the end of this dinner Jaggers lets Pip know how much he admires the thick and brutish Drummle, whom he's never met before; Pip lets Jaggers know how much he dislikes Drummle; Jaggers advises Pip to steer clear of Drummle as much as he can, and hints that Drummle may well feature in some secret long-term plan of his.

Important questions need to be asked here: Why does Jaggers draw attention to his master-servant relationship with the powerful Molly? Why is Jaggers attracted to Drummle? Why does Pip dislike Drummle? Why does Jaggers advise Pip to steer clear of Drummle? What's Jaggers's secret long-term plan? Before we can offer possible answers to those questions, we need to consider how Jaggers treats Pip and Estella differently, as guardian of one and controller of the other.

JAGGERS AS PIP'S GUARDIAN

AS A LAWYER, Jaggers is responsible for Pip's grooming, according to his client's wishes. From the beginning, he describes his professional boundaries carefully; but, as the guardianship progresses, Pip finds those boundaries frustrating and accepts them without understanding them. At one point he wishes Jaggers had someone in his life who would "unbend his brows a little". While that's a noble sentiment, Pip's brows are bent in a different way.

As Pip's guardian, Jaggers acts under instructions, offers no opinions, refuses to betray confidences, chooses what questions he'll answer, and uses very specific language when framing his answers. He finds Pip a tutor, Matthew Pocket, who happens to be an estranged cousin of Miss Havisham. He arranges accommodation for Pip with Matthew's son, Herbert, a candid and guileless young man. While Pip is a minor, he'll be given a liberal allowance, which will establish a good credit rating in the marketplace, and Jaggers will check his bills and pull him up if he's found to be "out-running the constable". Once Pip reaches his majority he'll receive a fixed 500 pounds per annum, in quarterly instalments, until his benefactor makes himself known or decides otherwise, and he'll have to manage his financial affairs by himself.

Jaggers is a trope for pure reason who emphatically, perhaps pathologically, refuses to allow feeling to enter his legal practice. He understands his guardianship in specific terms and doesn't see himself as Pip's moral guide or keeper, presumably since moral considerations aren't purely rational. Instead, Pip is given a large degree of freedom, and is left to his own devices, as he interprets and adapts his individual circumstances. Pip is therefore free to get things wrong, and, having got

things wrong, free to set them right as best he can. Are there two parallel commentaries being conducted here; first, an early modern commentary on neoclassical reason and romantic feeling; second, an early modern commentary on freedom and necessity as they relate to the human condition? If so, whether these commentaries are conscious or unconscious is moot, since they would have been part of the Kantian and Hegelian spirit of the nineteenth century, which Dickens absorbed one way or another; just as twentieth-century authors absorbed the influence of Freud and Jung one way or another.

Pip's moral development occurs apart from Jaggers's extreme rationalism, not in spite of it, and it occurs in an appropriately early modern way that reconciles his romantic vision without abandoning the noble feeling that inspired it. In being true to his noble feeling, Pip heals the damage he's caused, and the damage Magwitch and Miss Havisham have caused, along a broad front. He encourages Miss Havisham to change her thinking about Matthew Pocket. Although he's now debt-ridden, he secretly diverts part of his allowance towards purchasing a business partnership for Matthew's son Herbert. He convinces Miss Havisham to secretly finance the remainder of that partnership when he no longer has the means to do so himself. He rejects Miss Havisham's offer to assist him financially, even though he's in real need of that assistance. Through him, Miss Havisham becomes fully aware of the consequences of her deranged vanity; but when she crumples to the floor and asks for forgiveness, he tells her he needs forgiveness himself, and instead to think of the damage she's caused Estella.

In trying to smuggle his benefactor Magwitch out of England, Pip ignores Jaggers's advice to appropriate Magwitch's "portable property"—that is, the sizeable amount of cash Magwitch is keeping on his person—since that's all that can be salvaged if Magwitch is caught in England and everything back in Australia is forfeited to the Crown. When Magwitch is caught, with his portable property on his person, that's forfeited to the Crown too, but this doesn't matter to the morally-awakened Pip, who stands by Magwitch and comforts him during his final illness, offering him a reconciling hope as he dies: "You had a child once, whom you loved and lost ... She lived and found powerful friends. She is living now. She is a lady and very beautiful. And I love her!" It's spin but pastorally appropriate under the circumstances.

