

Great Expectations: Reasons for Its Popularity

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Introduction: *Great Expectations* may be Dickens's most popular novel. On the surface, this is rather surprising, since it was written during the period when, according to conservative critics, Dickens was flagging in his old exuberance. Whether or not these critics are right, it is a fact that later novels like *Little Dorrit* were less popular than many of the earlier, lighter novels. Yet *Great Expectations* can probably hold its own in popularity with anything Dickens wrote. In this paper, I would like to suggest four reasons why the novel is so popular. Each suggested reason will allotted its own section. Section 1 deals with the size of the novel; Section 2, with the absence of the "Victorian angels"; Section 3, with the novel's appeal to both "schools" of Dickensian criticism (to simplify a critical commonplace); and Section 4, with the artistic quality of the novel.

1. The unusually convenient size: The first point, though important, can be made briefly. At least since the twentieth century, older novels may owe their survival to the university classes that have promoted them. *Great Expectations* is often chosen to represent the novels of Dickens because of its size. The second most recent Penguin edition (the text used in this paper) is 493 pages,⁽¹⁾ which is about 300 pages shorter than any other Dickens masterpiece except *Hard Times*.

Oliver Twist, decidedly not one of the masterpieces, is shorter,

which partly explains its popularity. The only Dickens novel that is truly short—280 pages in one typical edition⁽²⁾—is *Hard Times*. As Edgar Johnson informs us (406), Dickens broke his long-time practice of writing in monthly installments and turned out an installment of *Hard Times* each week. The week-month ratio almost carries over to the length ratio, when comparing *Hard Times* with novels like *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.

There is no reason to assume that English literature as a native-language study will survive much longer in the twenty-first century. Certainly in the United States the trend is unpromising.⁽³⁾ But novel classes in the twentieth century, at least, were faced with the constant question of how much reading the students could be assigned. The British system has traditionally glossed over this problem by adhering to a more general approach, in which an author's works are discussed as a group rather than one-by-one; but in the traditional American system—which focuses on credits gained in each class and inevitably requires that all reading for a class be done by the end of the term—smaller novels are more convenient. *Great Expectations* is a compromise between *Hard Times*, which is small but atypical, and the long novels. It is long enough to allow Dickens to be Dickens without imposing a 900-page reading assignment on students.⁽⁴⁾

2. The absence of stereotyped Dickensian women: In *Great Expectations* there is no Dickensian angel to incite critical scorn. Anyone who has reviewed the criticism of Dickens's novels knows that a sort of club of critics, traditional and modern, begins with the premise that the "legless Victorian angel" is a blemish on Dickens's novels.⁽⁵⁾

While I disagree strongly with this view of Dickens's patented "angels," there can be no denying that their portraits have had a

negative effect on the reputation of many of Dickens's greatest novels. There is the "problem" of Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield*; the double problem of the Mary Graham and Ruth Pinch in *Martin Chuzzlewit*; the larger problem, because her role is so prominent, of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*; for some, surely, the problem of Lizzy Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend* (assuming Bella Wilfer to be saved by her early spitefulness); and of course the great problem of Amy Dorrit, in *Little Dorrit*—great because Amy is the eponymous heroine: she is "little Dorrit," and the novel can't be much of a success if she is a failure.

In *Great Expectations*, the only conceivable angel is Biddy, but she is treated in a fairly realistic vein. Besides, she appears too infrequently to spoil the novel for angel-haters,⁽⁶⁾ and she ends by marrying Joe the blacksmith. She neither desires to be a gentlewoman (except in the spiritual sense, in which, as Philip Hobsbaum observes, Joe is "the true gentleman" in the novel [236]⁽⁷⁾) nor ends as one.

The main woman in the story is Estella, and she is anything but an angel. When Pip first meets Estella at Miss Havisham's house, she displays a precocious gift for contempt. Without much effort she manages to convey the message that she despises not just Pip but Pip's only friend and faithful protector, the innocent blacksmith Joe Gargery, husband to Pip's bully of a sister. This is an attack on Pip's weakest rampart, his social pride: he becomes ashamed of Joe, who has been nothing but kind to him.

