

CHARLIE'S ANGELS:

The Female Characters of *Great Expectations* in Comparison to Mary Wollstonecraft's Idea of Women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

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In the cleverly titled "Charlie's Angels," Emma Skagen reads Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* in the light of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, focusing especially on Wollstonecraft's ideas about reason and sensibility in women's education, and the "slave-despot" dichotomy. She richly analyzes a range of female characters in the novel who illustrate the dilemma of romantic (and Romantic era) women. A highlight, for me, is her analysis of Estella as at once a slave, a despot, and (as her name suggests) a star whose "troublesome journey" may "shed light on the Romantic woman's dilemma. Perhaps her story is a light that can guide the way to a better female condition."

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Female characters have a striking presence in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Although it is a Victorian novel and Dickens is a Victorian author, the story takes place in the Romantic period ("1807-10 to 1823-26" Edminson qtd in Sadrin 37). Female writers of this time period held certain beliefs

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about the female condition - the most important of those writers, perhaps, being Mary Wollstonecraft. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she describes the faults of women and what must be done to improve their condition. Wollstonecraft seeks “for women that perfection of nature which [grows] out of an ideal combination of knowledge, reason, and virtue” and believes that education is the path that will lead them there (Wardle 151). She believes that women must leave behind their habit of over-exercising sensibility and, through education, learn to use reason instead. Wollstonecraft’s ideas shed an interesting light on the female characters of *Great Expectations*: the novel’s female characters exhibit signs of sensibility and/or reason and, through certain small acts of rebellion against the female condition, Dickens shows their desire to change their fate. Since Dickens “use[s] fiction to advocate the creation of moral consciousness,” we can assume that he is trying to tell - or teach - his readers something through the lives and experiences of his female characters (Lenard 78). In addition, this subject matter is perhaps one of particular interest to Dickens, since he is known to “use the same feminized language of emotion and sentiment associated with women writers” (Lenard 77). Wollstonecraft claims

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that “it is sufficient to allow that [woman] has always been either a slave or a despot, and to remark that each of these situations equally retards the progress of reason” (Wollstonecraft 124). Thus, we shall explore Dickens’s women in light of Wollstonecraft’s spectra of reason-sensibility, education, and slave-despot, as well as through the progression of reason or the lack thereof. Additionally, we shall examine the acts of rebellion and desire for change exhibited by these characters.

Firstly, Mrs. Joe is arguably a woman of great sensibility as well as a despot whose progression of reason is hindered. One would normally associate reason with masculinity, and masculinity can be clearly seen in Mrs. Joe’s character: she is “tall and bony,” and wears a “coarse apron” with a “square impregnable bib . . . stuck full of pins and needles” (Dickens 28). However, reason is defined as “the power of the mind to think and form valid judgments by a process of logic” (“Reason,” n.1 II. 5a), whereas Mrs. Joe displays more of the negatively connoted “woman’s reason” (Wollstonecraft 242), “fact[s] stated as . . . explanation[s] of [themselves]; . . . illogical argument[s]” (“Reason,” n.1 P1. c.). She “sometimes declare[s] that [she] . . . believe[s] . . . certain things, because she . . . believe[s] them” (Wollstonecraft 242); for

example, she feels the need to wear her apron at all times, whereas Pip “really see[s] no reason why she should have worn it at all: or why, if she did wear it at all, she should not have taken it off, every day of her life” (Dickens 28). Another problem, according to Wollstonecraft’s theory, is that Mrs. Joe clearly is not a believer in education. She tells Pip, “Ask no questions, and you’ll be told no lies” (33), for “people [who] are put in the Hulks . . . always begin by asking too many questions” (34). Wollstonecraft also states that “children will never be properly educated till friendship subsists between parents,” and there is clearly no friendship between Mrs. Joe and her husband (407). Pip and Joe are “fellow-sufferers” of Mrs. Joe’s temper (Dickens 28). According to Wollstonecraft,

The management of temper, the first, and most important branch of education, requires the sober steady eye of reason; a plan of conduct equally distant from tyranny and indulgence: yet these are the extremes that people of sensibility alternately fall into; always shooting beyond the mark. (152-53)

Although she speaks here of managing the temper of a child who is being educated, one can perhaps assume that the mother or teacher’s temper is equally important. But Mrs. Joe has an unequivocally bad temper. With this temper, she is a despot and a tyrant over Joe and Pip, and

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Wollstonecraft seeks “not power for women, but freedom” (Wardle 151). Mrs. Joe is not free; she is clearly unhappy in her given roles. She is married to Joe, who is, according to her, a “staring great stuck pig” (Dickens 31). With regards to raising Pip, she says, “I’d never do it again!” (29). Despite her clearly despotic nature, she considers herself “a slave with her apron never off” (40). It is not only because of her temper that she is a despot, but also because of her methods of housekeeping: “Mrs. Joe was a very clean housekeeper, but had an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself” (41). Pip felt guilty at the beginning of the novel for robbing Mrs. Joe; he “never thought [he] was going to rob Joe, for [he] never thought of any of the housekeeping property as [Joe’s]” (32). It seems that her use of power in the home – over both her family and her property – is her way “of exerting [her] sense of control and communicating [her] rebellious impulses” (Wynne 83). Dickens wants his readers to see this rebellion; in Mrs. Joe’s case, however, although she rebels in the home, her reason does not progress. She remains despotic and over-exercises her sensibility until she is violently hit over the head by Orlick, at which point her progression of reason is hindered even more – perhaps stopped completely.

