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BOUNDING CHAINS: SOCIAL CONVENTIONS IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD* AND
GREAT EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens provides social commentary through the exploitation and understanding of social conventions. Two coming-of age novels differ drastically in their representations of Victorian society and what it means to find happiness within it. When Dickens published *David Copperfield* in 1850, he chose to reward his protagonist with happiness in both his career and family. Moral character, the ability to demonstrate right from wrong, became the determining factor of success for those in David's life. Dickens evokes a darker tone in *Great Expectations*, creating a reality where happiness is a complex issue.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.” –Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*.

Social conventions and the relationships they foster shape the lives of characters, both real and literary, in interminable ways. Whether it is the class status of a newborn child or the formation of an irreplaceable human bond, both society and the people in it find a permanent place in our lives. In both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens underlies coming-of-age novels with commentary on morality and relationships, dictating what roles they play in society. Morality is defined as the ability to decide between right and wrong, a code of conduct created within the norms of society. Dickens had published four novels between these two and his style had become increasingly darker. In 1853, *Bleak House* followed *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times* followed in 1854, *Little Dorrit* in 1857, and *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859. *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* were chosen because they are Dickens’ two first person narrative, coming-of-age novels. Each draw from numerous aspects of Dickens’ own life and have a protagonist who comes into wealth through a stroke of luck. They exemplify poverty and social mobility in different lights. In 1850 when Charles Dickens wrote *David Copperfield*, his life was tremendously different from when he published

Great Expectations a decade later. In his biography, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, John Forster discusses the differences and similarities between the two novels:

A subtle penetration into character marks the unlikeness in the likeness; there is enough at once of resemblance and of difference in the position and surroundings of each to account for the divergences of character that arise; both children are good-hearted, and both have the advantage of association with models of tender simplicity and oddity, perfect in their truth and quite distinct from each other; but a sudden tumble into distress steadies Peggotty's little friend, and as unexpected a stroke of good fortune turns the head of the small protégé of Joe Gargery. (Forster, 364)

David Copperfield, published in 1850, represents a story of a young boy's life from birth to adulthood. He moves through the ranks of society to eventual happiness and success, both romantically and professionally. Dickens rewards his characters with happiness and the lesson that the good-hearted prosper over the corrupt. The characters in *David Copperfield* who make a distinction between right and wrong and act on such distinctions find success at the end of the novel. That the novel is semi-autobiographical suggests that it reflects Dickens' own sentiments and values. For example, the notion that the solution to happiness is family and career success and if one always makes the conscious moral decision, such success will follow. He intertwines aspects and characters from his own life in order to shape the story of a young man who climbs the social ladder and whose morality leads him to a happy ending. Those who have been loyal and kind to David find their own happiness and at the end of the novel, the reader leaves the protagonist in a warm-hearted reflection of his life. David is grateful for his family and

accomplishments. In 1850 when the novel was published, Charles Dickens was still married to Catherine Hogarth with his five children, the youngest six years old. Charles, like David, had reached great success in his profession and personal life. Perhaps at this point in his career, Dickens values family and financial security above all else, which is why he chooses to reward his characters with that same success.

Ten years later, in 1860, Dickens published his second coming-of-age novel, *Great Expectations*. The novel varies greatly from *David Copperfield*, as the protagonist receives his wealth through a convict benefactor and morality does not always prevail. Pip does not end happily married to Estella as David is to Agnes. London is transformed into a place of disappointment and illusion instead of hope. Any glimpse of happiness is found in the intimate relationships characters have with one another and the desire to hold onto such connections when all other hope has been abandoned. Pip wants to assume the role of gentleman to be with Estella but learns that the world proves to be both corrupt and disappointing. This pursuit of happiness makes the novel timeless and relatable to any reader.

In both novels, Dickens draws upon aspects of his own life for inspiration. Although they are both stories of personal growth and social mobility, they represent different ideals. Happiness in *David Copperfield* is found in the social conventions of family and well-deserved professional success. In this novel, Dickens rewards moral characters both socially and fiscally to advocate that mobility is possible in society. The author drastically changes his approach in *Great Expectations*, where happiness is pursued both socially and fiscally but never truly found. Social conventions such as family are questioned throughout Pip's pursuit of his expectations. I argue that in the two

texts, Dickens provides different solutions for happiness based on his view of society. In *David Copperfield*, happiness is found through traditional family conventions and financial security. This 1850 novel reflects an idealistic view of society, as the characters' endings are perhaps too perfect and impractical. In his much darker novel, *Great Expectations*, there are no established solutions. The text depicts a much more complex society, reflecting the complicated nature of reality. Chapter two will argue morality, the ability to distinguish and demonstrate right from wrong, as a means of success in *David Copperfield* and the way that social conventions sway moral character. In *Great Expectations*, the solution differs as characters are not ultimately rewarded and the quest for happiness is unfulfilled. The characters rely on their relationships with one another as a possible source for happiness, as wealth proves to be unsatisfying. Chapter Three will focus solely on the second text, analyzing its darker nature and why the protagonist can never truly achieve his great expectations. As Dickens moves from idealistic in 1850 to realistic and complex in 1860, he puts London under a microscope and questions what matters most in society.

Chapter 2

Characters, Society, and Morality in *David Copperfield*

As Dickens' initial first-person narrative, coming-of-age novel, *David Copperfield* presents a Victorian society where goodness always prevails. Unrealistically, the text consistently rewards moral virtue with happiness without acknowledging that life is much more complex. There are many factors, such as socioeconomic status, that can influence a person's ability to find happiness. In *David Copperfield*, the value placed in good morals overpowers the boundaries set by society. The characters exemplify the desire to adhere to social norms and show the way that can often conflict with being a moral, good-natured person. Our protagonist, David, begins the novel as an infant, eventually progressing through childhood and into adulthood. As a child, he maintains a sense of innocence and naiveté as he encounters obstacles and other characters. For example, in his relationships with the women throughout the novel, the Murdstones, and those he meets in London. David's innocent nature provokes sympathy from the audience when he experiences hardships, establishing a connection between the reader and a hope for the protagonist's success.

