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Great Expectations: A Camouflaged Collaboration with Wordsworth

The Victorian era is an age branded with a conservative and prospering economic atmosphere; it created a society “where the material conditions of life indicate social position” (Abrams 1059). Not only that, but industrialization had taken its toll “after the resources of steam power had been more fully exploited” for railway systems, machinery, and ships (1043 Abrams). Consequently, London’s population had tripled towards the end of the century. It was of this age that Charles Dickens flourished as a prominent novelist. His novels can be viewed as typically Victorian in style and theme: he writes of the struggle between the modern, industrialized life versus the country life. However, the focus of this paper will circulate around his bildungsroman novel, Great Expectations and how it can be applied to Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads. The “Age of Spirit” or the Romantic Age is well-known for its fixed hierarchal political, economic, and most importantly social pyramid. Its society was one where the bourgeoisie/ aristocracy have extreme power, and the working class has none. However, it is due to the extreme poverty of the poor that the Romantic poets set an extraordinarily high estimate “on human potentialities and powers”, and associated immorality with the nobility (Abrams 7). After the French Revolution, the Romantics believed that the power of will and determination could change people. Hence, Wordsworth seems almost idealistic at times throughout his Preface, as he believed that nature and “powerful emotion” are the key elements to

good writing and change. Despite the obvious differences between the two eras, particularly the critical development of literature, one can see how Dickens wrote in Wordsworth's shadow. However, this does not imply that Great Expectations strictly abides to the Preface; it rather shows that Dickens involuntarily followed some of Wordsworth's philosophies in the process of writing his novel. Therefore, through the analysis of relevant characters and incidents in the plot of the novel I shall attempt to strengthen my argument.

Pip, the protagonist and the narrator of Great Expectations presents his physical, emotional, and intellectual growth throughout the novel. Hence, this novel generates into what was mentioned earlier, a bildungsroman. Initially, Dickens wrote the novel with the intention of it being a biographical story of his life. Dickens' personalized writing advocates his Romantic predecessor in style, as Wordsworth powerfully preaches individualized and personal writing. The sentiments which inspire his poetry are personal, as they are "recollected in tranquility", thus, according to him no other factors influence his writings but those that have inspired him in the first place and himself. For example, let's take the title of one of his poems "My heart leaps up": it immediately suggests the personalized essence of the poem. Throughout the poem, Wordsworth speaks of nothing but the power of "natural piety", the divinity of the child ("The Child is father of the Man"), the beauty of ordinary things, and their impression on him. His poem has been defined by critics as being "pragmatically private, domestic and autobiographical" (Baron 55). Similarly, Dickens' novel mirrors his life events; his father was a kind man but was imprisoned because he was in debt, just like Pip was nearly imprisoned later on in his life for the same reason. This forces Dickens to look down on the law, and London's justice system. Hence, his inner battle with the law helped form his most

complex convict character, Magwitch. At the beginning of the novel, we have this horrifying image of Magwitch as a “fearful man... who limped, glared and growled” that traumatizes Pip immensely. However, as the events in the novel escalate he is viewed as good man with high morals; the laws of property cannot bind those deprived of food and shelter, which Magwitch was a victim of. This discovery forces the reader along with Pip, to re-evaluate what is conceived by justice: is the institutional justice system a correct evaluation for immorality? According to Dickens and Wordsworth, it is not, for one must look beyond the superficiality of the law and judge righteousness, or evilness through the inner morals of the individual. Hence, the correct kind of justice roots from the inner self and not the external world. In fact this aids Wordsworth’s theory upon the formation of characters; characters have elements that belong to “nature” rather than “manners (Wordsworth 651).

Additionally, during his childhood Pip lives in the country, works as a blacksmith, considers himself too good for his rural environment (“I continued at heart to hate my trade and to be ashamed of home”) and experiences financial success in London as a young man, exactly as Dickens himself did which emphasizes the narrative’s personal essence (Dickens 100). Similarly, to Wordsworth he “brings his feelings near to those of the persons he describes” (Wordsworth 656). Wemmick is also a complex character that relates to the writer’s life; Wemmick is a law clerk, and so was Dickens before deciding to be a journalist. Along with other Romantics of his age Wordsworth was deeply affected by the French Revolution, and hoped for one in England too. War came and the prayers for victory in the churches found him in his heart praying for defeat. Unfortunately, England escaped a revolution, leaving his faith in the world shaken. However, the Revolution humanized his soul and built him into a “poet of man” (Wordsworth 659). Therefore, one can easily see that both

writers were deeply affected and revolted by the institutional justice system of London.

Pip, also represents the innocence of the child in Wordsworth's eyes; Wordsworth believed that the child "liest in Abraham's bosom all the year... God being with thee when we know it not" (Mukherjee 399) i.e. the child is a part of divinity. Through the analysis of this sestet, we can see what Pip's childhood shares with Wordsworth's theory on children:

Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,  
 If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,  
 Thy nature is not therefore less divine:  
 Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;  
 And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,  
 God being with thee when we know it not.

