

Failed Expectations: Motherhood and Mother Figures in *Great Expectations*

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In Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, the reader, through Pip, experiences many different forms of motherhood. The idealistic notions that the protagonist implicitly holds about motherhood lead the reader to make judgements about the characters based on gendered expectations. This effect is visible in the vilification of Miss Havisham and Mrs. Joe Gargery, who do not fit Pip's expectations of motherhood. Alternatively, Joe Gargery and Bidley perform maternal roles for Pip, and as such are viewed in a more positive light. The violation of motherhood expectations is not limited, however, to the shared disdain of Pip and the reader; Miss Havisham and Mrs. Joe are punished for their transgressions with gruesome, silencing ends to their tales. Although their punishments may seem excessively cruel for their wrongdoings, "their subduing, silencing and destruction play what is offered as a necessary and enjoyable part in the usual restoration of order in Dickens' novels" (Ingham 86).

Despite the numerous mother figures, Pip's biological mother is absent from his life; she is introduced in the very first chapter as being deceased along with his father and five very young brothers (Dickens 3). The presence of a deceased mother figure has an unstated but pervasive effect on Pip's life because "'mother' is a synecdoche for physical and psychological origin; by taking her out of the picture, Dickens constructs a crisis in which self-understanding, represented as the ability to craft a coherent life story or autobiography, is entirely dependent on the solution to a mystery" (Dever 7). Although it may seem cruel of Dickens to chalk Pip's abnormally ambitious expectations up to the death of his mother, thereby effectively making her death significant only in the context of his own life, maternal death was a literary practice commonly used for this exact purpose. As exemplified in *Great Expectations*, the mother's death is not mourned for the loss of a person's life so much as it is for the subsequent lack of motherhood potential; that is to say, "the issue at stake is not motherhood for the sake of the mother, but motherhood for the sake of its emotional impact on those around her, particularly the bereaved children and husband, forced to struggle on after her death without her as their reliable moral compass" (Dever 18-19). In her absence, Pip's interpretation of his mother as "freckled and sickly," while his father was "a square, stout, dark man" (Dickens 3), gives the reader insight into

his internalized ideas about femininity and masculinity, as “the contrast suggest[s] the stereotypical oppositions between vigour and debility, hardness and softness, strength and weakness, darkness and fairness, that characterized middle-class ideals of manhood and womanhood” (Waters 152). Furthermore, the lack of a real mother allows Pip, as well as the reader, to imagine the mother as an ideal figurehead rather than a flawed real person. In the absence of such an ideal mother, Pip is instead exposed to a variety of mother figures, and the text “traces how a young man comes to trade in his romantic dreams of a new family and an estate home for a career in business” (Cohen 81) when he finds that the mother figures fail to meet his great expectations.

The most obvious example of a mother figure in Pip’s life is his sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery. Unlike the expected familial situation where the wife is obedient and servile to her husband, it is Mrs. Joe who is the figure of authority and punitive power in the family. Because this is such a blatant violation of gender roles, specifically maternal roles, both Pip and the reader perceive Mrs. Joe as being an aggressive and villainous character. Pip wryly remarks, given her tendency to use physical violence on both her husband and her brother, “I supposed that Joe Gargery and I were both brought up by hand” (Dickens 7). From the very first introduction of Mrs. Joe, the reader is given significant insight into the dynamics of their familiar relationship. Joe Gargery is infantilized and feminized by his wife’s abuse, while Mrs. Joe, a harsh woman both in temperament and appearance, is further masculinized by her tendency to go out on “Rampages” and use a cane called “Tickler” (8) to enact her violence. Mrs. Joe does not completely abandon the expected roles of the housewife—for instance, she “is a very clean housekeeper, but [has] an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself” (21). Cleanliness was an important role in a housewife’s duties; however, Mrs. Joe complains deeply and regularly about being a “slave with her apron never off” (20), and complaining was most certainly not within the confines of proper wifely conduct. Similarly, she takes on the role of mother to Pip, but utterly fails to treat him with any degree of maternal love, often telling him she wishes she’d never taken him in. The social violation of Mrs. Joe’s aggression is forcefully corrected by Orlick’s attack, which robs her of autonomy, restoring her as a sympathetic character while simultaneously raising uncomfortable questions about the internalized nature of proper gender roles. Indeed, it appears to the reader that the single most motherly act Mrs. Joe ever does—albeit involuntarily—is to get violently attacked, because this allows Bidley to enter more deeply into Pip’s life. According to Victorian gender norms, the family unit was “the