Dickens enforces this connection by creating a parallel between David's relationship with book characters and the reader's relationship with David. As he has no contact with other children, David calls upon the characters in books from his father's collection to keep him company: "It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me), but impersonating my

favorite characters in them-as I did- and by putting Mr. and Miss Murdstone into all the bad ones—which I did too” (58). David reminds his audience of the way a reader can place himself within the story, which is particularly relevant to the Victorian reader of this text as the novel reflects Victorian society. Mr. Murdstone marries into the Copperfield home to take over Mrs. Copperfield’s fortune. His sister, Miss Murdstone, moves into the house to bask in the benefits of the marriage. When they arrive, the brother and sister treat David and Clara poorly, blackening the environment of the household: “The gloomy taint that was in the Murdstone blood, darkened the Murdstone religion, which was austere and wrathful” (55). They work together to produce hostility and to drain the Copperfields of life, taking away all free will from Clara. David notices this change in his mother as they all spend more time together: “Again, I wonder with a sudden fear whether it is likely that our good old clergyman can be wrong, and Mr. and Miss Murdstone right, and that all the angels in Heaven can be destroying angels” (55). His mother is the angel that is being destroyed by the Murdstones. She relinquishes all of her power to the siblings, a consequence of Victorian legal system: “When the husband and wife exchanged vows, they became one person and, in the words of the jurist William Blackstone, ‘the husband is that person.’ The wife, as noted earlier, upon marriage lost virtually all powers over any property that she possessed” (Pool, 165). Clara no longer owns the property that was left to her and the assertiveness of Murdstone prohibits her from taking ownership over household decisions. The Murdstones are abusive to David and his mother, both verbally and physically. When David cannot answer questions correctly during his lessons with his mother, Mr. Murdstone beats David with his cane:

He had my head as in a vice, but I twined round him somehow, and stopped him for a moment, entreating him not to beat me. It was only for a moment that I stopped him, for he cut me heavily with an instant afterwards, and in the same instant I caught the hand with which he held me in my mouth, between my teeth, and bit it through. It sets my teeth on edge to think of it. He beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death. (59)

The violence and cruelty within the scene exemplify the oppression that the Copperfields lived under and evoke sympathy in the reader. The audience feels an emotional attachment to David and his well-being, which is why his effort to fight back is easily accepted. Any harm done to Mr. Murdstone's hand is justified and well deserved. This scene is a crucial moment in the text because as a result, Murdstone sends David off to live in London.

Having never met his father, David does not have male figures in his life to admire. David's father died six months before he was born, leaving Clara to raise David on her own. When Clara met Mr. Copperfield, she was a nursery-governess for a family he used to often visit. The pair was unevenly matched, and it was his fortune that allowed them to live so comfortably. Any knowledge Clara had about running a household came from the skills Mr. Copperfield taught her before his death. The imbalance of power in their marriage makes it easier for the reader to see why Clara was an ideal target for the Murdstones. Her vulnerability simplified Mr. Murdstone's ability to gain her affection, while her late husband's fortune made her an optimal choice. Aside from the effect Mr. Copperfield's death had on Clara's second marriage, the absence of a father figure

prohibited David from having a traditional family upbringing. If David's father lived, the events in the novel would not have unfolded as they did.

It is not until David's arrival at the Salem House in London that he encounters male characters to look up to. Whether these young men are worthy of his admiration becomes a battle throughout the text. He meets Steerforth and Tommy Traddles who both remain relevant to the novel as it progresses. When David arrives at Salem House, he is required to wear a placard that states "Take care of him. He bites" (76). This punishment was a result of the final beating in which David bit Mr. Murdstone. Before the other children arrived back at Salem House, David anticipated the way they would react to his placard based on the way the children carved their names into a door of the playground.

There was one boy—a certain J. Steerforth—who cut his name very deep and very often, who, I conceived, would read it in a rather strong voice, and afterwards pull my hair. There was another boy, one Tommy Traddles, who I dreaded would make game of it, and pretend to be dreadfully frightened of me (77).

Dickens describes these characters before David has the opportunity to meet them. Perhaps this is a play on David's relationships with characters in novels. He has never had any friends so he must imagine personalities from the details he is given. David's first impressions of Steerforth and Traddles establish their superiority in age and intimidation.

During his time at Salem House, Steerforth and Traddles exemplify, respectively, immoral and moral qualities that characterize them for the rest of the novel. A display of this contrast could be seen through an example with Mr. Mell, a teacher at Salem House

who took a liking to David and often helped him. Steerforth had great disdain for Mr. Mell because the instructor did not show any favoritism towards him. As a result, Steerforth exploited his own vindictive nature towards Mr. Mell, as David narrates: “It always gave me pain to observe that Steerforth treated him with systematic disparagement, and seldom lost an occasion of wounding his feelings, or inducing others to do so (89). One Saturday, Steerforth caused havoc in the classroom by disrespecting Mr. Mell and encouraging other students to do so as well. The instructor attempted to remain calm as Steerforth insulted his wealth and position in society by asserting that Mr. Mell was not a gentleman. Once the principal, Mr. Creakle, appears, Steerforth tells him that Mr. Mell’s mother “lives on charity in an alms-house” (94). Upon learning this piece of information, Mr. Creakle asks Mr. Mell to leave his position at the school. The principal felt that the instructor’s socioeconomic status would reflect poorly upon the institution. Steerforth had learned this information from David, which places part of the blame on the novel’s protagonist. David acknowledges how his guilt conflicted with his need for Steerforth’s approval: “For myself, I felt so much self-reproach and contrition for my part in what had happened, that nothing would have enabled me to keep back my tears but the fear that Steerforth, who often looked at me, I saw, might think it unfriendly...if I showed the emotion which distressed me” (94-5). David blamed himself for Mr. Mell’s dismissal but was so enthralled by Steerforth’s popularity that he remained silent. Even in an educational institution, social hierarchy was the determining factor. Although he was a student, Steerforth’s familial wealth gave him precedence over the instructor. This event speaks to the value placed on wealth and the way in which family status can affect all aspects of one’s life. Regardless of Mr. Mell’s success as teacher, his

