

Great Expectations and Victorian Gender: Rethinking the Nurturing Mother

1. Previously we have talked about Pip's orphanhood and thus his search for a father.

- a. If the father is the author of one's destiny - class standing and inheritance - mother is the author of one's emotional life.
- b. This stereotype persists into our own era in spite of major changes in gender roles.
- c. Notion that male is responsible for providing/public-sphere work and female is responsible for nurturing/private-sphere work.

2. Alienation of male labor in Victorian Britain begets gender ideology

- a. Male alienated labor - competitive, aggressive, acquisitive, self-gratifying public sphere - arises, according to Marx, when workers fail to control the means of production, and become cogs manipulated by a larger system.
- b. Female (domestic sphere) labor is opposite - noncompetitive, nonaggressive, nonmaterial and above all self-denying - mediates male labor/public sphere.
 - i. I.e.: the woman softens and domesticates the savage man; performs emotional, rather than physical, labor.
- c. This pattern typical of Dickens's novels until 1858 - female characters are selfless homebodies who domesticate men (Dora, Agnes, Esther, etc.).

3. Great Expectations deviates from this ideology - and from Dickens's earlier acceptance of the ideology in his first fictionalized autobiography, *David Copperfield*.

- a. Conditions in Dickens's life: his compartmentalized attitudes about women revealed
 - i. Divorce/separation from the slow, unintellectual Catherine, mother of his children, in 1858; acrimoniously he refuses ever to see her again and forbids the children from associating with some members of her family
 - ii. Meanwhile, Catherine's sister Georgina Hogarth acts as Dickens's housekeeper and nanny, raising the children and managing the household. Rumors arise in London about the possibility of their sexual involvement, but in truth this was unlikely.
 - iii. Dickens begins affair with 18-year-old actress Ellen Ternan in 1858; probably sexual; probably resulted in a miscarriage; was probably an unhappy relationship for Dickens, who was the pursuer in the relationship
 - iv. Pattern: Dickens compartmentalizes his relationships with women, reserving one woman for sex and romance, one for childbearing, and another for housekeeping and child-rearing.

- b. In fact, Dickens successfully shows that the women in the novel are alienated from their tasks - have become parts of laborers, assembling children, and are angry and despondent over losing traditional control over their “product,” children.

4. The “mothers” of Great Expectations are as complex - and inadequate - as the “fathers.”

- a. Pip is motherless and therefore seeks a mother just as he has sought fathers.
- b. But the women of GE - Mrs. Joe, Estella, Miss Havisham, Molly, Mrs. Pocket - are anything but nurturing; in fact, they are alienated sadists bent on gaining revenge on a male world that has wronged them.
- c. The one exception is Biddy, who nurtures the family physically and intellectually.
 - i. Yet Biddy also baffles Pip’s desire to see her as nurturing refuge by being
 - (1) lower-class
 - (2) catechizing Pip for rejecting Joe and pursuing Estella

“If you want to become a gentleman [to spite Estella] I should think that would be better and more independently done by caring nothing for her words. And if it is to gain her over, I should think she was not worth gaining over.”

 - (3) by marrying Joe instead of Pip at the conclusion of the novel - when Pip thinks he is going to be rewarded for reforming, he is wrong.

5. Estella an orphan - like many of Dickens’s orphaned female protagonists - and lacks a nurturing mother; instead she has a destroying mother.

- a. Miss Havisham successfully raises Estella to be what Herbert calls “a Tartar,” a ruthless warrior who successfully fails to be attached to anyone.

“Mother by adoption, I have said that I owe everything to you. All I possess is freely yours. All that you have given me is at your command to have again. Beyond that, I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities.
- b. Estella, groomed to be “the absent center of the Victorian male’s affections” - the beautiful object - incites responses in others without feeling anything herself. She is a love machine, alienated from the means of production and from the product of her labor. She is the object that represents Pip’s evanescent “expectations.” He says:

“Truly it was impossible to dissociate [Estella’s] presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood - from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe.”

6. Mrs. Joe hates Pip to the point of wishing he had never been born.

- a. physically and emotionally starves Pip - even the food is full of pins
- b. resents being cast as a mother and has no children of her own
- c. raising “by hand” means literally bottle-feeding, rather than raising a child with a wet

nurse - thus the mother is not the nurturing breast, but a hard bottle

7. **Miss Havisham appears motherly - adopting Pip - but in fact tortures him**
 - a. falsely aims to convince Pip that she is the author of his expectations
 - b. uses him as training material for Estella's lessons
 - c. orders him to "play" and confuses him by setting up expectations, then paying his apprenticeship fee, sending him back to obscurity

8. **Provision - nourishment - the unselfish giving to others that lies outside the capitalist world of production - is the contested metaphor in a world without mothers.**
 - a. Eating becomes a metaphor of selflessness or selfishness
 - i. Pip gives food to Magwitch not once but twice
 - ii. Wemmick feeds the Aged P as well as Pip
 - iii. Jaggers feeds the young men - and watches them
 - iv. Miss Havisham does not allow herself to eat, and watches cake decay

 - b. Cannibalism becomes metaphor for preying on others
 - i. Magwitch inspects Pip's fat cheeks and threatens to eat him
 - ii. Pumblechook and Wopsle and compare Pip to a "swine" - ingredient in the pork pie he has stolen for Magwitch
 - iii. Miss Havisham "feasts" on Estella "as though she were devouring this beautiful creature she had reared"
 - iv. Havisham's cousins wait for her to die so they can "feast" on her remains - she is already devouring herself
 - v. When Orlick tries to murder Pip, Pip notices "he slowly unclenched his hand and drew it across his mouth as if his mouth watered for me."

9. **Dickens has difficulty concluding the novel because the world he has created reflects a world in which parents no longer raise children.**
 - a. Joe is more like a mother than any other character.
 - b. Pip finds himself having to forgive most of his metaphorical parents - and himself - for the botch they have made of his childhood.
 - c. His own future as a parent is dead; he is celibate, doomed to watch others reproduce, and not a successful capitalist, either.