most important element in this equation for social stability and individual success . . . and the context in which the feminine stereotype throughout this period was both evolved and presented to girls for their admiration and emulation” (Rowbotham 18). Mrs. Joe fails to uphold this ideal family life, and one aspect of her vilification is rooted in her inability to provide maternal support for Pip’s personal aspirations. The punishment for her violation of the expectations of motherhood is retribution in the form of Orlick’s attack and eventually death.

Miss Havisham provides another example of a mother figure, and she, too, represents a wildly distorted version of the Victorian ideal. Miss Havisham acts as the antithesis of a mother figure to Pip in two ways: through her indoctrination of Estella with improper social ideals, and through her and Estella’s indirectly teaching him to be ashamed of the one properly maternal figure he has in his life, Joe. Unlike the proper Victorian mother, who instills in her daughter the values and expectations of her society, Miss Havisham teaches Estella to dominate and manipulate men rather than to be servile and obedient to them. The most obvious example of Miss Havisham’s indoctrination is Estella’s view of love. While according to Victorian social conventions, “it was seen as both natural and inevitable that for a woman, falling genuinely in love evoked feelings of cheerful self-sacrifice . . . that a girl in love would happily surrender her person and possessions to her lover” (Rowbotham 43), Estella has been taught to be manipulative rather than emotional with regard to romance. Miss Havisham, living out her own revenge fantasies after being left at the altar, tells Estella to “break his heart” (Dickens 54), thereby rejecting the role of a protective maternal figure to Pip. Additionally, it is only “once Pip meets Estelle [sic] and is humiliated by her rejection [that] he imagines such a familial realignment, the adoption fantasy thereby serving to articulate the novel’s motivational drive in terms of personal, definitely psychological, wish-fulfillment” (Cohen 75), as illustrated by his daydream of Miss Havisham adopting him. Pip, in his fervent desire to escape the life of perceived mediocrity into which he was born, imagines a world in which Miss Havisham adopts him as well as Estella (Dickens 211). Instead, she continues to mistreat him, in Pip’s eyes, by not embracing him as the son she has never had. Her punishment, like Mrs. Joe’s, appears to be disproportionately cruel for the crime of failing to engender the maternal role Pip clearly expects of her. Although Miss Havisham is not physically cruel to Pip as Mrs. Joe is, she does refuse to give him kindness and motherly love; her lack of maternal behaviour towards him is punished, as Mrs. Joe’s is, with a grisly death.