Once Pip's social and economic expectations evaporate, and he's set as many things right as he can, he's free to be reconciled with Joe and Biddy, who remain the ultimate benchmark of his moral development. It needs to be said again, though, that Pip's moral development occurs apart from Jaggers's pure reason, not in

spite of it, primarily because of the freedom he's been given. Jagers influenced Pip, and his influence—the influence of pure reason—was never bad even if it was amoral. His influence over Estella is another matter altogether.

JAGGERS AS ESTELLA'S CONTROLLER

WHILE MISS HAVISHAM is grooming Estella to be her revenge upon men, Jagers is more of a guiding hand in Estella's life than is generally realised, and his motives towards her are quite different. He maintains particular professional boundaries with Pip, which focus our attention on the young man's freedom; he maintains particular private boundaries with Estella, which focus our attention on the young woman's lack of freedom; both sets of boundaries relate to his status as a trope for pure reason.

Estella doesn't know the identity of her birth parents and neither does Miss Havisham. Jagers knows Molly, his housekeeper, is Estella's birth mother, but he doesn't know the identity of her birth father. Pip eventually guesses that his benefactor Magwitch is the birth father. While that guess allows him to score a point against Jagers, it's not essential to understanding the relationships between Jagers and Molly or Jagers and Estella.

What's the relationship between Jagers and Molly? Dickens obviously thinks it's important, since he gives us corroborating accounts from three different characters. Molly was once a handsome young woman, perhaps with gypsy blood. She was jealous, physically powerful, and had a violent temper. She was tried for murder at the Old Bailey, for strangling another woman, and was acquitted. Jagers defended her and his defence was widely admired: "in fact, it may almost be said to have made him". His case rested on arguing the improbability of the defendant being physically capable of strangling the victim, and, throughout her trial, Molly was artfully dressed to ensure she looked much slighter and more delicate than she really was. After her acquittal, Jagers repeatedly boasts of her strength, suggesting he defended her knowing she was physically and temperamentally capable of the murder.

Their master-servant relationship, which represents a Hegelian dialectic, even has its own unofficial title, "Wild Beast Tamed". Central to this dialectic is the Platonic model of mind which dominated classical metaphysics for centuries. In this model, which originates in the ancient Greek myths of rationality and irrationality, the mind has a tripartite structure of reason, noble feeling, and base appetite, each associated with different parts of the body. Reason is associated with the mind as the highest point of the body (that's Jagers). Noble feeling is associated with the heart and can be

inspired as a higher form of irrationality (that's Pip). Base appetite is associated with the lower abdomen and is therefore a lower form of irrationality (that's Molly). Because the heart is closer to the lower abdomen than the mind, the higher form of irrationality is always threatened by the lower form of irrationality, hence the need for reason to control feeling from being overtaken by base appetite.

While she was on trial, Molly admitted to Jagers she was concealing a child, which coincided with his brief to find a child for Miss Havisham to adopt. Jagers knew if the child was left with its birth mother it would either die—there are suggestions Molly would have harmed the child herself—or grow up in the kind of atmosphere that leads to a destructive future. He presented a case of salvation versus damnation to Molly; a moral rather than a legal case that belongs to his private life not his professional life. If she gives the child to him he'll do his best to defend her in court; if she's saved her child will be saved too; if she's lost her child will still be saved. Molly agreed to this physical and metaphysical blackmail and Estella was adopted. When Molly was acquitted, she entered Jagers's employment and ever since then he's boasted about suppressing "the old wild violent nature whenever he saw an inkling of its breaking out, by asserting his power over her in the old way".