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Miss Havisham is another of *Great Expectations's* extreme female characters: counter to Mrs. Joe, she is a slave to her sensibility. Miss Havisham's sensibility has caused her to be ruined by her failed engagement. She admits, even boasts, to Pip at their first meeting that her heart is still "broken!" (Dickens 72). As a consequence of her sensitive nature, she desires to remain frozen in time for the rest of her life: "Everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago" (73) - including Miss Havisham herself. The fact that Satis House "is Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew, or all three . . . for enough," that "whoever had this house, could want nothing else" (70), suggests to the reader that Miss Havisham wants nothing else for herself. She "voluntarily relinquishes her liberty as part of her project for revenge," which she plans to exercise vicariously through Estella (Wynne 81). Miss Havisham attempts to be a despot over Estella, and even in her own life: her "stopped timepiece gives her an illusory power as the controller of a moment in time" (77). However, it is all in vain. It is plain to see that she is not in control of her life: "the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust" (Dickens 73). Her plans for Estella "to wreak . . . revenge on men" fail miserably when Dickens has Estella marry a man who treats her badly

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(283). Miss Havisham gives Estella to Bentley Drummle, “such a mean brute, such a stupid brute!” (335), and it is “the greatest slight and injury that could be done to the many far better men who admire [her], and to the few who truly love [her]” (334). Rather than ruining bad men, Estella is ruined by marrying a bad man. Her marriage to Bentley Drummle as an act of revenge upon man is like “cutting off the nose to spite the face” (Charles 42). Miss Havisham’s desire for revenge shows the reader two things: her great sensibility - because her desire for revenge is driven by her emotions and clearly not based on logic - as well as her desire to rebel against her traditional female role. It is clear that her sensibility has caused her progression of reason to be hindered; she has chosen to remain stuck in one point of time, much like Mrs. Joe - to not progress at all. Mrs. Havisham’s sensibility can be compared to the over-sensibility of women described in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*:

Ever restless and anxious, their over-exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering - not the wavering produced

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by deliberation or progressive views, but by contradictory emotions. (137)

We can see this over-sensibility in Miss Havisham when she becomes excited over emotional struggles in others – especially Pip: “How does she use you, Pip; how does she use you?” (Dickens 282), and “she says many hard things of you, but you say nothing of her. What do you think of her?” (74), Miss Havisham asks Pip of Estella, “with her witch-like eagerness” (282). We see here Miss Havisham’s calculated effort to try to stir up Pip’s emotions, to begin breaking his young heart. And it is clear that her over-exercised sensibility is troublesome to Pip: he “should have been happier and better if [he] had never seen Miss Havisham’s face” (256). Like Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham does not seem to put much stock in education, which Wollstonecraft believes is the answer to the “over-sensibility” exhibited by women. She has no desire to know what is happening outside her “Enough” house (perhaps with the exception of Estella’s revenge-seeking progress). She says, “I know nothing of days of the week; I know nothing of weeks of the year” (74). Although we do not see progression in her reason, we do see her eventually come to realize what she has done to her adopted daughter when she admits that she “stole [Estella’s] heart away and put ice

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in its place” (366). Not only is there a hint of character growth in that sense, but Dickens also shows her rebellion against the typical role of women. In the room where she spends her days, one can see “rebellion against the traditional feminine domestic practices centred on tidiness, cleanliness, and order” (Wynne 79), as the floor is “strewn” with “faded bridal relics” (Dickens 286). Her mess can be seen as “her interpretation of the female condition by means of memorabilia” (Wynne 78).

The lines between Wollstonecraft’s notions of reason and sensibility begin to blur with Estella. She seems to have a sufficient amount of the former and a lack of the latter, but Estella still ends up marrying Bentley Drummle, who is “half a dozen heads thicker than most gentlemen” (Dickens 196) and uses “her with great cruelty” (437). Miss Havisham’s plot for revenge against men through Estella is less than successful. Reason dominates over sensibility in Estella: during an argument with her adoptive mother, she holds her ground, “never departing from the easy grace of her attitude, never raising her voice as the other did, never yielding either to anger or tenderness” (284). While Estella might have the reason of which Wollstonecraft writes, she has so much reason that she does not have the sensibility required to understand love: “When you say you love me,