In stark contrast to the aforementioned women, who fail at motherhood, Joe Gargery is the most successful maternal figure in Pip's life, despite being a man. Joe is kind, sensitive, and not a source of patriarchal authority to Pip—he resembles a traditional mother figure much more than a traditional father figure. Joe is not viewed as an authority figure by Pip or Mrs. Joe. Pip views him as “a larger species of child, and as no more than [his own] equal” (Dickens 8), while Mrs. Joe is clearly the authority figure in their relationship, both factors which serve to feminize Joe. The feminization of his character serves a dual purpose: juxtaposed with Mrs. Joe's character, it provides “an indication of Mrs. Joe's emasculating power,” and occupying the maternal void left by Pip's sister, it fulfils “Pip's need for a mother-surrogate” (Waters 153). Joe is first described as “a fair man, with curls of flaxen hair on each side of his smooth face, and with eyes of such a very undecided blue that they seemed to have somehow got mixed with their own whites” (Dickens 7): from his very first appearance he is portrayed as a feminine and almost infantile character. Joe's physical appearance prepares the reader to view him as a motherly figure, and the assumption is confirmed by his actions towards Pip. Joe is motherly towards Pip by nurturing and encouraging him, consoling him during his sister's rampages, and praising Pip's skill as an “oncommon scholar” (64). Joe acts much more lovingly towards Pip than Mrs. Joe, which further feminizes his character, as Victorian social norms dictate that “the masculine capacity [is] for reason and logic, while the woman [is] ‘the legitimate muse of emotion’” (Rowbotham 19). Because of his properly maternal care of Pip, Joe is rewarded with a happy ending; he is “freed first from [Mrs. Joe's] tyranny of which her speech was symbolic and then by her death for a new marriage with the biddable Bidley” (Ingham 86).

As (perhaps a bit uncomfortably for the reader) both a mother figure and love interest to Pip, Bidley directly complies with the feminine norms expected of her. Because of her socially acceptable behaviour, Bidley is portrayed and interpreted as an ideal woman, who flawlessly encompasses the roles of sister, mother, and wife. Bidley fits the traditional ideal of feminine and maternal gender roles; she teaches Pip things with great patience and adeptness, but without asking anything in return, and she never challenges Pip's assertions of masculinity, such as when he mentions that she would be a suitable wife for him if he had lower standards for his life (Dickens 116). Despite the fact that she is “not beautiful” (113), Bidley is portrayed as an ideal woman due to her sweet, feminine, maternal, and servile nature. By Victorian literary standards,

physical beauty was of itself not necessarily held to be an indication of a good spirit within, though many fictional heroines were lovely to look on. It was, however, more a question of expression than feature that was seen to make a girl “good-looking” in all respects. Less than perfect lineaments could be overcome by a happy, heavenly expression, and by a pleasing neatness in appearance. This outward physical aspect was further reinforced by demeanour. A good girl’s behaviour was always modest, indicative of unselfish submission to those in due authority over her, such as her parents. It was also nicely calculated to be appropriate to her station in life, making it necessary that she should have an acute consciousness of her own relative situation in the class hierarchy. Additionally, it was desirable that she should be educated as fitting for her station and abilities. A good girl should be able to make a contribution to household affairs, and be able to add materially in a variety of ways to the comfort of the males in her life, be they fathers, brothers, or husbands. (Rowbotham 23)

Biddy is the most obvious example in the text of the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, a maternal character whose focus was on the domestic sphere and “making her household a comfortable, tranquil refuge, where the busy man could relax on returning from his toil” (Rowbotham 15). The family unit into which Biddy is thrust, in her role as Mrs. Joe’s caretaker, is obviously dysfunctional. However, the Victorian social standards dictated that “[i]n any family, it was presumed to be the females that provided the cement which held the family together” (Rowbotham 18), and Biddy is no exception to this rule, as she proves to be invaluable in maintaining, and even improving, the standard of living for the members of the family—namely, Joe and Pip. Because she does not violate Pip’s expectations of a proper mother figure, despite not being available for marriage to him, Biddy is married to Joe “in a burst of happiness” (Dickens 437); a fitting reward for both her own and her husband’s maternal service to the story’s protagonist.

Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* is full of complex, and often unpleasant, characters. Power dynamics between these characters are very revealing of the gender dynamics of the Victorian society in which Dickens was writing, particularly the expectations surrounding motherhood. In the text, Pip is exposed to numerous mother figures. Those who, in his eyes,

act maternally towards him, have relatively happy endings; Joe and Bidley, who nurture Pip unconditionally, marry each other and end up apparently content. Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham, on the other hand, do not meet society's or Pip's expectations for feminine maternal figures and are punished accordingly.

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