Part of Joe's goodness is a profound modesty that makes him especially vulnerable when in the company of people he considers gentry. His Sunday suit looks cheap and ill-fitting; he falls into hilarious fits of shyness; and his responses to the simplest questions are surreal-

istic.⁽⁸⁾ The older Pip who narrates the story understands and respects this as an odd manifestation of Joe's goodness; but the young Pip is a slave to his pride, and it has the regrettable effect of making him ashamed of Joe. The fault lies within Pip, to be sure, but Estella brings it to life, which is enough to exonerate her of the charge of being an angel. No one complains about Dickens's Victorian devils.

It transpires that practically from the cradle Estella has been taught to treat all males with contempt, and Pip is the perfect target: he is bewitched by her, and he visits the Havisham house on a regular basis. Until her adolescence, the only boys Estella seems to meet are Herbert Pocket (Pip's best friend in later life) and Pip; and Herbert isn't the slightest bit interested in her. So Pip is a well-focused target, and really the chosen victim of Miss Havisham's scheme to revenge herself through Estella on men.⁽⁹⁾ Pip comes to view Estella as a disastrous habit that he can't begin to break. As the novel develops, and after Pip has suffered through the rites of passage into the gentry, he learns the truth about Estella's parentage (a secret that he will go to his grave without divulging to her): she is the product of an illegitimate affair between Pip's own benefactor, the transported convict Magwitch,⁽¹⁰⁾ and an insane murderess.⁽¹¹⁾ Estella's heritage is no more angelic than her personality. But Pip learns this at the peek of his own spiritual development, when he has freed himself from the last shreds of snobbery, and he continues to love Estella as much as ever. The only criticism leveled against Estella is that the happy ending may have compromised her character to some extent.⁽¹²⁾

3. The appeal of the novel to various critics: Critically,⁽¹³⁾ *Great Expectations* enjoys the best of both worlds by being late and yet not

one of the reform novels. These novels include my personal favorite *Bleak House*, as well as the rather unpopular novella *Hard Times* and the dour but wonderful *Little Dorrit*. To traditional critics, these reform novels are objectionable on the grounds that they are essentially unDickensian. However unfair this view is, it is assumed to have a point by, arguably, the most even-handed of all twentieth-century critics, George Orwell. And yet even G. K. Chesterton—a very conservative critic, since he argues for the supremacy not simply of Dickens's early novels but of the earliest of all, *Pickwick Papers*—admits that these later novels have something new to offer. While not entirely approving of the serious note (the note of "realism") in *Bleak House*, Chesterton admits that the novel is an advance in its plausibility and unity on all the earlier novels and that this is, in a sense, an admirable thing (cf. 200-201).

Great Expectations satisfies both sides of this divide. It has the maturity of construction that Chesterton respects in *Bleak House* while remaining free of the overt reformist tendencies of the novels mentioned.

I choose Chesterton to illustrate this point because he is such a brilliant spokesman for the conservative view of Dickens novels—a view that tends to approve of the earlier novels for their vivacity and characterization and to find later novels such as *Little Dorrit* too dark and confining in their development of specific reformist ideas to suit Dickens's genius.⁽¹⁵⁾ One might expect critical consensus to have moved on from that point of view to a more modern one. To take the only figure more popular than Dickens, Shakespearean criticism has long since discarded Samuel Johnson's view that (despite their admitted greatness) Shakespeare's plays suffer from a lack of didactic

(or stated) morality. In truth, however, there is no consensus about Dickens in modern criticism. There are champions of the later novels, but there are also a host of critics who are closer in their appreciation of Dickens to Chesterton than, say, to the followers of F. R. Leavis.⁽¹⁶⁾ American critics are an especially eclectic group.