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I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there,” she says to Pip (333). Estella is both a slave and a despot. Her tragedy is “her knowledge that she is powerless and her realization that knowing this will in no way change her story” (Schor 542). She is stuck as Miss Havisham’s revenge-seeking tool, but she also has a large amount of power over Pip. He trembles “in spirit and worship[s] the very hem of her dress” in her company, and he “never was happy with her, but always miserable” (Dickens 255). It is clear that Estella holds all power here, as it is “impossible for [Pip] to avoid seeing that she cared to attract [him]” (254). As Wollstonecraft states, women who are educated for dependence may “sometimes, galled by their heavy yoke . . . take a malignant pleasure in resting it on weaker shoulders” (110). Being both a slave and a despot hinders her progression of reason: although she is largely a woman of reason, or perhaps because of a surplus of misplaced reason, she marries the wrong man. As for her education, Dickens tells his readers that Miss Havisham teaches Estella to be “proud” and “hard” (Dickens 285). Estella is unhappy with Miss Havisham’s unfair expectations after being educated so poorly by her. She has been brought up “wholly in the dark confinement

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of [Miss Havisham's] rooms, and had never [been shown] that there was such a thing as daylight" (285), and yet Miss Havisham expects her "to understand the daylight and know all about it" (286). But Estella's name finds its etymological roots in *stella*, meaning star in Latin ("Stella, -ae"). Dickens even writes that "her light came along the dark passage like a star" (Dickens 72), and she later compares herself to a candle: "Moths, and all sorts of ugly creatures . . . hover about a lighted candle. Can the candle help it?" (290). This imagery of light and starlight shows that Dickens may mean for her troublesome journey to shed light on the Romantic woman's dilemma. Perhaps her story is a light that can guide the way to a better female condition. Estella seems to have a deeply ingrained understanding of the inevitability of her fate and, because of this understanding, she does not rebel. She is perhaps aware of the fact that her marriage to Drummle will be unrewarding: "Don't be foolish about its effect on you," she says to Pip, "It may have its effect on others, and may be meant to have. It's not worth discussing" (290). But when she says that it may be meant to have an effect on others, what does she mean? Perhaps she is in fact rebelling against Miss Havisham's plan for revenge, because she knows it is futile. Estella does seem to

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progress, however – and it seems that Dickens is teaching his audience a lesson here. During their final encounter, she says to Pip, “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be” (429). Estella seems to have finally attained some sensibility. Through Estella’s personal growth, shown at the end of the novel with “the saddened softened light of once proud eyes . . . the friendly touch of the once insensible hand,” Dickens seems to communicate to his readers that women require a certain amount of sensibility (438).

Biddy may seem to be the one female character in *Great Expectations* who thinks and acts logically, but her “sturdily virtuous . . . role, though an important one, is too minor to entitle her to be considered as the novel’s heroine” (Slater 282). Perhaps she is Charles Dickens’s ideal woman. She seems to be neither a slave nor a despot. Her first introduction in the novel shows the reader that she is not a slave. To be sure, tyrannical adoptive parents – for she is also an orphan – would not allow “her hair [to] always [want] brushing, her hands [to] always [want] washing, and her shoes [to] always [want] mending” (Dickens 59). There is absolutely no evidence of her being even slightly despotic. She is always sincere. She is the only

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person willing to show Pip that he is beginning to look down upon his people after discovering his expectations: “Won’t his manners do then?” (150) she exclaims when Pip refers to Joe as “rather backwards in some things” (150). Let us now compare Bidley to Wollstonecraft’s “woman with a tolerable understanding” (Wollstonecraft 114). She “comprehend[s] the moral duties of life, and in what human virtue and dignity consist” (114), as one can see when Bidley states, “Whether you scold me or approve of me . . . you may equally depend upon my trying to do all that lies in my power, here, at all times” (Dickens 151). Wollstonecraft’s woman “marries for affection,” as does Bidley (Wollstonecraft 114). Pip says to her, “you couldn’t love him better than you do” (Dickens 434). It is plain to see that she is a believer in education. Not only does Bidley help teach Pip the alphabet when they are both young (59), but she plans to become a teacher, to “teach herself while she teaches others” (265). Bidley is the only female character who seems to remain constant. There is no desire for rebellion in her, nor does Bidley seem unhappy in her womanly role. There is no obvious progression of reason in her, but Bidley does not need to progress – she already has reason and sensibility.

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Dickens's treatment of his female characters in *Great Expectations* demonstrates his attitude toward the female condition during the Romantic period. Through an examination of Estella's character, it becomes clear that Dickens believes women cannot change their fate with only reason - they must have a balance of both reason and sensibility. Estella seems to learn this lesson the hard way, and Dickens wants his readers to learn from her struggle. However, he also illustrates the way women like Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham are doomed to be forever miserable because of their lack of reason. They display small acts of rebellion, but they are stuck in roles they despise. And finally, Biddy, the only female character who seems to have and maintain a balance between reason and sensibility throughout the novel, marries a man she truly loves, and the reader assumes that she will live happily ever after.

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