mother's situation prohibits him from mobilizing up the social ladder. The social class he was born into inhibits him. By contrast, Steerforth was forever privileged from his mother's wealth. That Steerforth, a young boy, knew to exploit Mr. Mell's financial situation displays how the importance of status is engrained early on. That he made the decision to verbally attack Mr. Mell and was proud of the result foreshadows Steerforth's immoral character. In opposition, Tommy Traddles argues that Steerforth "ill-used" Mr. Mell, as he "hurt his feelings, and lost him his situation" (95). Traddles understands the ethical dilemma involved in the situation and that Steerforth was in the wrong. Steerforth refutes Traddles' comment by asserting that he would have his mother send money to Mr. Mell and his family. David responds: "We thought this intention very noble in Steerforth, whose mother was a widow, and rich, and would do almost anything, it was said, that he asked her" (95). Both Steerforth's reaction and David's commentary enforce the degree in which Steerforth was spoiled by his family's wealth. He uses money as a solution to the problem instead of understanding the ethical dilemma behind it. The differences between Steerforth and Traddles shape the men they become and the fates they endure at the end of the novel.

In the last chapter of the novel, "A Last Retrospect," Dickens neatly wraps up the novel by acknowledging the present state of some of the characters. Traddles is a lawyer working at the chambers in Temple, rewarded with fortune in both wealth and family. When Traddles and David meet, he tells David about the success that he has had and enjoyed:

'I really have been able, my dear Copperfield, to do all that I had most at heart. There's the Reverend Horace promoted to that living at four hundred

and fifty pounds a year; there are our two boys receiving the very best education, and distinguishing themselves as steady scholars and good fellows; there are three of the girls married very comfortably; there are three more living with us; there are three more keeping house for the Reverend Horace since Mrs. Crewler's decease; and all of them happy.'

His happiness has been a result of his marriage and financial success, as seen through the fortunes he describes to David. Dickens reminds the reader that Traddles was not always successful: "Traddles's house is one of the very houses—or it easily may have been—which he and Sophy used to parcel out, in their evening walks" (727). He has a large house, one that he used to admire with his wife. By acknowledging this contrast, Dickens shows the way that Traddles moved up in society and was rewarded for his hard work.

The author also rewards another character for his kindness through financial retribution. Mr. Micawber initially played a crucial role by housing David in London at Windsor Terrace during his time at Murdstone and Grinby. The city is a beacon of hope for a young David, a fairytale place that he read about in his stories. Dickens is feeding into an idea that the city can be a place for renewal. For David, it is his opportunity to escape the oppression he was living under in Murdstone's household:

What an amazing place London was to me when I saw it in the distance, and how I believed all the adventures of all my favourite heroes to be constantly enacting and re-enacting there, and how I vaguely made it out in my own mind to be fuller of wonders and wickedness than all the cities of the earth, I need not stop here to relate. (70)

As a child, he saw hope and excitement instead of anticipating the city's harsh reality. The "wonders" and "wickedness" did not encompass the poverty and dirt that he would come to find during his stay. At the young age of ten, he begins to work at the warehouse just as Dickens worked at Warren's Blacking Factory. The warehouse allows the reader to gain a true glimpse of London: "Its paneled rooms, discolored with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say; its decaying floors and staircase; the squeaking and scuffling of the old grey rats down in the cellars; and the dirt and rottenness of the place" (139). This description parallels the poverty and filth that overwhelmed the city. In *The Life of Charles Dickens*, John Forster relates David's time in the warehouse to Dickens' own experiences in Warren's Blacking Factory. Forster references Dickens' autobiography in his text, and the parallels between Murdstone and Grinby and Warren's Blacking Factory are clear in their descriptions. The passage about Warren's states: "Its wainscoted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old gray rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again" (52). The same phrasing of the old gray rats, the decaying floors and rotten staircases clarify the connection between the two factories. Forster directly draws upon this parallel, writing of how *David Copperfield* expresses the way Dickens mirrors an authentic 1800s London society in his novels:

The idea of *David Copperfield*, which was to take all the world into his confidence, had not at this time occurred to him; but what it had so startled me to know, his readers were afterwards told with only such change or addition as for the time might sufficiently disguise himself under cover of

his hero. For the poor little lad, with good ability and a most sensitive nature, turned at the age of ten into a "laboring hind" in the service of "Murdstone [49] and Grinby," and conscious already of what made it seem very strange to him that he could so easily have been thrown away at such an age, was indeed himself. (Forster, 49)

David was placed into the throes of society and the harsh nature of factory work. These scenes are opportunities for Dickens to provide social commentary about his own experiences as a child and their relevance in Victorian period. Dickens spent time working at Warren's Blacking Factory where he earned six shillings a week covering pots of paste blacking. David earned the same salary, pasting labels on bottles and corks. To David, the factory became a place where hope was lost and the days of Salem House were behind him. One of the lowest emotional points for David in the novel, he expresses the misery he endured:

The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned and had thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back anymore. (140)

The isolation and despair that David felt was a reflection of Dickens' own feelings working in Warren Blacking Factory. He uses David as an outlet to express his own feelings, which is reflected once again in Forster's biography. He quotes from Dickens' autobiography and one can see how Dickens placed his own sentiments, nearly verbatim, into his novel:

The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written.

