

# Finding Our Fathers: Paternal Imagery as a Vehicle for Social Criticism in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

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In Dickens' *Great Expectations*, the main character is an orphan named Pip. The entire story can be cast as Pip's search for a father: someone to love him, guide him, teach him about the world and serve as a role model. Conveniently, Dickens creates a world filled with potential father figures ranging from Pip's foster father Joe, to his guardian Jaggers in addition to his teacher Matthew Pocket and Joe's uncle Pumblechook. Dickens portrays each of these men as father figures to Pip in some sense, but he does so in order to comment on his society. We will focus on Joe and Jaggers, examining what values they represent as father figures and what Dickens is trying to say through them.

Because they lived in a society marked by stark class contrasts, we will begin by comparing how Joe and Jaggers relate to "lower" men. Consider Joe's reaction to Magwitch upon hearing that the prisoner had stolen food from his house: "God knows you're welcome to it...We don't know what you have done, but we wouldn't have you starved to death for it, poor miserable fellow-creatur.-Would us, Pip?" (40). Note that Joe uses language to

establish equality in two directions. He calls the prisoner “fellow-creatur”, implying a kinship with him while at the same time bringing Pip into the fellowship by asking a rhetorical question. This passage demonstrates how willing Joe was to come down to the level of those society frowned upon. It also shows his respect for Pip, a child, and hence one of the most poorly regarded members of society. To see how unique Joe’s respect for a child like Pip was, we only need to look at the dinner scene a few pages earlier where the entire company dedicated themselves to tormenting and humiliating Pip. Pumblechook ironically claims that Pip was “enjoying himself” with his elders and betters, and “improving himself with their conversation” (27).

In contrast to Joe, Jaggers holds much the same view towards “lower” people like children and prisoners that Pumblechook and the other Christmas diners had. Upon first meeting Pip on the stairwell at Miss. Havisham’s house, without knowing anything about the boy, Jaggers exclaims “Well! Behave yourself. I have a pretty large experience of boys, and you’re a bad set of fellows. Now mind!” (83). Towards the end of the book, when describing his involvement with Molly’s child, he says “Put the case that pretty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business life he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net,—to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, bedevilled somehow” (413). These passages demonstrate that for Jaggers, children are nothing but developing criminals; he doesn’t need to know anything about Pip to know that Pip is bad. Pip is a child and that is all that matters. Jaggers hardly thought better of the accused men that he defended, having told one “That’s what I told you not to do, You thought! I think for you; that’s enough for you” (167). Unlike Joe, Jaggers emphasizes

the social distinction between himself and his social subordinates. Furthermore, he has no trouble treating people accordingly. Pip describes him as “[throwing] his supplicant off with supreme indifference” (168). It is unlikely that Jaggers would have treated Miss. Havisham in the same manner.

Having examined their relations with “lower” people, we can now consider how the two men related to the women in their lives. Both Molly and Mrs. Joe are portrayed as wild, out of control women, but Jaggers tames Molly while Joe very clearly does not tame Mrs. Joe. Despite the pain and suffering she inflicted upon him, when Mrs. Joe is sick, Joe devotes himself so completely to her care, that Pip says “the dear old fellow was sadly cut up by the constant contemplation of the wreck of his wife” (123). Dickens suggests that Jaggers is simply incapable of demonstrating such basic compassion. For example, during the dinner party where Jaggers grabs Molly’s hand to show his guests, she begs him to release her. Yet he fails to empathize with her suffering. Earlier in the story, he even forced her to give up her child as he explains to Pip, “over the mother, the legal adviser [Jaggers] had this power: I know what you did, and how you did it. You came so and so, you did such and such things to divert suspicion. I have tracked you through it all, and I tell it to you all. Part with the child” (413). It is no accident that Jagger’s expression is phrased in terms of power relationships. Throughout the book, Jaggers’ interactions with Molly are described strictly in those terms, as in this comment by Jaggers, “he kept down the old, wild, violent nature whenever he saw an inkling of its breaking out, by asserting his power over her in the old way” (414). Wemmick suggests that Jaggers keeps Molly around as a reminder of a great conquest, just like some hunters keep stuffed trophies in their home, when he tells Pip,

“you’ll see a wild beast tamed” (202). In that sense, Molly is a monument to Jaggers’ ego while Mrs. Joe is a testament to Joe’s weakness. Nevertheless, both men fight for the woman in their lives: Jaggers in court while defending Molly and Joe in the forge with Orlick.

Another axis on which we can compare Joe and Jaggers is how the other characters perceive them. Jaggers fills everyone around him with mortal fear. Pip describes seeing that fear in the first man he meets in London (the coachman that brings him to Jaggers’ office), “I don’t want to get into trouble. I know him!’ He darkly closed an eye at Mr. Jaggers’ name, and shook his head” (164). Even Wemmick, Jaggers’ fearless clerk of many years, cannot relax around him. After dining with Jaggers and Pip, Wemmick tells Pip, “I feel that I have to screw myself up when I dine with him,—and I dine more comfortably unscrewed” (392). Wemmick goes on to explain just how secure Jaggers really feels:

“He never lets a door or window be fastened at night.”

