

“I am ignorant and backward.”: The Possibility of Progress in *Great Expectations*

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Abstract:

Dickens’s call for improvement pervades *Great Expectations*, a novel that uses Pip’s journey into adulthood to create a story equal parts *bildungsroman* and examination of class stagnation. Dickens highlights deficits in London’s human condition, questioning what, if anything, can be done to improve it. A frequent critic of Victorian educational systems, Dickens returns to this theme by creating and shattering Pip’s ‘expectations’ to highlight what he deems false forms of improvement. Pip laments that it is “a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home,” yet his transformation into a scholar reshapes him as mechanical and unsympathetic; he distances himself from Joe and his lowly family (Dickens 1999, 89). Hence, Dickens reveals his non-example of progress while veiling his definition of personal and societal improvement. By focusing on Pip’s transition from “a common laboring-boy” into an “oncommon scholar,” Dickens’s call for the improvement of London’s human condition through his demand for educational reform appears. However, he pushes beyond this in *Great Expectations*. The changes Dickens defines are physical, visceral interactions in moments of hardship, suffering, and most notably, at the time of one’s death. London’s ‘improvement’ relies on a return to imaginative and sympathetic educators and students alike.

Keywords: Dickens, Education, *Great Expectations*, Victorian Schools, Literacy, Improvement, Class, *bildungsroman*

The Working-Class Home’s Anti-Examples

Classic Dickensian representations of class stagnation permeate *Great Expectations*. At the heart of the matter of improvement is Dickens’s call for extending greater compassion. Dickens demands change on an individual level that will, in turn, affect London more broadly. Improvement appears as the need for compassion and education in the novel, on the individual level and the collective level of the people of the city of London. An overflow of attempts to escape poverty and destitute educational systems arise. Teachers and students alike fall suspect to Dickens’s criticism, with Pip at the forefront.

Pip partakes in different modes of learning, his first in boyhood as Mr. Wopsle’s great-aunt’s student. Pip describes Wopsle’s great-aunt as keeping “an evening school in the village; that is to

say, she was a ridiculous old woman of limited means and unlimited infirmity" (Dickens 1999, 39). Likewise, Pip describes her methods of teaching as lackluster, framing her as an unqualified and ignorant instructor. While a good-hearted teacher, she lacks the competence to teach Pip and Joe. While not as monstrous as some of Dickens's most memorable schoolmasters—such as Bradley Headstone—she lacks their skill. Dickens was not so naïve as to argue that compassion alone defines 'good' teachers and students. He often criticized this notion by providing characters that serve as anti-examples, instructors, and systems void of regulations or qualifications. Wopsle's great-aunt's school mirrors the Victorian Dame schools, educational facilities that, as Philip Collins describes, were "faulty in the extreme" and that "no type of school was so universally damned by official and unofficial observers" (Collins 1963, 84). Both the flawed schoolmaster and school itself resurface throughout Dickens's speeches, sketches, and novels, yet in *Great Expectations*, he carefully offers alternatives to these flaws instead of merely criticizing their absence. Likewise, he takes time to demonstrate the dangers that inflict those who receive no education at all. Patrick Brantlinger asserts that "somewhere in Dickens's thinking lurks an equation between crime and literacy, instead of between—as might be expected—crime and illiteracy" (Brantlinger 1998, 72).

Joe best embodies Dickensian values of hard work, humility, and compassion while also representing the dangers of illiteracy. Pip's sarcastic description of Joe's ignorance, particularly in regard to Joe's illiteracy, exposes Pip's alienation from his feelings of compassion and the distinction between those who are formally educated and those who are not. He describes:

It was necessary for Joe to hold on heavily to the table with his left elbow, and to get his right leg well out behind him, before he could begin, and when he did begin, he made every down-stroke so slowly that it might have been six feet long, while at every up-stroke I could hear his pen spluttering extensively. He had a curious idea that the inkstand was on the side of him where it was not, and constantly dipped his pen into space, and seemed quite satisfied with the result. Occasionally, he was tripped up by some orthographical stumbling-block, but on the whole, he got on very well indeed. (Dickens 1999, 344-45)