(Forster, 53)

Murdstone and Grinby becomes a clear representation of Warren's in both the physical description and David's words. These passages became an acceptance and acknowledgement of the author's past within the text. David's financial circumstances upon his arrival also create a basis for him to build upon as he progresses throughout the novel. During this period of his life, the Micawber family gave him the emotional and financial support that he needed to survive. He was given lodging in their home and spent a great deal of time with them: "In this house, and with this family, I passed my leisure time" (143). While miserable working in the warehouse, the Micawbers provided David with a sense of belonging.

One could argue that Mr. Micawber resembled a father figure for David, as he became a part of the Windsor Terrace household. Living in the house under the care of Mr. Micawber and his wife, along with their family, provided David with a glimpse of traditional family conventions. The man is eventually brought to prison for his debts, but the relationship between him and the young boy continues. During one of David's visits to see Mr. Micawber in prison, David describes him as: "a thoroughly good-natured man, and as active as a creature about everything but his own affairs as ever existed, and never so happy as when he was busy about something that could never be of any profit to him"

(151). He worked for the benefit of others but could not manage to save his own debt.

Regardless of his inability to handle money, he proves to be a moral character through his unselfish actions. His desire to help others ultimately helps him prevail against Uriah Heep, one of the novel's villains. A caricature of greed, Heep manipulates others to obtain the Wickfield family fortune. Mr. Micawber exposes Uriah Heep for the fraud he has committed in the chapter "I Assist at an Explosion": "HEEP has, on several occasions, to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief, systematically forged, to various entries, books, and documents, the signature of Mr. W.; and has distinctly done so in one instance, capable of proof by me" (627). To manipulate Mr. Wickfield, Uriah Heep would falsify documents to give him power over Wickfield's wealth. He wanted to marry Mr. Wickfield's daughter Agnes and to have control over a fortune that was not rightfully his. Continuing with the theme of rewarding morality, Mr. Micawber exposes Uriah Heep and ruins his plan. Uriah is sent to prison for his actions and ends up under the care of Mr. Creakle, the principal from Salem House who fired Mr. Mell. Dickens groups the immoral characters together in prison, while allowing those who value morality and sympathy for others to succeed. Mr. Micawber is rewarded as well, with a move to Australia where he and his family can start anew without any debt. Mrs. Micawber tells David of Mr. Micawber's freedom and their newfound plans shortly after the encounter with Uriah Heep: "Mr. Micawber being now on the eve of casting off the pecuniary shackles that have so long enthralled him," said Mrs. Micawber, 'and of commencing a new career in a country where there is sufficient range for his abilities'" (644). After exemplifying his good character, he has the opportunity to find happiness

with his family. His success once again enforces the notion that in *David Copperfield*, morality is rewarded.

Much like Uriah Heep, Dickens also punishes another character for a lack of moral virtue. Steerforth plays the opposing role to Tommy Traddles and finds his own demise in his selfish nature. He is punished for his immorality and for his destruction of Emily's character. Steerforth seduces David's childhood friend, Emily, into running away with him so that she may become a lady. When Emily runs away from Steerforth as a fallen woman, she becomes an outcast in society. Emily returns to London ashamed of what she has done and professes her own social ruin in a conversation with David and Rosa Dartle:

I had been brought up as virtuous as you or any lady, and was going to be the wife of as good a man as you or any lady in the world can ever marry. If you live in his home and know him, you know, perhaps, what his power with a weak, vain girl might be. I don't defend myself, but I know well, and he knows well, or he will know when he comes to die, and his mind is troubled with it, that he used all his power to deceive me, and that I believed him, trusted him, and loved him! (600)

She acknowledges the life she should have had if she had not decided to run away with Steerforth, a life that would have been respected in Victorian society. The deception that she attributes to him is seen throughout the novel as a proper depiction of his character, particularly in the episode with the instructor Mr. Mell. In her escape and desire for forgiveness, she earns back her moral virtue and finds a new beginning by moving to Australia with her uncle and the Micawbers. Shortly after, the immoral Steerforth faces

his own destructive fate in death. His boat is wrecked in a storm and he drowns near Yarmouth. When David first sees the boat, he is unable to identify the remaining survivor: “I saw that she was parting in the middle, and that the life of the solitary man upon the mast hung by a thread. Still, he clung to it” (660). The villagers were watching the wreck unfold, hoping that this young man would survive. After continuing on with his description of the scene, David senses a level of familiarity with the solitary man at sea: “He had a singular red cap on, —not like a sailor's cap, but of a finer colour; and . . . he was seen by all of us to wave it. I saw him do it now, and thought I was going distracted, when his action brought an old remembrance to my mind of a once dear friend” (660). In this moment where his life was in danger, Steerforth remained confident and reassured in his actions. For perhaps the first time, his confidence fails him and he is unable to survive the wreck. When the body washes up on the shore, a fisherman asks David to recognize its identity:

But he led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children—on that part of it where some lighter fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind—among the ruins of the home he had wronged—I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school. (661)

David reminds the reader of the child in Steerforth he once knew and the lives the two had endured. That he is washed ashore near the Emily's house connects his death to his wrongdoings in life. Steerforth did not show any moral character or sympathy for the people he deceived and therefore could not be rewarded within the novel.