The point is that neither the conservative critics' preference for Dickens's earlier style nor some later critics' preference for reform-centered novels like *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* precludes an admiration for *Great Expectations* because this novel combines the exuberance of the earlier novels with the greater unity of the later ones. It tends to please both schools. Thus a full 68 pages of the Leavises' *Dickens the Novelist* are devoted to *Great Expectations*. However solemnly the Leavises present themselves,⁽¹⁷⁾ and despite the oblivious conceit that I can't help inferring in their dismissal of most of the world's critics (including Chesterton), they are at least as positive about *Great Expectations* as the conservatives.

4. The high caliber of the writing: *Great Expectations* is in the best tradition of Dickens's "old style," with each character exhibiting certain eccentricities, but in a fine and muted manner. Even my favorite Dickens novel *Bleak House* seems rather contrived if we compare the way these eccentricities—which can be found everywhere in Dickens—are portrayed. When we think of Matthew Bagnet and his wife, for instance, what we will probably remember is that Matthew speaks in clipped sentences (usually but not always cut in half) and he always ends by praising his wife, whom he calls "the old girl." After each encomium, he explains to any available listener that he never tells his wife how much he admires her because, "Discipline must be maintained." For instance, he says this on two successive pages (407 and

408). No matter how charmed we may be by the Bagnet character, after we come across this for the third or fourth time, we become overly aware that it is a literary contrivance (and a rather mechanical one, we are likely to feel). At the very least, it mars our suspension of disbelief.⁽¹⁸⁾

There is nothing contrived to the same extent in *Great Expectations*. Let us take as a fair example the repetitions of Wemmick, Jaggers's clerk and (privately, across the mote in his tiny castle) Pip's good friend. Wemmick is a character similar socially and spiritually to Bagnet, and he has his own eccentric phrases. Yet his constant expression of faith in "portable property," which must be repeated as often as Bagnet's comment on discipline, always seems apposite to the occasion. We are aware that this is a Dickensian eccentricity, but I doubt if anyone is distracted by its artificiality. Each situation calls for Wemmick's honest advice, and the maintenance of portable property is his deepest wisdom.

In fact, Wemmick's final resort to this formula may lure the reader into regretful agreement, or at least ambivalence. Pip has forfeited all the wealth that Magwitch intended for him and allowed it to be claimed by the Crown. On the one hand, it is clear that Pip can't possibly take the proper steps to recover Magwitch's fortune without sacrificing his concentration on essential things (such as ministering to the dying Magwitch); and his matured and tested sense of values makes such a selfish lapse impossible. Even so, who doesn't respond to the words of Wemmick's lament?

"Thank you, thank you very much. It's a bad job," said Wemmick, scratching his head, "and I assure you I haven't been so cut up for a long time. What I look at, is the sacrifice

of so much portable property. Dear me!" (461)

This is a very fine stroke. Wemmick may be chorus to our own feelings. Magwitch earned the money for Pip, after all—why shouldn't it go to him? But this only gives us a keener feeling for how far, spiritually, Pip has come. He has surpassed the good Wemmick, and perhaps he has surpassed the reader as well. So at least in this example from *Great Expectations*, what could be a flaw becomes a virtue.

Besides this, the novel has a verbal plausibility that seems to me unsurpassed in Dickens's oeuvre. A very sure sense of the different stations in life is registered in the way people talk. Herbert Pocket is urbanity itself in tutoring Pip in table manners:

"Let me introduce the topic, Handel [this is Herbert's nickname for Pip], by mentioning that in London it is not the custom to put the knife in the mouth—for fear of accidents—and that while the fork is reserved for that use, it is not put further in than necessary. It is scarcely worth mentioning, only it's as well to do as other people do. Also, the spoon is not generally used over-hand, but under" (461)

Pip has asked Herbert to instruct him in table manners and other fine points of gentlemanly conduct that village life as a blacksmith's apprentice hasn't prepared him for. Herbert obliges, and in a very agreeable way. The above example is typical. Herbert's correction is kind, urbane, and mildly humorous. In the traditional sense, he is the perfect gentleman, despite starting out with no money and being at least financially obliged to Pip for the rest of his life.⁽¹⁹⁾