While the poet is bewildered by the glorious scene of nature around him, his daughter scampers about "untouched by solemn thought". However, the dearth of solemnity in the child does not suggest that her nature is less divine. Not only is her soul endowed with pureness, but it is also a part of God. All year round the child lies in "Abraham's bosom", the "blissful place where the departed souls of the blessed people find rest" (Mukherjee 340). Hence, the child's spirit is naturally reverent to Wordsworth. Although Dickens does not discuss it as deeply as Wordsworth, Pip is viewed as an innocent and pure child of nature. His kindness is portrayed when he sympathizes with the gruesome convict, Magwitch. Also, his innocence glows as he discusses the injuries Mrs. Joe had inflicted upon him, both physically and emotionally. For example, he claims that the "child is small, and its world is small" so any "injustice" executed is deeply wounding to him/her (Dickens 54). Moreover, Pip

is a “young offender”, for his birth is seen as a crime to society, religion, and morality (Morris 111). It is almost like he is cursed to live a low life because he is born poor. Through the knowledge of his doomed background, Pip loses most of his innocence. Initially, he does not understand why Estella demeans him by referring to him as “boy”, or “common”, but shortly he understands why and the truth is bitter: he is at the bottom of the social ladder, and too impoverished for the industrialized classes; he has it burnt into his memory that poverty is contemptible so that before long the desire for wealth becomes an “organic conviction” (Morris 105). Similarly Wordsworth’s, “We Are Seven” carries the notion of original sin, and as Wordsworth says in his Preface, displays the “strength of the fraternal”; the children are condemned to suffer by society for their social/economic background. The “little Maiden’s” innocence does not let her see the world from the eyes of an adult, which makes the truth harsher to accept by the reader. Somehow, both writers enable us to feel compassion superfluously when we are forced to look at immorality from the eyes of children. Also, in Great Expectations, Satis House represents Pip’s “promise of plentitude” that takes his discontentment away, whilst to the seven year old, cottage girl it is heaven.

Miss Havisham and her decaying mansion are described eerily by Dickens, this is not just Gothic like the Romantic novelists, but it also supports Wordsworth’s theory in the application of a “colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual manner” (Leitch 650). Miss Havisham appears to be the “Witch of the place”, her room was covered with “dust and mould”, and there seemed to live a “spider community”, mice, and beetles (Dickens 69). Hence, the atmosphere of the house along with its owner is disturbing and highly imaginative. The reasons behind her insanity are however, normal; she was once a

sane woman, who got her heart-broken. One might argue that an emotional breakdown is reason enough for her decaying state, but realistically speaking, women go through it all the time. Hence, it is not a completely unusual event, but Dickens by practicing Wordsworth's initiative, twists it round and packs his character with physical and mental abnormalities. Furthermore, Dickens dares to tell us that her house "had once been handsome", but now it seems to be rotting away. The scrupulous details of the once normal, gothic mansion are presented to the mind in an unusual manner which emphasizes Wordsworth's theory of making the "ordinary things" extraordinary (Wordsworth 650).

One of the main themes of Great Expectations is the preaching of good morals, and inner goodness; Conscience is of greater value than social advancement which dominates the spirit of the Preface. Hence, once again Dickens manages to subconsciously write under Wordsworth's silhouette. Wordsworth believes that humanity seems to be decaying due to the rapid rise of the city, so a poet is needed to tone down the city excitement. Also, he chose the "low and rustic" life partially because the sentiments of the "common man" are more humane and pure (Wordsworth 650). Pip escapes this life, only to discover his moral lesson and goes back to his moral rural life. Following his tracks on this journey of self-discovery forms the plot of the story, and allows the reader to understand the moral message delivered by Dickens. The presence of Joe and Biddy in the novel emphasize the need for moral integrity, as they are the two characters that are "in charity and love with all humanity" (Dickens 354). This leads to a crucial point: Wordsworth deeply underlines the need for a "worthy purpose" in the Preface which is fulfilled by Dickens. The moral message which underlies the events of his novel proves that his work carries a purpose. Moreover, in alignment with his Romantic predecessor,

Dickens displayed a hostile image of London which shows his aversion to the industrialized city. As people move to the cities, they lose elemental passions and become more inhumane in order to adapt to their modern environment. Wordsworth further emphasizes his point through his poem, "London, 1802"; he calls out for Milton to help awaken the modernized city's "cheerful godliness", and to bestow upon them what is lost of "manners, virtue, freedom, power" (Wordsworth 297). The modernized inhabitants of London that Pip encounters (except Herbert) are corrupted to a certain extent; they are not as humane as Joe and Biddy, who have been created by nature.