In addition to Emily and her role in the text as a fallen woman, Dickens characterizes women throughout the novel in terms of traditional roles. The first women introduced are all representations of a mother figure highlighted in different ways. Clara Copperfield, David's mother, is an incredibly delicate and child-like character. Peggotty, David's nanny, differs in that she helps Clara run the household, acting as a means of guidance for both the mother and son. David contrasts the two women in his second chapter, "I Observe" by stating:

The first objects that assume a distinct presence before me, as I look far back, into the blank of my infancy, are my mother with her pretty hair and youthful shape, and Peggotty with no shape at all, and eyes so dark that they seemed to darken their whole neighbourhood in her face, and cheeks and arms so hard and red that I wondered the birds didn't peck her in preference to apples. (24)

He identifies the two women with one another but as each other's counterparts. Dickens uses physical differences to depict their opposing roles. While David's mother represents naïve youthfulness, Peggotty maintains a more disciplinary role as a faithful housekeeper. Many times throughout the novel, Peggotty and Clara assume a mother-daughter relationship. In a scene when David is home for the holidays, he comments: "For Peggotty had been used of old to talk to my mother sometimes like a child" (104). Depicting Clara in this child role enforces her inability to be a strong mother figure for David. Clara's weak character encourages her dependence on others, particularly Peggotty. Where David's mother lacks in parenting, Peggotty presumes the role: "She did not replace my mother; no one could do that; but she came into a vacancy in my heart,

which closed upon her, and I felt towards her something I have never felt for any other human being” (62). In maintaining her role in the Copperfield house, Peggotty holds her place in society without question. Clara continues to be weakened by the stronger surrounding characters and her inability to run the household on her own. While David is at Salem House, his mother’s weakness eventually destroys her. Even in death, she encompasses that childlike figure, as seen through Peggotty’s description of her passing: “[W]hen she was glad to lay her poor head on her stupid cross old Peggotty’s arm—and she died like a child that had gone to sleep” (121). David continues to imagine his mother from the time of his infancy, remembering the person she was before she encountered the Murdstones: “In her death she winger her way back to her calm untroubled youth, and cancelled all the rest” (121). David hoped that his mother would find happiness in death, as she was not strong enough to find it anymore in life. Her weakness in character ruined her, and in doing so Dickens is asserting that women like Clara cannot survive in Victorian society.

Dora Spenlow, David’s first wife, mirrors the feeble nature of Clara Copperfield and suffers a similar fate. She is incapable of running a household or discussing serious matters, and although David strives to strengthen her character, it is to no avail: “So ended my last attempt to make any change in Dora. I had been unhappy in trying it; I could not endure my own solitary wisdom; I could not reconcile it with her former appeal to me as my child-wife” (581). The descriptions of both Clara and Dora express this childlike nature as both unalterable and destructive. He continues on to write, “But, as that year wore on, Dora was not strong. I had hoped that lighter hands than mine would help to mould her character, and that a baby-smile upon her breast might change my

child-wife into a woman. It was not to be” (582). Dora could not be a mother, as illness hit her before such an opportunity was possible. As nearly a child herself, Dora would have most likely been incapable of caring for an infant. Unlike with David’s mother, Dickens does not provide Dora with the prospect of trying to fulfill a motherly role. Her untimely death is meant to eliminate her as a debilitating factor in David’s life. Her character provides the reader with another example of the kinds of women who are unsuccessful in Victorian society. Her passing gives David the opportunity to be with a woman who is more complacent with the traditional role as his wife, Agnes.

After Dora’s passing, David reflects on the decisions he has made and the relationships he has formed. In particular, he draws upon the memories of his Agnes and his own regrets: “She was so true, she was so beautiful, she was so good, -- I owed her so much gratitude, she was so dear to me, that I could find no utterance for what I felt. I tried to bless her, tried to thank her, tried to tell her what an influence she had upon me; but all my efforts were in vain” (697). He acknowledges the role that she has played as caretaker of her father, as her self-sacrificing personality makes her the ideal wife. In a conversation with Agnes’ father, Mr. Wickfield, he assures David of the sacrifices his daughter has made: “‘But no one knows, not even you,’ he returned, ‘how much she has done, how much she has undergone, how hard she has striven. Dear Agnes!’” (699).

Unlike Dora, Agnes dedicates her life to helping others and to taking care of the household. She is not afraid of poverty or the duties of running a home, as seen through what she has accomplished for her father. Agnes’ ability to maintain this role makes her the ideal candidate for David and the two are rewarded with a satisfying marriage.

Dickens also justifies the union between David and Agnes by providing Dora’s

permission. The author informs the reader that Dora sent Agnes a letter before she died asking Agnes to take her place as David's wife (718). Dora's approval provides more support for this second marriage and allows the couple to be rewarded with happiness without any guilt. In Agnes, David is able to find the life and family he has longed for, "I had advanced in fame and fortune, my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years. Agnes and I were sitting by the fire, in our house in London, one night in the spring, and three of our children were playing in the room..." (719). By engaging in this conclusion, Dickens enforces the use of traditional family conventions of the period as an indicator of success. With fortune and family, one could be completely happy within society.

Chapter 3

Characters, Society, and Success in *Great Expectations*

Great Expectations challenges the notion that moral character yields reward, asserting the impractical nature of a simple solution to happiness. In *David Copperfield*, characters that display a good-hearted spirit, practice moral decisions, and adhere to social conventions are rewarded with happiness. Dickens alters his argument in his second first-person narrative, questioning the ability to achieve such happiness at all. The author diminishes social conventions and instead places the greatest value in intimate relationships. The novel places the most value on the relationships characters have with one another instead of on the virtues they display. Although some do personify representations of immorality and morality, many of Dickens' characters in *Great Expectations* are dark and complex, graying the line between good and evil that was enforced in *David Copperfield*.

At the very beginning of the novel, the reader meets Pip as a young orphaned boy living with his older sister and her blacksmith husband. Dickens opens with Pip at the graves of his parents and other siblings, striking a dark tone to prepare the reader for the text. On the very first page, the graveyard scene presents a sense of hopelessness that carries on throughout the story. The parents and five siblings that are buried inform the audience that Pip never experienced the conventional family of a mother, father, and child. His sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, is the closest mother figure that Pip has. She lacks any sense of compassion and assumes a role of a disciplinary caretaker. Pip's relationship

with his sister is defined during one of their first visible encounters upon Pip's return home from the churchyard. She tells him, "I may truly say I've never had this apron of mine off, since born you were. It's bad enough to be a blacksmith's wife (and him a Gargery) without being your mother" (Dickens, 9). The scene displays the tension within the household and the way his sister does not want to be that mother figure. Mrs. Joe Gargery has to take care of Pip as though he were her son, but that is not the case. Her husband, Joe, represents a father figure to Pip throughout the novel. Pip initially introduces Joe as "a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish, dear fellow – a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness" (8). Although not well educated, Joe is hard working and provides the care and compassion for Pip that Mrs. Joe Gargery lacks.