Herbert has the predictability of caricature. He has his simple love affair, his quite unfounded optimism that (as Mr. Macawber would put it) something will turn up, and his total unconsciousness that

when something does, in fact, turn up, it is because of Pip's benevolent intervention. Yet Herbert doesn't impress us as a caricature. His portrait is too finely drawn, perhaps because his distinguishing characteristic (the focus of the potential caricature) is his innate refinement.⁽²⁰⁾

On the opposite end of the social scale is Magwitch, the born criminal. Magwitch never talks like anything but what he is, yet he always conveys a sense of his basic dignity. He is a much better man than British society—given his terrible luck in parents—has allowed him to be. The story of his life that he tells Pip and Herbert begs comparison with Pip's autobiography (which is the novel itself). Line for line, it is of the same quality. Magwitch is honest and concise. Of course he uses the vernacular, since that is what he knows. Even when he quotes the speech of educated people, he cannot be counted on to preserve the original register. Appropriately, since Magwitch is preoccupied with Compeyson in his hatred of him, and has known him for a long time, he does employ that villain's educated register in quoting him. There is some parody in his repetition of Compeyson's pompous phrases. But when he quotes Arthur (brother of Miss Havisham and certainly educated), he mixes in his own dialect:

“Sally, she really is upstairs alonger me, now, and I can't get rid of her. She's all in white,' he says, 'wi' white flowers in her hair, and she's awful mad, and she's got a shroud hanging over her arm, and she says she'll put it on me at five in the morning.” (363)

This is mostly Arthur, to be sure, but what of *alonger* and *wi'* (the contracted *with*)? Surely these are Magwitch's own dialect. Arthur's

delirium tremens ("the horrors" to Magwitch) inspire his ravings but would never alter his normal dialect. As for Magwitch's own voice, it has a dignity that somewhat disarms Pip and Herbert of their original revulsion. Magwitch's prelude is a fine example:

"Dear boy and Pip's comrade. I am not a going fur to tell you my life, like a song or a story-book. But to give it you short and handy, I'll put it at once into a mouthful of English. In jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail. There, you've got it. That's my life pretty much, down to such times as I got shipped off, arter Pip stood my friend."
(360)

In short, *Great Expectations* is as perfect an example as anything in Dickens of a broad range of mastered and convincing speech registers.

Finally, there is the double view that runs through the novel. Looked at as a whole, the novel tells the story of one young man's financial, social, and spiritual development. The young man gets on the right track in the second half of the novel when he begins to lay unconscious emphasis on his own spiritual development. This is manifested in Pip's growing appreciation for Magwitch as a human being and in Pip's eventual recognition that Joe and Biddy are not just the objects of his neglect but better persons than he is. Pip reaches full maturity by the end of the novel. We can't call it his "zenith," since he doesn't become perfect, and there is no reason to suppose that the rest of his life will be a plateau with no improvement. But by the end of the novel, Pip-the-protagonist is a thoroughly admirable person. What makes this novel so different from most *bildungsromans* (novels about developing youths) is that we can see the developed Pip from the beginning.

While he has much in common with Dickens, the narrator is not Dickens but the mature Pip. And we can feel the distinction between Pip-the-narrator and the struggling young Pip in some of the comments the former makes about the latter in the course of his narration. To take only one example, there is the scene referred to earlier, in which Biddy mildly (but indignantly) scolds Pip for talking so condescendingly about Joe—as if Joe needs a further education before he is a suitable companion for the newly-made Pip. Pip is quite insufferable in the way he mocks Biddy's suggestion that Joe might be too "proud" to step into a sphere in which he would look out of place. But at the same time, he feels guilty for talking to Biddy this way. Unfortunately, and predictably, he takes a high moral tone and lectures Biddy, as if she were the pompous one:

"Now, Biddy," said I, "I am very sorry to see this in you. I did not expect to see this in you. You are envious, Biddy, and grudging. You are dissatisfied on account of my rise in fortune, and you can't help showing it."