In so fully rendering Joe, the blacksmith struggling with writing, Dickens reminds readers of the importance of literacy, and likewise, its increasing value, even among laboring classes. Biddy's moral teaching helps Joe gain a basic understanding of reading and writing skills, yet as an adult man, he is drastically behind those who benefited from such skills in youth. What makes Joe distinct on a visceral level, however, rests in the fact that he never entirely becomes fully literate and what is preserved is humility. Thus, Joe "does not learn to forget how his person and identity are rooted in the oral culture of family, place, and time." In short, Joe remains humble and possesses a child-like curiosity, unlike Pip, who gives in to his ego and forgoes imagination. Or, as Tross puts it, "the power of literacy to inform was matched by its power to deform was a constant anxiety for the Victorian middle-class, faced as they were with an increasingly literate, novel-reading public" (Tross 2004, 235).

Dickens's Examples of Good Educators

Despite Dickens's digs at poorly qualified educators, he does take time to give credit to the strides the lower-class individuals take to improve their condition in the face of limited resources. The passage describing Joe's attempts best highlights Dickens's appreciation of the working-class who attempt to learn. Furthermore, Dickens uses Biddy to exemplify his definition of a 'good' educator. Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt functions as one of the novel's anti-examples, alongside Miss Havisham, who attempts to teach Pip and Estella the principles of romance. Biddy, on the other hand, possesses qualities that resonate with Dickensian values. Pip describes Biddy's patience and methods through which she teaches him to read, fully accrediting her as his primary instructive benefactor. By much of Pip's unassisted self, and more so, by Biddy's assistance than Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, Pip "struggled through the alphabet as if it had been a bramble-bus" (Dickens 1999, 40).

Biddy's teaching helps Pip mitigate his concern over the quality of his writing, instilling in him the determination to improve his shaky letters. After working closely with Biddy, Pip "fell among those thieves, the nine figures, who seemed every evening to do something new to disguise themselves and baffle recognition" but at last, begins "in a purblind groping way, to read, to write, and cipher, on the very smallest scale" (Dickens 1999, 39). Literacy becomes the primary means of improvement for Pip, as this moment reshapes him as different from Joe and the rest of the laboring-class. The art of reading and writing develop into the method in which Pip can examine himself and those around him—but not without cost. Throughout Pip's journey into adulthood and, more notably, through his distinction as "an uncommon scholar," Dickens ultimately promotes a middle-class tenet which contains his values of hard work and frugality. Additionally, "where the 'new' Pip painfully reemerges, as a transformed imago, so to speak, out of the larva of his past parasitism into a prospective state of maturity and independence," Pip deliriously reimagines himself as an inflated success story, leading him to disregard his only constant friend, Joe. Hence, Dickens envisions not only a conflict between labor and education, he also argues for an alliance between a conveniently archaic, docile, and contented laboring class and an enterprising and industrious bourgeoisie. The pull between working-class morality and the necessity of education thread Pip's past and future together, but as Dickens proposes later, it is the interaction between two people, not class-types, that creates improvement of a grander kind.

Joe exclaims that Pip's newfound ability to write molds him into more of an "uncommon scholar" than those around him, as Pip realizes Joe's education "was yet in its infancy" since he did not go to a formal school (Dickens 1999, 40). The lackluster tutelage under Wopsle's great-aunt, and even under an improved version with Biddy, become overshadowed by this first taste of improvement, one that would later push him into becoming fully literate, and subsequently, abandoning the laboring-class. Pip grows to understand that being literate creates an opportunity to advance beyond his current class status, and to develop educationally; he must leave the working-class sphere.