In understanding his relationship with other characters, the audience must first gain a grasp of Pip and Dickens' decision to write a novel about this first-person narrator. The reader encounters the novel through the eyes of Pip, following him from childhood to adulthood in this bildungsroman (coming of age) story. In "Charles Dickens, Social Worker in his Time," an article published by the Oxford University Press in 2012, Arlene Bowers Andrews questions Dickens' objectives behind his narrative voice. In the article, she connects Dickens' novels to social work in order to support that "Dickens, in his timeless fictional narratives, continues to have relevance for contemporary social justice advocacy" (par. 1). She writes that, "The relationships of children - such as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Pip (Great Expectations) - to various adults in their lives offer an array of models of social relations in a family context" (Section 3, par. 7). Pip's family context is with Mr. and Mrs. Joe Gargery and their nontraditional nature opposes the

period's social conventions. Andrews also praises Dickens for his "gift of expression" and his ability to reflect the nature of problems in society through his stories. In choosing Pip as his narrator, the audience can see how society is reflected in the text through an active lens. The reader follows Pip on his journey to achieve great expectations and experiences it alongside of him. In her article, Andrews continues to connect Dickens' novels to the world he lived in:

Dickens understood what we now call social systems and wrote about individuals, families, communities, and organizations in ways that reveal the powerful effects of systemic social forces. He courageously and persistently exposed social disparities, pursued social justice, and advocated for social welfare on behalf of people who were oppressed and vulnerable. He drew from his own lived experience to create stories that generated popular discourse about the social concerns in the Victorian era.
(Andrews)

Bowers reads *Great Expectations* in a way that portrays Dickens as an advocate for social justice. Dickens complicates the idea of success by calling the source into question. Pip does not find his "great expectations" fully satisfying, which perhaps reflects an idea that wealth and stability are not the ultimate sources of happiness.

London plays an influential role in *Great Expectations* and the way that the state of society is expressed. When Pip first learns of his fortune, Dickens introduces the character of Mr. Jaggers. The lawyer comes to Pip and Joe explaining the newfound circumstances, stating that Pip "will come into a handsome property. Further, that it is the desire of the present possessor of that property, that he be immediately removed from his

present sphere of life and from this place, and be brought up as a gentleman—in a word, as a young fellow of great expectations” (138). To Pip, his wildest dreams had been handed to him: “My dream was out; my wild fancy was surpassed by sober reality” (138). His hope was that this fortune would finally allow him to be worthy of his childhood love, Estella, and that his benefactor was her adopted mother, Miss Havisham, with the intent of properly uniting the two. Mr. Jaggers informed Pip that he must come to London, as it was the place he would become a gentleman. London is a representation of high status and a symbol for Pip’s hopes. This inheritance is a transformative period in Pip’s life and he recognizes its significance upon his move to the city. He narrates, “We changed again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me” (160). He acknowledges the irreversible nature of these life changes and the possibilities that await him.

The city becomes an outlet for Dickens’ social commentary through his observations. His description of London upon Pip’s arrival mirrors the way in which the Dickens perceived the city:

So I came into Smithfield, and the shameful place, being all asmeared with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So, I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul’s bulging at me from behind a grim stone building...
(165)

Smithfield was cattle-market during the 1850s that Pip had encountered the area upon a stroll out of his lawyer’s office. The filth, fat, blood, and foam that seemed to seep into

Pip were from the slaughtered animals in the market. His initial exposure to London was not one of beauty but instead one that displayed the grime, rawness, and brutality that existed in parts of the city. That Saint Paul's Cathedral, which is often portrayed as a beautiful landmark of London, was perceived in such a gray nature reflects the nature of the city as dark and overwhelming. In addition to contextual evidence within the novel, scholars have also supported a parallel between physical descriptions of London and the nature of society. Novelist and professor Alan Lelchuk writes in his article "Self, Family, and Society in *Great Expectations*" that

Society as nightmare is reinforced by London, where Pip seeks to realize great expectations and becomes a gentleman. The physiognomy of London, "ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty" corresponds to its inner moral nature. Its "dismal atmosphere" breathes dust, grit, soot, and filth, and is impossible to escape. (409)

Pip's move to London is supposed to suggest a great deal of hope for his future and his growth in status, but the scene does not reflect this idea. Instead, the city appears to be constricting and disappointing. He includes these descriptions of the city to portray landmarks, such as St. Paul's, and experiences, like the filth and poverty, that the London reader would have experienced on a daily basis. His writing forces the reader to face and acknowledge the world he lived in and the problems that existed. Dickens often took strolls throughout the slums of the city and his own walks were reflected in Pip's passage. In *The Life of Charles Dickens*, John Forster recalls Dickens' trails:

There were then at the top of Bayham Street some almshouses, and were still when he revisited it with me nearly twenty-seven years ago; and to go

to this spot, he told me, and look from it over the dust-heaps and dock-leaves and fields (no longer there when we saw it together) at the cupola of St. Paul's looming through the smoke, was a treat that served him for hours of vague reflection afterwards. To be taken out for a walk into the real town, especially if it were anywhere about Covent Garden or the Strand, perfectly entranced him with pleasure. But most of all he had a profound attraction of repulsion to St. Giles's. (44-48)

The dome of St. Paul's is mentioned similarly in the text and in Forster's biography, which adds that these strolls were often a time for Dickens to reflect. Dickens was attracted to areas where society was most impoverished. Such slums were true representations of the hardships that many endured in London. These descriptions in *Great Expectations* force the reader to confront the poverty and filth that encompass reality in nineteenth century London. He represents a realist view of the city in his novels based on his own experiences and allows his readers to understand his world through the eyes of Pip.