"If you have the heart to think so," returned Biddy, "say so. Say so over and over again, if you have the heart to think so." After a little more of this, with all the fledgling Pip's stilted repetitions and rhetoric (note the five awkward repetitions of "you" in the passage above), Pip-the-narrator resorts to summary, and we get an excellent glimpse of what this pompous young snob will become:

I again warmly repeated that it was a bad side of human nature (in which sentiment, waiving its application, I have since seen reason to think I was right), and I walked down the little path away from Biddy, and Biddy went into the house, and I went out at the garden gate and took a dejected stroll until

supper-time; again feeling it very sorrowful and strange that this, the second night of my bright fortunes, should be as lonely and unsatisfactory as the first.

But, morning once more brightened my view, and I extended my clemency to Biddy, and we dropped the subject. (176, as above)

Though I ended the quote with the word “subject,” the narrator continues to describe the morning scene. This is worth mentioning because it suggests the maturity of Pip-the-narrator, who is not interested in highlighting his own little jokes. What the narrator shows himself to be in this passage is a man of humor and irony, but also of tolerance. He is aware that his younger self’s talk of “the bad side of human nature” applies to Pip and not to the accused Biddy, whose only fault is being right in her defense of Joe—right in *fact* but also right in *sentiment*: she would never patronize Joe even if he weren’t “proud,” which he is. The joke in parenthesis is deadly in its succinctness (especially the phrase “waiving its application,” which means pretending we don’t notice how the “human nature” comment is applied to the wrong person), as is the comment about Pip’s “clemency to Biddy” the next morning. Yet there is also compassion for the young man in his confusion and loneliness. We are treated to the workings of the mind and heart whose development it is the business of the novel to chronicle.⁽²¹⁾ This is a rare accomplishment, and it surely helps to explain and justify the novel’s popularity.

Notes

- (1) The later and much larger Penguin edition has the disadvantage of no notes at all. (See Works Cited.) How Penguin would regard this as an improvement is a mystery to me.
- (2) This is the Random House edition listed in the Works Cited section.
- (3) Degrees in English literature are still given in the United States. Graduate schools still grant M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s, though a *Princeton Review*-type primer on graduate schools frankly advises students to avoid the major because teaching positions are so hard to obtain. But on the undergraduate level, English literature is a disappearing major. In general, it involves too much reading in a culture that is undergoing a transition away from reading—which means in plain English, a culture that is becoming less and less literate. The trend away from really demanding reading assignments took root, I believe, with the enshrinement of student evaluations. Granting that there are noble holdouts, especially in the elite universities, American college teachers are much more lenient than they were a generation ago because their jobs and peace of mind depend, to some extent, on their popularity.
- (4) The 900 pages I refer to—more accurately, 800 to 900 pages—is in fairly small print and is well over a thousand pages in Japanese translation. Perhaps this is because of the Japanese genius for marketing. These novels, translated into Japanese, are divided into more than one volume and usually more than two. That is a significant commercial advantage for the vendor.

- (5) The phrase was coined by George Orwell (35). It has been cited approvingly by many other critics.
- (6) In my own opinion, there is nothing wrong with Bidley's portrait. Her fundamental goodness seems both plausible and unobtrusive, especially in the context of Pip's bullying sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery (aka "Mrs. Joe"), and her adopted "uncle," Mr. Pumblechook, who is actually Joe's uncle; but Joe is little Pip's protector, and Pumblechook is the cheerleader of Mrs. Joe's policy of "bringing [Pip] up by the hand" — which is to say, of physical and psychological abuse. Pumblechook is always admonishing Pip to thank Mrs. Joe for her cruelty: "Especially," said Mr. Pumblechook, "be grateful, boy, to them which brought you up by the hand" (57).