“Is he never robbed?”

“That’s it!” returned Wemmick. “He says, and gives it out publicly, ’I want to see the man who’ll rob me.’ Lord bless you, I have heard him, a hundred times, if I have heard him once, say to regular cracksmen in our front office, ’You know where I live; now, no bolt is ever drawn there; why don’t you do a stroke of business with me? Come; can’t I tempt you?’ Not a man of them, sir, would be bold enough to try it on, for love or money.” . . .

“Ah! But he would have much,” said Wemmick, cutting me short, “and they know it. He’d have their lives, and the lives of scores of ’em. He’d have all he could get. And it’s impossible to say what he couldn’t get, if he gave his mind

to it.”

(205). Dickens gives the impression that Jaggers is so terrible a force that even the most ruthless of hardened criminals quake in fear at the thought of crossing him.

In contrast, the other characters see Joe as weak. During the Christmas dinner, Pip claims that “Joe’s station and influence were something feebler (if possible) when there was company than when there was none” (26). Dickens cannot describe Joe’s strength except in the same breath as describing his weakness: “[Joe was] a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness” (8). Despite his strength, Joe is bullied continuously, especially by Mrs. Joe, but also by Pumblechook. She even calls him “the dunder-headed king of the noodles” (114) in front of Pip and Orlick. Only relatively late in the book does Dickens bother to present Joe as strong. His opportunity for doing so is the incident where Joe and Orlick fight “like two giants” (115). Pip claims that “if any man in that neighborhood could stand uplong against Joe, I never saw the man” (115).

While Joe is objectively strong, Dickens creates a world where everyone thinks Joe is weak. Conversely, Dickens provides no evidence that Jaggers is strong, but everyone is terrified of him. Dickens portrays both men as powerful but in very different ways. The root of this dichotomy underscores the different worlds Dickens represents with these characters. Jaggers has no power but the power to shape people’s perception of truth by emphasizing and hiding the words of others. His skill in using language to manipulate others’ reality derives from his ability to intimidate and bully. But the ability to manipulate truth is useless without a social structure in which force occurs at the bidding of the courts. Jaggers’ abilities only benefit him because he lives in a society where people live and die by arguments

made in court. Ironically, Joe is the one who forges the chains that shackle prisoners and the bars that hold them. Yet Joe derives no power from doing so, while those chains and bars form the foundation upon which all of Jaggers' power rests.

Thus, Jaggers is a magician; his power is the ability to change what people believe. Joe has no such power. He can't even convince people that he looks good in his Sunday suit since Pip claims "it was not for me to tell him that he looked far better in his working-dress" (99). In that sense, Jaggers and Compeyson are alike, living off their ability to make people believe in what is not really there. In the same vein, Joe is like Magwitch. Magwitch's solitary struggle in Australia, living alone among the sheep while enduring the colonists' cruelty is very similar to Joe's self-enforced punishment in living with Mrs. Joe. Both men suffer to atone for crimes not entirely their own: Joe bears Mrs. Joe's abuse as penance for his father's violence toward his mother and Magwitch bears the punishment that should have fallen to Compeyson. Joe and Magwitch share one other thing: they both had a child taken from them by Jaggers.

The common thread running through all of these examples is honesty. From Pumblechook's repeated claims that he was responsible for Pip's rise to fortune through Jaggers' twisting of words and meaning in court to Compeyson's success owing to his deceptions, Dickens portrays men succeeding or failing because of their ability or willingness to deceive. Consider how Joe understands honesty, starting from Joe's speech early in the book about lies:

This was a case of metaphysics, at least as difficult for Joe to deal with as for me. But Joe took the case altogether out of the region of metaphysics, and by

that means vanquished it.

“There’s one thing you may be sure of, Pip,” said Joe, after some rumination, “namely, that lies is lies. However they come, they didn’t ought to come, and they come from the father of lies, and work round to the same. Don’t you tell no more of ’em, Pip. That ain’t the way to get out of being common, old chap...Lookee here, Pip, at what is said to you by a true friend. Which this to you the true friend say. If you can’t get to be uncommon through going straight, you’ll never get to do it through going crooked. So don’t tell no more on ’em, Pip, and live well and die happy.”

(71). Joe could never do what Jaggers does and the reasons why have little to do with education. Joe cannot live in the morally ambiguous world Jaggers thrives in. Consider Jaggers’ protestations when Mike, his client, brings him a witness that will swear to anything: “You infernal scoundrel, how dare you tell ME that?” (169). Jaggers complains loudly, not because of the ethical breach involved, but because Mike has allowed him to know about it. Dickens does not merely use Joe and Jaggers to represent an idealized notion of honesty and deceit, but rather, to criticize the tremendous power his society gave those willing and able to deceive.