Because his first exposure to the city revolved around his trip to the lawyer's office, Dickens uses the setting to discuss corruption within the legal system. When Pip is approached by an "exceedingly dirty and partially drunk minister of justice" (165), the corrupted nature of the law at this time becomes increasingly evident. The minister takes Pip into the yard and shows him "where the gallows was kept, and also where people were publicly whipped, and then...the Debtors' Door, out of which culprits came to be hanged" (Dickens, 166). Pip continues on to narrate that the minister gave him a "sickening idea of London" (166). The minister is happy to give Pip a tour, projecting a

sense of pride of the system. The prisons also play a crucial role with the character of Magwitch, the escaped convict who is secretly Pip's benefactor. Throughout the novel, he represents the opposite of the gentlemanly status Pip is trying to achieve. This representation is part of why Pip is disappointed when he learns the identity of his benefactor, a hardened criminal. However, it is also in prison that Pip remains alongside Magwitch at the time of his death, supporting a sense of mutual affection in their relationship.

Moments before his passing, Pip tells Magwitch that his daughter is alive and that Pip is in love with her. Magwitch's daughter is Estella, Pip's childhood love and friend. Growing up, he had always assumed her role as a lady just as Miss Havisham had raised her. When Pip discovers the truth about Estella, he learns that her parents are the convict, Magwitch, and Jagger's maid, Molly. To strengthen the complicated backstory, Jagger had initially met Molly while representing her when she was on trial for the murder of another woman. As Wemmick tells Pip: "They both led tramping lives, and this woman in Gerrard-street here had been married very young, over the broomstick (as we say) to a tramping man, and was a perfect fury in point of jealousy. There had been a violent struggle, perhaps a fight" (393). Jagger won the case on the grounds that Molly, a much smaller woman than her opponent, would not have been physically able to harm the other woman. After she was acquitted, Jagger took her in as his servant. The history of Estella's parents enforces the depth of the characters and the deception in appearances. Estella is unaware of her genealogy and portrays herself as a lady in society. Jagger explains this kept secret to Pip by stating, "I think it would hardly serve her, to establish her parentage for the information of her husband, and to drag her back to disgrace, after

an escape of twenty years, pretty secure to last for life” (414). Jiggers sees no reason to tell Estella the truth, as it would do her more harm than good. Remaining ignorant of her real story, Estella can believe that she has earned her place as a lady. The grim reality is that she is not a lady, but the daughter of a convict and a tramp. Pip accepts this story in his continuous pursuit of her affections.

As he told Magwitch at the time of his death, he loves Estella. An understanding of her family history does not change that. Weakened, Magwitch responds by lifting Pip’s hands to his lips before quietly passing away. The intimacy of the scene reflects the way in which the relationship developed beyond a monetary level. In the text and particularly in this moment, true happiness is found in a deeper connection between people, not through wealth. The reader has already experienced the disappointment of life as a gentleman alongside Pip. Earlier in the novel, Pip describes how unsatisfying he found financial success and his life in London:

We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintances were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did. To the best of my belief, our case was in the last aspect a rather common one. (274)

The passage is in reference to how Pip and Herbert Pocket would spend their days at Barnard’s Inn. Their careers in the law chambers allowed the gentlemen to pretend that they had found happiness but it did not assist them in actually achieving it. They were

falling further into debt, and it is not until Magwitch's death that Pip decides to quit the chambers to gather his own affairs.

He becomes incredibly ill from the events that preceded Magwitch's death, particularly Pip's attempt to save Miss Havisham and his battle on the marshes with Orlick. Pip had gone to visit Miss Havisham and upon his departure, he has a vision that she is dead. When Pip turns back, feeling anxious about the illusion, he sees Miss Havisham cloaked in flames: "In the moment when I was withdrawing my head to go quietly away, I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment, I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high" (401-2). His vision acted as an eerie foreshadow of the fire and as a saving grace for Miss Havisham. Pip returns to save her and as he removes her from the fire, he is wounded: "My left arm was a good deal burned to the elbow, and, less severely, as high as the shoulder; it was very painful, but... I felt thankful it was no worse" (404). Shortly after he saves Miss Havisham, Pip encounters Orlick, in a confrontation on the marshes. Already wounded from the fire, Pip is sure that the battle with Orlick will kill him: "I felt that I had come to the brink of my grave. For a moment I looked wildly round my trap for any chance of escape; but there was none" (425). Pip learns during this scene that Orlick killed Pip's sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery. On the marshes, Pip's survival was dependent on Herbert Pocket's arrival to the scene. Pocket is Pip's colleague in the chambers and finds the note Orlick sent to bring Pip to the marshes. Although Pip is alive, his mental and physical state is tremendously weak. The events that occurred did strengthen his humility, and it is not until he renews his relationship with Joe Gargery that he begins to feel better. After Pip's inheritance brought

him to London as a gentleman, his relationship with Joe diminished as they separated into social spheres. In this scene, Pip's brother-in-law appears to him as the father figure he once was: "For, the tenderness of Joe was so beautifully proportioned to my need, that I was like a child in his hands" (466). After enduring the pressures of London society in the chambers and the death of Magwitch, Joe's comfort and familiarity became a source of healing: "He would sit and talk to me in the old confidence, and with the old simplicity, and in the old un-assertive protecting way, so that I would half believe that all my life since the days of the old kitchen was one of the mental troubles of the fever that was gone" (466). This exchange between Pip and Joe displays the significance of intimate relationships and their place in a person's life. Pip's relationship with Joe is his salvation from financial pressures as it heals him of his illness. While Pip is asleep, Joe pays off the debts Pip had accumulated and left before he could wake. Returning to the viewpoint of Joe as a friend and father figure, he helps Pip in his time of greatest need.