In this context, a decent woman incapable of cruelty is no more than a balanced proposition, and Bidley's portrayal is very plausible. Though never cruel, Bidley is quite willing to reprimand Pip when he shows ingratitude to Joe, but always with a refinement of approach worthy of the woman who will eventually be Joe's wife. For instance, when the young Pip talks loftily of developing Joe's manners so that he will be ready to enter a "higher sphere," Bidley asks Pip if it ever occurred to him that Joe knows his limitations and is "too proud" to want to enter this sphere. When Pip, in his conceit, laughs at this, Bidley continues, "He may be too proud to let any one take him out of a place that he is competent to fill, and fills well and with respect. To tell you the truth, I think he is: though it sounds bold in me to say so, for you must know him far better than I do" (176). As so often, Pip expresses sadness to see Bidley so jealous of his

success, a recurring irony sometimes lamented by the older Pip who narrates the story. But the point is that variations on this scene become a motif in the early part of the novel—after Pip has been presented with his “great expectations” and before he has learned the proper value of things and people; so Biddy does, in her quiet way, speak up consistently. She does not allow Pip to look down on Joe; and this shows an unangelic spunk that is sure to go down better than the submissiveness of Agnes and Ruth with critics of Dickensian angels.

- (7) Malcolm Andrews observes the similarity between Joe and another closet gentleman, Tom Pinch: “Joe's sensitivity towards and respect for women links him with the otherwise very different figure of Tom Pinch” (95). This must be accurate. Dickens shows great respect for the truly humble and decent, especially if they are most liked by the discriminating.
- (8) Here is sample of Joe's interview with Miss Havisham. To the old lady's credit, the narrator Pip tells us that she understood well enough what kind of person Joe was from his answers and general demeanor, and this isn't ironic: she understood him to be a good and unselfish man. But the interview itself (except to the young Pip, of course) is hilarious. Joe never once answers Miss Havisham directly. He only addresses Pip:

“You are the husband...of the sister of this boy?”

It was aggravating; but, throughout the interview Joe persisted in addressing Me instead of Miss Havisham.

“Which I meantersay, Pip,” Joe now observed in a manner that was at once expressive of forcible argumentation, strict confidence, and great politeness, “as I hup and married your

sister, and I were at the time what you might call (if you was anyways inclined) a single man.”

“Well!” said Miss Havisham. “And you have reared the boy, with the intention of taking him for your apprentice; is that so, Mr. Gargery?”

“You know, Pip,” replied Joe, “as you and me were ever friends, and it were looked for’ard to betwixt us, as being calc’lated to lead to larks. Not but what, Pip, if you had ever made objections to the business—such as its being open to black and sut, or such-like—not but what they would have been attended to, don’t you see?” (128)

Aside for the insane hilarity of this habit of Joe’s, and the aggravating effect it is having on Pip, in his new mode of feeling ashamed of Joe, the passage makes Joe all the more likeable to us. He is fair-minded to an extent that would be implausible in a less inspired novel. We see here, for instance, that Joe is quite sensitive to Pip’s secret objections to the blacksmith trade, and that he can be absolutely relied on not to stand in Pip’s way (despite the legal “indentures”) if he decides to try some other career.

- (9) Miss Havisham is an iconic figure in Dickens lore. People who have never read a page of Dickens may have seen images of the old lady who was jilted on her wedding day years ago. She still wears bridal white, keeps the clocks set to the hour of her betrayal at the hands of an absent bridegroom, and retains the wedding cake made for the never-to-be wedding reception. (The cake is a bivouac for rats and spiders.)

As Pip later learns, a man named Compeyson—whom Pip, as

a child, first saw on the marshes in convict's leg irons, and who plays out his role in life as Magwitch's mortal enemy—was that absent bridegroom. Miss Havisham adopted Estella with the specific purpose of training the girl to break the hearts of men the way hers had been broken by Compeyson. Being the only plausible young male in the village, Pip became the object of Miss Havisham's lesson, which was all too successful: Estella inspired passion and love without feeling any herself. Not surprisingly, this turns out badly for Miss Havisham. Estella has learned her lesson so thoroughly that she can love neither Pip nor Miss Havisham. The old lady then sees that she has sinned against life: she has been as cruel to Pip (a faithful and innocent lover) as Compeyson was to her.