Dickens employs Biddy to highlight the characteristics of a 'good,' even if sparsely qualified, teacher. He also uses Biddy to show that meaningful education relies on compassion, competence, and creativity to improve the lower classes on some level. Despite shaping Pip's educational expectations as vain, Dickens refutes superficial means of learning through showing Biddy's aspirations. Biddy says she works to "...be industrious and patient, and teach myself while I teach others. The new schools are not like the old, but I learnt a good deal from you after that time, and have had time since then to improve" (Dickens 1999, 215). Opinionated and wise, Biddy sees through Pip's shallow aspirations, as Dickens frames her as not only humbler than Pip, but far brighter, closely resembling his definition of a 'good' educator.

As Pip advances socially and educationally, he also comes to understand that improvement through literacy relies on money; Joe could not learn to read growing up because "poetry costs money" (Dickens 1999, 41). In an early conversation with Joe, Pip hears that however "uncommon fond of reading" Joe might have been, he ultimately was unable to 'improve' into being literate due to falling under London's poor. The most incriminating restriction derives from Mrs. Joe's condemning stance on higher education. Joe describes how she "an't over partial to having scholars on the premises...and in partikler would not be over partial to my being a scholar, for fear as I might rise. Like a sort of rebel" (Dickens 1999, 42). Mrs. Joe's anxieties over what happens when the laboring-class becomes educated, 'improves,' is not unwarranted. Absurd as it may sound, Joe accurately perceives self-improvement as posing a threat to the community it is supposed to help. Once Pip receives the large sum of money from Magwitch, who, for much of the novel, is an unidentified benefactor, he gains the freedom to flee Mrs. Joe's home in pursuit of higher learning. Dickens takes issue with this all-too-easy vessel of improvement and uses it as a way to parody those who come into money and do not work for their advancements.

Meckier argues that "throughout *Great Expectations*, Dickens equates the impulse toward self-improvement with base cravings for social and material advance," perhaps a slant at Darwin's popular 1859 *Self-Help*. Just as readers of *Self-Help* believed they, too, could conveniently and expediently improve, "Pip's dramatic ascent, Dickens scoffed, is what most readers of *Self-Help* hoped would happen to them, with or without a strong effort on their part" (Meckier 2001, 543). For both these readers and Pip alike, the idea is to become better off, not a better person. This form of quick-and-easy improvement reshapes Pip's attitudes toward those who labor. His benefactor not only grants him the financial security for educational improvement, he also provides a threshold in which Dickens inserts a critique against Pip's newfound churlish character.

Pip's financial and educational improvement, and the benefactor who aids in this, later demonstrate Dickens's call for a different kind of improvement for Londoners more broadly. In what Campbell describes as a turn of fortune's wheel, Pip's reversal has the effect of reordering his priorities and changing his views on himself, those surrounding him, and London. Pip realizes immediately, but then must learn several times over during the novel, that literacy is not the solution to London's broader human condition, and therefore, will not suffice as the only path toward

improvement. Alternatively, the reversal not “only inverts Pip, but changes the world and revolutionizes as well, Pip’s understanding of it” (Campbell 1996, 154). More distinctly to *Great Expectations*, Dickens uses the coming of age story to create a call for improvement on a visceral level, pushing beyond educational reform alone. There are many concerns as to what will happen to London’s poor if they improve and, otherwise, what consequences lie in store if they do not.

Wealth and the Uncommon Scholar

As per Dickens’s usual, he draws attention to what is lost when one advances from an uneducated and impoverished home to an educated and literate society of affluence. Dickens does not take issue with learning but rather, criticizes the commodification of literacy and the entitlement that follows those who pursue it. Pip, upon ‘improving’ into a gentleman, undergoes a change in disposition that Dickens portrays as less than favorable. A theme common in *Our Mutual Friend* and *Hard Times*, as well as the idea that once one gets an education, he becomes unable to access and extend the compassion learned in the working-class home. This understanding temporarily follows Pip’s transferal, yet his initial educational improvements began in the very working-class home he aims to leave behind. Murray Baumgarten notes that, as previously mentioned, it is there that Pip learned to write. Readers become invested in this form of improvement, and “the material which the young Pip reads is handwritten. His imagination fastens eagerly upon the constitutive strokes of pen and chisel” (Baumgarten 1983, 61). Paper changes Pip he as becomes more formally educated, more literate, and comes into more wealth. “In the course of the novel we will confront, as does Pip, these two aspects of literacy: as writing it has calligraphic potential and can liberate the imagination; as reading it may be a code that directs and even imprisons the imagination in rules and laws” (Baumgarten 1983, 62). Pip becomes more educated and loses the imagination that Dickens so frequently called for in students and educators alike. Once Pip reaches the degree in which he defines a gentleman, “he leaves behind his childish pictorial imagination... *Great Expectations* will thereby remind us that even if literacy is the mark of the gentleman, reading has often made men and women mad” (Baumgarten 1983, 65).