After a peaceful ending with Magwitch and reconciling with Joe, the end of the novel and its significance becomes an effort to reunite a final pair within the text. Estella, the strongest and most prevalent female character, is Pip's ultimate chance for happiness at the novel's conclusion. As a child, Pip claims that his desire to become a gentleman is rooted in winning over Estella's heart. He states, "[S]he's more beautiful than anybody ever was, and I admire her dreadfully, and I want to be a gentleman on her account" (129). From their first meeting, Estella guaranteed that Pip understood the difference in class standing between them. She was raised by Miss Havisham as a lady and made a point to degrade Pip whenever possible, calling him a "common laboring-boy" and insulting his coarse hands and boots (60). Estella made him feel ashamed for his lifestyle,

yet even as a child he loved her and wanted to prove his worth. Regardless of how much time passed, his sentiments for her remained the same. Years after their initial meetings, Pip returned to Satis House where Estella had lived. During this encounter, he writes of the changes they had endured and feelings that had remained unaffected: “I learnt that she had but just come home from France, and that she was going to London. Proud and willful as of old, she had brought those qualities into such subjection to her beauty that it was impossible and out of nature – or I thought so – to separate them from her beauty” (235). He associates her strong-willed nature as part of her beauty, attributing power and influence to such strength in personality. In her young adulthood, she continued to be a product of her caretaker, Miss Havisham, and unrelentingly tried to break the hearts of others. During their time together, Estella told Pip: “I have no softness there, no – sympathy – sentiment – nonsense” (237). She represents the idea that emotions are a form of weakness and vulnerability. To Estella, the only way to remain powerful is to avoid any form of attachment. Estella’s idea of strength through detachment sharply contrasts Pip’s desire to create intimate personal relationships. To Pip, these connections are a way to escape the difficulties of society and the instability of financial success. To Estella, these relationships are the sole cause of ruin. The conclusion of the novel questions which of the two theories will prevail and what affect that will have on the overall moral of the text.

When Pip is reunited with Estella in the end, they are in the remnants of what was once Miss Havisham’s home. While physically in ruins, Estella and Pip discuss the changes that have occurred: “The ground belongs to me. It is the only possession I have not relinquished. Everything else has gone from me, little by little, but I have kept this”

(483). Estella has not been happy with her life as everything has been taken from her and she asks Pip for the friendship they once had: “now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be”

(484). She has reflected upon their relationship and the apathetic manner in which she regarded him. Dickens does not reward Estella’s character in the end, continuing with the darkness that underlies the entire novel. The characters that encounter a sense of hope within the novel, such as Pip and Joe, find that hopefulness in their relationships with one another. In her cold-hearted, defensive nature, Estella does not have the opportunity to enjoy similar intimacies. Pip is also not satisfied in the conclusion, as the reader is left with an ambiguous ending, unaware if the two characters remain together: ““We are friends,”” said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench. ‘And will continue friends apart, said Estella” (484). Dickens leaves the reader with the two walking out of Miss Havisham’s hand in hand but with no ultimate resolution.

In his original ending, the author makes his intentions much clearer. Dickens altered the ending after Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton suggested that he change it and “argued that the ending was too disappointing to the reader” (508). In this version, Pip states “I had heard of her leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, brutality and meanness” (508). The author leaves the reader with the assurance that Pip and Estella do not permanently reunite, as they only meet when she drives by in her carriage. Pip only finds solace in knowing her pain and Dickens writes, “I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, 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" (509). This ending succumbs to a discontent within society that appears to be inevitable, as the characters can only receive peace through knowing that they are not enduring the pain alone. They strive for wealth, family, and for a better future but in neither ending do they ever truly reach those expectations.

There is great suspicion that Ellen Ternan, Dickens' mistress from 1857 until his death in 1870, inspired Estella's dark and complicated nature. When Ellen and Dickens met, she was eighteen years old and a part of the theatre. In *The Invisible Woman*, Claire Tomalin studies Ellen's character, her relationship with Charles Dickens, and the pressure to keep it out of the public eye. Tomalin writes of the author's persona, "Dickens preserved his renown as the jovial keeper of hearth, home, children, and dogs...The public swallowed the carefully maintained domestic image, but it would have been too much to expect it to accept the presence of Nelly in Dickens' life" (5). Having a public relationship with Ellen would have gone against Victorian conventions, which is perhaps why Dickens does not strictly adhere to such norms in *Great Expectations*. Tomalin writes: "Where he was eager for release from the conventions and hypocrisies of British middle-class society, she wanted to leave behind the equivocal world of the theatre in which she had been reared and become respectable" (131). Their desires were in conflict with one another because being with her risked tarnishing his career and her hopes of being a lady. Tomalin writes of these struggles and the effects they had on the couple's relationship: "The more he loved her, the more painful must have been the knowledge that his love might be responsible for making her submit to difficulty and disgrace" (133). Dickens was afraid that he would ruin Ellen by making her a fallen

woman. The feelings professed in this line mirror descriptions of Pip's love for Estella, paralleling the two strong female roles and the kind of love they evoked in others. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens writes: "Once for all; I knew to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be" (232). Pip understands that he may never be with Estella but loves her nonetheless. Initially, his status in society makes him unfit for her. Yet even when he receives his inheritance, Estella's cold-hearted nature remains an obstacle. For Dickens, his love for Ellen is restrained by the boundaries society and his public image have set. Fortunately for his readers, the depth of the author's relationship with Ellen found a literary outlet *Great Expectations*: "Out of anxiety and guilt came a masterpiece cast in an unfamiliar mould, subtle and haunting, and with a new note of self-questioning and self-knowledge" (Tomalin, 130). The complexity of the characters contributes to the novel's underlying darkness and forces the reader to face his or her own grim reality. Dickens creates an accurate depiction of Victorian society; he does not provide the novel's characters with happy endings because realistically that would be impractical. People are not always successful, regardless of good intentions. The pursuit of happiness is unfulfilled, as the intricacies of human desire eliminate the possibility of a simple resolution.

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