- (10) Transportation here means being sent to Australia as an alternative to going back to prison or to the gallows. After a life of crime and imprisonment, Magwitch is captured on the marshes near the young child Pip's house. He terrifies Pip into bringing him food, which Pip does efficiently and generously. Thus when, we later learn, Magwitch does amazingly well in Australia, he becomes Pip's anonymous benefactor. His problem is that he can't be satisfied to remain in Australia; he insists on seeing how Pip looks and acts in his daily life and comes to England—an act defying the terms of his transportation and making Magwitch a victim of Compeyson's malicious scrutiny and liable to the death penalty if and when caught.
- (11) Pip learns this from his own and Magwitch's intimidating lawyer Jaggers. The woman is Jaggers's servant. It was Jaggers who successfully secured the woman's acquittal, against all odds

and in spite of the facts of the case. When Jaggers realized that the mother intended to murder her child too, he took the child (Estella) and gave her to Mrs. Havisham.

- (12) The best discussion of this question that I have seen—the question of whether the happier ending urged by the novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton was a mistake on Dickens's part—is Angus Calder's in Appendix A of the older *Great Expectations* edition listed in Works Cited. Ultimately, it is a moot point which version is superior: the earlier one, in which Estella has remarried with a kind doctor when Pip meets her, or the later one that Dickens settled on, which holds out hope that Estella and Pip will marry in the fullness of time. I prefer the latter. It is beautifully done and plausible enough. In fact, if Estella's new ability to show concern for people is implausible, then the earlier version is suspect as well. So I think we should accept Dickens's choice for his own novel. And I do grow tired of critics like Q. D. Leavis who imply that because Bulwer Lytton was a mediocre novelist, his influence was a concession to the vulgar public. Virtually none of the critics who blink at Bulwer Lytton are even mediocre novelists. The final choice was made by Dickens himself.
- (13) In keeping with my basic theme of why *Great Expectations* is popular—not why it is great—this is a question of critical esteem and not of actual literary value. Common sense would suggest that wide critical esteem would tend to reflect real quality, but that is more than I am trying to demonstrate in this part of the paper.
- (14) Chesterton is quite poetic on the subject of *Pickwick Papers*.

While admitting that *Pickwick* "is not a novel" in the formal sense, he insists that it is something better. "To the level of 'Sketches from Boz' [Dickens] never afterwards descended. To the level of 'Pickwick Papers' it is doubtful if he ever afterwards rose" (79).

- (15) Here, for instance, is Chesterton on *Little Dorrit*: "'Little Dorrit' (published in 1857) is at once in some ways so much more subtle and in every way so much more sad than the rest of his work that it bores Dickensians and especially pleases George Gissing. It is the only one of the Dickens tales which could please Gissing, not only by its genius, but also by its atmosphere. There is something a little modern and a little sad, something also out of tune with the main trend of Dickens's moral feeling, about the character of Dorrit as actually and finally weakened by his wasting experiences, as not lifting any cry above the conquered years" (229). We may note that by "Dickensians" Chesterton means critics who essentially share his tastes. Even the subtlety of *Little Dorrit* "bores" Chesterton and his compeers.

George Gissing was the leader of the Realist movement in the novel. Chesterton tends to use him as a symbol of the realism that darkens Dickens's later work. It seems relevant to mention that Chesterton's complaint against the portrait of Mr. Dorrit, that he doesn't rise above himself at the end, reflects the negative bias against the novel in which he is portrayed. Chesterton would never expect characters like Mr. Bumble (in *Oliver Twist*) or Mr. Pecksniff (in *Martin Chuzzlewit*) to rise above themselves in the end. Yet neither of these characters is weaker or more despicable than Mr. Dorrit, who leeches off and despises his

daughter Amy while deferring to his other children, even as they also despise and leech off her. Not just “realism” but simple artistic integrity demands that Dorrit’s fate should be essentially the same as Pecksniff’s, even if it is more realistically portrayed. Why would Chesterton expect otherwise? Only, I think, because he is looking for a concrete example to illustrate his aversion to both the novel and the kind of Dickens novel that it represents.