Literacy possesses a transformative power, and Pip becomes expectant that he will reach a ‘happy ending.’ Pip’s reasons for turning his back on the working class, specifically Joe, become focal. After all, Pip wants to continue to improve beyond what Joe is capable of, for he wants to rise in society and become a gentleman. Pip’s “intellectual capacities left him unsatisfied with his work as blacksmith. When he is bound apprentice to Joe in the Town Hall, he experiences the whole process as a humiliation” (Hösle 2008, 492). Additionally, Pip has read his imaginations “somewhat blindly, in self-absorption, in much the same way that Mrs. Pocket reads her book of peerage. But Joe’s selfless, charitable illiteracy has all along pointed toward a third possibility, an ideal reconciliation of metaphor and fact that seems to free him from the lies of adult fiction” (Byrd 1976, 265). The question of balance, of when, is one just educated enough riddles the entire novel, and *Great Expectations* falls danger of fitting Dickens’s usual rants that end without

solution. However, he does offer a definite form of improvement separate from educational reform: human to human, corporeal contact.

Problematic Visceral Improvement

Visceral improvement reshapes several characters in the novel, but problematic visceral experiences also plague it. Before directing attention to Pip's visceral interactions with his benefactor—Magwitch—it is worth dwelling a bit longer in the laboring-class. It is within London's laboring-class that Dickens most clearly inserts troubling, if apparent, suggestions for visceral improvement. The means of improvement Dickens suggests originate here present challenges, especially when visceral improvement is taken into consideration. First, Joe, "With his good honest face all glowing and shining," represents Dickens's idea of contentment and humility (Dickens 199, 169). However, Elizabeth Campbell claims in "Dickens and the Language of Fortune" that Joe is not without flaw. As "The central, eternally female virtue that Joe represents had always been at the heart of Dickens' novels; but in *Great Expectations*, virtue undergoes a change of sex," which she argues makes Joe both the novel's moral center but also a disgrace of emasculation by his termagant wife (Campbell 1996, 169). Despite this slant, one shared by many critics, Joe nevertheless functions as an example as to why improvement is necessary for stagnant middle-class. Married to the abusive Mrs. Joe Gargery, Joe does not pursue education for his wife "would not be over partial to my being a scholar, for fear I might rise. Like a sort of rebel" (Dickens 1999, 42).

Joe does learn through his "meditative raking of the fire by fire" as a blacksmith, where he also questions his good-hearted yet underprivileged origins (Dickens 1999, 41). Likewise, Dickens, in what scholars have considered to be a troubling move, defines Mrs. Joe's improvement as a drastic change in sympathy and temperament upon becoming an invalid by Orlick's brutal attack. Mrs. Joe, who repeatedly reminds Pip of his burden to her, as well the fact that he owes her infinite degrees of gratitude for even being kept alive. In framing their relationship this way, Dickens depicts Mrs. Joe as deeply flawed and for the most part, detrimental to both Joe and Pip's longing for learning. She uses abusive reasoning with both Joe and Pip as a way to keep them "from making demands on her; she can only assert her authority through brutal, and not tender or patient, instruction" (Weissman 1981, 108). In framing her this way, Dickens inserts visceral learning into the working-class sphere, creating a stark foil to Bidley's example as a 'good' teacher. Hence, an alternate, if at times, problematic source of 'improvement' appears.