Furthermore, Joe and Biddy are glorified for being ordinary and "common". In fact, Dickens satisfies his readers when they get married towards the end of the novel, for it is as Pip puts it: Biddy got the "best husband in the whole world", and Joe got the "best wife in the whole world" (Dickens 354). Thus, they prove Wordsworth's theory of the righteousness of the "low and rustic"/natural life correct. Their lifestyle and language are exceptionally Romantic: their lifestyle depends entirely upon nature and is led by instinctive passion, whilst their language is a "plainer and more emphatic" one (Wordsworth 650). Hence, their lives are typically Wordsworthian as they do not abide by the rules of society, for they are prompted by passion not reason. Their only source of education is their natural environment which makes them appear saint-like in the eyes of the reader. By bringing forward a variety of characters and settings Dickens "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society" as Wordsworth preaches in the Preface (Wordsworth 658). The novel thus constructs a "tension" between the social conditions which manipulate Pip's life (Abrams 1059).

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s the wealth of the middle class increased swiftly and this allowed them to purchase a life-style of striking lavish display (Miss Havisham) against which Dickens heavily argues. This places further emphasis upon the ghastly image portrayed to us by both writers of modernized London. As Morris states in his critical analysis of Dickens, it is a "hostile physical universe". Therefore, due to the pure beauty of nature Dickens, like the Wordsworthian poet, does not see the necessity in "elevating nature" (Wordsworth 656). Nature is described as it is, although the description is quite often detailed, no "poetic diction" is applied i.e. the language is simple and limited to the passions induced by nature, not by external factors such as grammatical form. For example, when Pip describes the "silvery mist" that was "touched by the first rays of the moonlight, and the same rays touched the tears that dropped from her eyes" its beauty does not come from the action; as noted in the Preface, "the feeling gives importance to the action and situation" and not vice versa (Dickens 357). Hence, the diction is based upon pure passion which bundles the description of nature with sentimental bliss.

In addition, the presence of two endings in the novel advocates Wordsworth's notion of selection: writing in the approved manner, depends upon "removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting" (Wordsworth 656) However, Dickens does not remove anything, he rather gives the reader the choice of which ending he/she would prefer to apply to the story. The original ending is often preferred as its graveness of tone and the brief meeting and parting of Pip and Estella in London seem more appropriate with the realism of the moral plot. It establishes poetic justice to Drummle, Estella, and Pip himself. Although Pip is not an evil character, time and opportunities have been lost for him and Estella to be together. However, the second ending has been written by Dickens to satisfy his readers, since the original ending is

seen to strip the passion from the romance between Pip and Estella throughout the novel; the novel seems to have bore a fairy-tale like story which the "Original Ending" seems to break down with its harsh realistic approach. The second ending, however, was typically Romantic and Wordsworthian as it produces an "excitement in co-existence with an over-balance of pleasure" (Wordsworth 660). Nature is described delightfully and seems to embrace the lovers' reunion. The stone-hearted Estella has been "greatly changed" as she is weakened by her emotions and actually cries. This extreme transformation aids in the fairytale-like feel of the novel since sudden change is a primary element in any fairytale. The Romantic idealistic approach to their relationship as they walk off hand in hand ("I saw the shadow of no parting from her") within nature accentuates the pleasurable feel of the ending. It also, "offers the glimpsed possibility of an oppositional vision of desire as social transformation" i.e. the union of Pip and Estella can be viewed as a union of commonness, not of gentility. Both of them are the same, only Pip becomes of better background, since she is the product of crime (Magwitch and Molly). Dickens moves the reader's sympathy towards forgiving Estella for her cruelty in a couple of pages, making her seem compatible for our hero. This Romantic approach supports Wordsworth's purpose of poetry: it illustrates how feelings are excited by nature and gives pleasure to the readers through "beautified language" and events (Wordsworth 660).

To conclude, Charles Dickens, a strictly Victorian novelist seems to be a camouflaged/sub-conscious advocate of Wordsworth's theories through his celebrated novel Great Expectations. The passions which clearly inspire the creation of the characters and the events of this work of fiction, proved to be capable of linking two eras together: the Romantic age, and the Victorian age. Not only that, but my paper advocates the universality of art, and of critical approaches towards

literature. Every critical writer's theories can be applied to several distinguished works of art, regardless of the time span between them. Wordsworth is not only an excellent critic, but he is also a more famous poet. His poetic art and critical theories have inspired me to apply his work to one of my favourite novels, Great Expectations. Both writers talk of the most influential incident in human life, love, and its power to inflict the deepest wounds and to heal the most irreparable. Dickens holds within him a tone of modest idealism delicately blended with a touch of romanticism. Hence, without notice, his novel has worked itself under the shadow of a prevailing Romantic poet.

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