What's the relationship between Jagers and Estella? Jagers maintains an attitude of "determined reticence" in her presence but he still holds strong views about her nature, which are obvious extensions of his views about her mother's nature. Just as he's suppressed Molly's "old wild violent nature", he's hoping to ensure Estella's nature remains suppressed in the same way. He acknowledges her intelligence—since she's obviously more intelligent than either Molly or Drummle—but his need to suppress her isn't about her intellect. It's about the struggle between rationality and irrationality within classical metaphysics; it's about the fear of the irrational that characterised the classical Enlightenment of ancient Greece; it's about the same fear of the irrational that characterised the neoclassical Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. Jagers wants to see Estella married to a man who's a match for her will, which is supposedly like her mother's will; a latency or potency lurking beneath the surface. That's why he's attracted to the thick and brutish Drummle, a man who either "beats or cringes". The implication here is that Jagers hopes Drummle will master Estella in the same way he's mastered Molly.

How does Estella react to all this? She's conscious of what's going on in Miss Havisham's household; her wits have been sharpened from a young age; she's fully aware of the nightmare of Miss Havisham's grooming.

In one scene she even challenges Miss Havisham while gazing at her adoptive mother with perfect command and calm wonder:

I am what you have made me ... All that you have given me is at your command to have again. Beyond that I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities ... I must be taken as I have been made. The success is not mine, the failure is not mine, but the two together make me.

Estella isn't conscious of what motivates Jiggers, or of his guiding hand in her life, because he's a master of control and his determined reticence never betrays his secret interest in her as Molly's daughter. She distrusts him unconsciously, though, and that's understandable, regardless of whether the reader sees her as a character in a story or as a trope in a discourse.

OUT OF THE RUINED PLACE

DICKENS RE-WROTE the ending of *Great Expectations*, when a friend and fellow novelist, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, argued it was too disappointing for the reader. In the original ending, Pip and Estella meet by accident on Piccadilly Street and continue their separate ways after a short conversation. Pip is grateful for this conversation with Estella, because: "in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be." In the present ending, Pip and Estella meet by accident on the vacant land where Miss Havisham's house and garden once were. They become friends, for the first time, as Pip recollects: "I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place ... the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her."

While it's possible this new friendship will lead to marriage, that's not what Dickens had in mind. Authors need to keep an eye on the sensibilities of their readers, but to encourage romance in an early modern novel that critiques romanticism, as much as it critiques neoclassicism, risks detracting from its message. As Pip and Estella are both survivors of long-term ordeals—physical and metaphysical—perhaps Dickens believed a

mature friendship, based on reconciliation and healing, was better than marriage.

Literature represents life but isn't life, and even an early modern novel can frame its post-Enlightenment commentary in an allegorical mode free of the constraints of literary realism or psychological probability. Once Jiggers is brought to the foreground, allowing us to focus on his professional persona as Pip's guardian, and his private persona as Estella's controller, we can see Dickens representing the Western meta-narrative—with its normative constituents of the Platonic model of mind, the Hegelian master-servant dialectic, and the Greek fear of the irrational—in a way that suggests what's wrong with the meta-narrative and how it needs to change. Let's not argue whether Dickens did this consciously or unconsciously; let's just give thanks he did. Had he approached this story with our twenty-first-century views on child abuse, his focus would have been less on the moral agency of the preternatural protagonist and more on the child as a victim whom society failed.

Consider Pip's life before his great expectations. What would have happened without those expectations, had he remained with his older sister and Joe and become a blacksmith? Would he have been better off without Magwitch's grooming, as a gentleman-in-training, never having shrouded himself in the myth of chivalry? What would have happened had he never experienced Jiggers's guardianship, which gave him so much—perhaps too much—freedom? What kind of person would he have become?

Consider Estella's life before her adoption. What would have happened without her adoption, had she remained with her birth mother? Would she have been better off without Miss Havisham's grooming, as her revenge upon men, which took away her heart and put ice in its place? What would have happened had she never experienced Jiggers's guiding hand as her controller, which reinforced and perpetuated her lack of freedom? What kind of person would she have become?

Consider Molly's relationship with Jiggers. What does he mean by "asserting his power over her in the old way"? And if there was an "old way" of asserting power over Molly, as a person and as a trope, is there a "new way" within the novel's late-Georgian setting? Does the novel describe it? Is Dickens participating in a post-Enlightenment commentary here, whether consciously or unconsciously?