Dickens frequently opposed capital punishment and physical abuse, as shown in the novel through Pip's relationship with Mrs. Joe and his observations of Magwitch's prison. However, he did acknowledge that in some cases, "being banged around some may do a lad good," or, as John Gordon argues in "Female Figures in *Great Expectations*: In Praise of Mrs. Joe," Dickens improves child-like and hot-tempered lasses this way as well (Gordon 2017, 254). Dubiously, Dickens provides one definition of improvement as the result of visceral, often violent, experiences,

but he does not extend this definition to Mrs. Joe's 'teaching' of Pip and Joe; he rejects her as a 'good' visceral teacher altogether. Despite "raising Pip by hand, "Mrs. Joe has nothing maternal about her...she is aggressive and uses both verbal and physical violence to keep him in his place" (Jarvis 2014, 1261-62). And, as Pip's awareness of her physical abuse develops, he notices that Mrs. Joe treats her husband similarly to the way she treats him. Mrs. Joe and her interactions with others become yet another anti-example of Dickens's call for improvement, this time in his call for visceral interactions. However, her physical transformation opens a questionable method for 'improvement': violent, visceral exchanges.

Penn argues that in *Great Expectations*, "vindictive characters generally suffer great injury and become figures seeking pardon in sentimental deathbed scenes. Dickens comes near to implying that one can switch from a castigating nature to a compassionate nature with a violent enough flipping of the switch" (Penn 2016, 128). Mrs. Joe's problematic visceral 'improvement' is not the only instance in *Great Expectations* in which physical violence is suggested as warranted or as a form of learning. Both endings of the novel detail how Estella was abused by her husband. In the published ending, Pip states that he had heard "of her as 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, avarice, brutality, and meanness." (Dickens 1999, 356). Pip continues to describe that all her meanness, in turn, was replaced with the "friendly touch of the once insensible hand" (Dickens 1999, 357). Extreme means of visceral interaction, it seems, Dickens attributes to her 'improvement.'

Perhaps the most problematic reading of this concept arrives when Estella tells Pip that, upon years of sadness, "suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape" (Dickens 1999, 358). In a similar vein, the original ending also ends with a message of visceral suffering as 'improvement,' as Pip describes that Estella (mistreated not only by Mr. Drummle but by a second husband as well) learns through pain that "had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be" (Dickens 1999, 359). Several scholars have attempted to examine Dickens's troubling suggestion of physical violence as a means of improvement, but many have also looked at Dickens's usage of physically aggressive moments to insert humor and themes of compassion. Take Pip's first encounter with Magwitch, for example. Pip states:

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself-for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet-when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously. (Dickens 1999, 10)

Both the gesture and Pip's description of it comically visualize for the reader that most Dickensian of themes: the reversal of fortune.

From *Pickwick Papers* onward through the central gesture of plot and the surest test of character, Dickens "had been forever turning his protagonists upside down and emptying their pockets" (Campbell 1996, 154). The reversal from illiterate to literate parallels the physical connectedness that occurs between characters yet a distinction must be made between the visceral interactions between Pip and Magwitch versus those between Mrs. Joe and Orlick, and Estella and Drummle. A shakedown gives a much different message than becoming an invalid or encountering domestic abuse does. However, in framing both female protagonists as unruly, vain, and cruel themselves, Dickens may be suggesting that getting their getting knocked around and physically altered 'improved' their dispositions. Why, then, does he not prescribe the same severity in 'improvement' for Pip? It may be that this choice was an unconscious one, but it may also be that since Pip's 'improvement' and expectations of what will follow, it is so delusional that getting knocked around would not be enough to change him. Or, perhaps since Pip was a victim of physical violence in his youth, this kind of early exposure visceral exchange render him incapable of improving this way. Dickens's message remains ambiguous, and perhaps he suggests this troubling move this way to create a criticism against violence altogether. However, he does provide one clear example that displays the other half of the solution to help heal London's human condition—compassionate physical exchange.