- (16) One amusing note in mid-twentieth-century British criticism has to do with the dominance of the Cambridge don F.R. Leavis. Because of the great influence Leavis attained, many of his followers accepted on faith his claim in *The Great Tradition* that *Hard Times* was the *one* completely “adult” book in Dickens’s repertoire, and the rest were sometimes-great works limited by their basic lack of a serious appeal to adult standards. Leavis and his wife Queenie (Q. D. Leavis) revised this view (characteristically, without admitting that any reversal was involved) in a much later book entitled *Dickens the Novelist*, in which both of the Leavises treated Dickens as (perhaps) the greatest English novelist and in his later works profoundly adult. The funny part is that it is very hard to find a Leavis disciple who hasn’t made exactly the same reversal as Leavis, and without admitting that the change of opinion was Leavis-driven. The exceptions are perhaps as many as two contributors to the Cambridge-inspired Penguin survey of nineteenth-century English literature edited by Boris Ford (a former Leavis student), who hadn’t agreed with Leavis’s placement of *Hard Times* in the first place and therefore didn’t have to revise their views.

- (17) The article referred to, by the (Mrs.) Q. D. Leavis, is entitled (with the usual attempt to be annoying) "How We Must Read *Great Expectations*."
- (18) In fairness, I should add that *Bleak House*, if less perfect, has the virtues of a longer novel. Brevity is not an unalloyed virtue. If I had to choose—and fortunately we do not have to choose—I would take *Bleak House* over *Great Expectations*.
- (19) After receiving the money that gives him his great expectations, Pip meets Herbert, the son of his tutor, and they become fast friends. Since Herbert has little money, Pip often entertains him. There is no financial advantage to Herbert in this because it tempts him into living beyond his means. But Pip does one thing that works out well for both of them: without Herbert knowing it, Pip pays to have a trading company created that takes Herbert on and advances him to the head of the company, at a very good salary. This enables Herbert to marry, and the company under Herbert's energetic guidance becomes a great success. Ironically, after Pip has lost his fortune and Magwitch has died, Pip joins Herbert's company as a clerk, living with Herbert and his wife in Egypt. Eventually, Pip becomes quite well-to-do, this time by his own efforts. So his one selfless deed, during the years after receiving Magwitch's support but before learning who his benefactor is, has provided both him and Herbert with a proper gentleman's life.
- (20) Jane Vogel has some interesting speculation on the origins of Herbert's name. The main suggestion is that Herbert is "herbal," which is in keeping with his effect on Pip's soul: "Perhaps Herbert is herbal in putting soothing balm on Pip's

painful burns" (118). My own feeling is that if this wasn't in Dickens's conscious mind, he still wouldn't disown it, since it sums up the effect of Herbert's sunny nature.

- (21) Brian Cheadle is surely right in saying that "Pip proves his right to be a hero of his tale by turning repugnance into a love for the outcast [Magwitch]" (79). Cheadle goes on to suggest that "There is something pyrrhic about Pip's moral victory" (80), after his eleven-year "exile" in Egypt. Cheadle cites Mr. Pumblechook's grandstanding observation that Pip has grown thin. But this strikes me as somewhat deficient in humor. Pumblechook is a mountebank who can always be counted on to be wrong; and he is fat, which, alas, is not preferable to "thin," let alone "slim." I think it is doubtful that we are supposed to give Pumblechook's observation much weight (as it were). I see no reason to regard Pip's stay in Egypt as an "exile." Surely that is provincial. Pip has been living with his dearest friends in an exotic land, and he has become a distinct success, something he never was in England. Of course when he returns to England, Estella has lost some of her luster, but she has had time to change, and Pip would be unlikely to strike up a new relationship with her if this change hadn't been given the time to occur. Pip accepts the tradeoff of Estella's loss of youth (though not of all her beauty) for her discovery of a functioning human heart, and one that is responsive to him.

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