Visceral Compassion and the Deathbed

Although Dickens presents many unsettling visceral modes of learning throughout *Great Expectations*, he also takes due care to depict moments of corporeal interaction that get at his second part of the solution to London's human condition. Education and literacy appear as the most consistent and clearly identifiable Dickensian mode of improvement. However, Hösle argues that "the book is structured according to the list of the corporal works of mercy" as the theme repeats through several of the characters' interactions (Hösle 2008, 477). Visceral acts of mercy are shown most clearly when Dickens chooses to write Magwitch free from his impending capital punishment, an issue Dickens long took issue with. Dickens's deep repugnance of corporal punishment appears throughout *Great Expectations*, especially if one reads Mrs. Joe's treatment of Pip through this lens. When practiced on children and "when it is sadistic, unjust, or ritualized," Dickens outright refutes it; however, he is also ready to acknowledge that there is something about physical interaction that transcends the capacity of words said, read, or written to provide London improvement.

There are other moments in Dickens's fiction where instances of violence are justified as due punishment, as a way to 'improve' one's selfish condition. Bentley Drummle, for one, might have been much improved, as a child, if he had not been allowed to develop his worst features, largely resulting from his overbearing and wealthy family. However, this is not the point Dickens urges readers to garnish from *Great Expectations*. Magwitch and Pip's relationship best exemplifies Dickens's call for visceral interaction. Despite the aggression present in their first encounter in

the graveyard, Pip and Magwitch later develop a kind of father-son relationship, which only deepens once Pip learns that Magwitch is Estella's father. Initially, Magwitch's paternal-like connection to Pip begins when he sends him money to become a gentleman, without Pip knowing the source of his newfound wealth until later in the novel. Furthermore, "Magwitch's 'gentlemanly' revenge project," which deforms Pip's character, ultimately reshapes him into "a 'true gentleman at heart': his forgiveness and newborn love for Magwitch, which prove that he has broken with the paternal pattern set by Magwitch" best exemplify Dickens's call for improvement (Gates 2010, 291-92). The scene in which Pip's ultimate improvement is below:

We had a doleful parting, and when I took my place at Magwitch's side, I felt that was my place henceforth while he lived.

For, now, my repugnance of him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (Dickens 1999, 332)

Pip learns what it means to be a gentleman indeed, and it is in the physical connectedness in this scene that this realization blossoms. Finally, Pip describes how "I felt his hand tremble as it held mine, and he turned his face away as he lay in the bottom of the boat" (Dickens 1999, 333). Much different from the physical 'improvements' inflicted by Mrs. Joe and Drummle, the gentle tremble of a dying man's hand transforms Pip into a different kind of gentleman, one capable of forgiveness, compassion, and displays of such values through visceral interaction. Despite the tone of earlier scenes between the two being framed as those present in "muscular novels" of the time, Dickens uses this moment to convince readers that, despite his flaws, Pip does improve genuinely by the novel's close, as he returns to the kindness he initially witnessed in Joe. The general tone of Magwitch and Pip's relationship transforms from "a sort of glorification of strength and ferocity" to gentle touch to teach each character that "his muscularity is of no use to him in the crises of his adult experience" (Shrimpton 2012, 137).

Instead, Dickens places Pip alongside Magwitch's deathbed to demonstrate to readers a call that extends beyond the scene at hand. Dickens "could only imagine Magwitch's dying as an idealized form of justice" and chooses to depict the death scene as he does, rather than as a hanging, for example, to fully flesh out Pip's improvement here (Stein 1988, 106). Despite Phillip Collin's insistence that Dickens was good at pointing out the flaws of London but was not so good about suggesting fixes, he does offer up suggestions as to what might help improve London's human condition. Dickens creates and shatters Pip's great expectations to allow what he defines as a well-rounded improvement on the individual and societal level in London. Through refuting the shallow definitions of monetary gain and materialism as improvement, Dickens calls for a return to an individualized, inquisitive humanity. Best exemplified when Pip extends compassion through holding Magwitch's hand on his prison deathbed, visceral interaction, and learning from

heartfelt moments must be applied to London's broader human condition to evoke Dickens's idea of improvement.

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