

CREATOR AND CREATURE:

Criminality in *Great Expectations* and
Frankenstein

BRYNN STAPLES

Brynn Staples's paper "Creator and Creature: Criminality in *Great Expectations* and *Frankenstein*" is a great example of how those little questions that arise while reading can be followed and turned into an illuminating and engaging research paper. While reading *Great Expectations* for my English 2002 (British Literature after 1800) class, Brynn asked about a passage in which the narrator Pip compares his relationship to Magwitch to the relationship between "the imaginary student" and the "misshapen creature he had impiously made" in *Frankenstein*. Pursuing this comparison as eagerly and reciprocally as Dickens did with Shelley's novel, she develops it into a nicely-structured, well-developed conversation between the two texts. Through her own richly textured analysis and inquiry into the social ethics of creation, Brynn "continues the discussion" that began almost 200 years ago.

Dr. Judith Thompson

In the revolutionary gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley examines the nature of the creator-creature dynamic by narrating the fraught interactions of Victor Frankenstein with his human-hybrid creation. In so doing, she explores the responsibilities of the creator

in a way that raises important questions about the basic moral rights owed to persons. In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens continues the discussion. He plays extensively with the creator-creature motif, casting Pip and Magwitch in the roles of both creature and creator. Dickens's invocation of the motif not only fuels the plot, but also advocates social reform in a way that is fundamentally optimistic. He directs the blame for the criminalization of Frankenstein's creature, Pip, and Magwitch, primarily to their exclusion and subsequent alienation from society by parties who are absorbed in it - gentleman creators. Moreover, Dickens articulates the need for reform in a manner that, in contrast to Shelley, offers hope for these creatures' reconciliations from criminalization.

In both *Frankenstein* and *Great Expectations*, the creator-creature motif drives the directions of the plots. In the former, Victor Frankenstein's ambitions lead him to successfully construct new life, animating a creature whom he immediately abhors, and whose eventual self-possession leads to the creature's seeking out and confronting of his hostile creator. Pip, like Victor, initiates the cycle of creation that binds together the

intricate plot of *Great Expectations*. In an act that fundamentally reveals a capacity for “charity and sympathy” (Crawford 628), he raids Mrs. Joe’s pantry to bring food and a file to the mysterious convict, Magwitch. He saves Magwitch from starvation and frees him from his bonds, setting in motion the wheels of the plot. Thus Pip effectively acts as the creator of Magwitch’s future, and incites the ensuing pattern of creation that underlies his own expectations.

Before they even acquire a strong sense of criminality, Frankenstein’s creature, Pip, and Magwitch all search but find no solid foundation for their identities in their respective pasts. This failure ingrains in them a sense of otherness from the very beginning, and thereby excludes them from society even before the influence of their gentleman creators.

Frankenstein’s creature laments that he has difficulty remembering the “original aera of [his] being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct” (Shelley 130). He finds a modicum of regulation and stability in the “changes of day and night” (131), and in the simple delights of nature. Although he eventually perceives himself as a kind of child

in relation to Victor, his identity is ultimately informed by an orphan-like detachment, which in many ways resembles that of Pip.

Pip, orphaned at birth, is also detached from his identity. In the first chapter of *Great Expectations*, Pip attempts to imbue himself with an identity through recognition of his family name, and by analyzing his parents' graves. He pursues their identities, and thus his own, by examining the letters on the headstones; the shape of the letters on his father's stone gives Pip the notion that he was "a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair," while those on his mother's give him the impression that she was "freckled and sickly" (Dickens 39). Pip's origins are shrouded with uncertainty; he must rely on these tombstones, these concrete yet conclusively detached effigies, to inform his sense of self.

Magwitch, likewise, has "no more notion where [he] was born, than [Pip has]" (Dickens 370), and sooner recalls the criminality of his early life than his actual origins. Indeed, he builds his identity on this criminality, which saw him "in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail" (370). He makes clear the extent to which his misconduct defined him, telling Pip with

conclusive emphasis, “[t]hat’s *my* life pretty much” (370). The ambiguity of Magwitch’s origins, like those of Frankenstein’s creature and Pip, forces him to look elsewhere for the foundations of his identity. The underlying instability of identity at the core of these characters provokes their sense of otherness from very early on, and excludes them from society even before the influence of a societally immersed creator.

The gentleman creators do not only alienate their creations utterly from society, however; they are also accountable for their creatures’ identities as criminals. Victor Frankenstein spurns his creation with open malice. In terror, he runs from the “wretch – the miserable monster” he has constructed (Shelley 86), abandoning him to the elements with the desperate hope that the creature will not haunt him. Frankenstein leaves him to fend for himself, newly born and uncomprehending. The creature has neither any link to society, nor any knowledge of how to participate in it. His appearance – like that of a “demoniacal corpse” (87) – estranges him from a society that is repulsed by the Other, and his initial lack of language renders him unable to articulate his thoroughly innocent intentions. The gentleman

creator's neglect incites the creature to act immorally. Helpless, frustrated, and lonely, he strikes out at Frankenstein's youngest brother, William, aiming only to hurt the man responsible for his anguish. Iain Crawford notes that the creature's experience with the family he observes also plays an important role in shaping his temperament: he is "permanently scarred by the [repulsion of the] educated and ostensibly civilized De Laceys" (628). The creature's subsequent criminal acts escalate only after his repeated rejections by society, and reach a climax with the murder of Frankenstein's new bride, Elizabeth. Thus, the utter negligence of his gentleman creators, which include the De Laceys, bear responsibility for the creature's alienation from society, and thereby create the creature's status as criminal.

Although Magwitch creates Pip's expectations of wealth, Miss Havisham and Estella are arguably more responsible for Pip's psychological creation as gentleman. They exclude him from the society on the marshes within which he is growing up by planting in him the "seeds of discontent" (Hagan 63). His time at Satis House leaves him ashamed of his

CREATOR AND CREATURE

upbringing, and reveals a kind of high society he had been happily oblivious to:

I set off on the four-mile walk to our forge; pondering, as I went along, on all I had seen, and deeply revolving that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into the despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way. (Dickens 100)

While his status as an orphan leaves him scrambling to piece together an identity from his parents' tombstones, the anxiety Pip feels at the hands of Miss Havisham and Estella rivals any he has felt thus far. He recognizes for the first time not only the presence of higher society, but also its remoteness. With a new understanding of his alienation from it, Pip lusts after society all the more intently. John Hagan observes that "Herbert Pocket's 'gentlemanliness' tortures him after their fight and helps establish the gentlemanly ideal in his mind" (Hagan 57). Thus, his gentlewomen creators at Satis House make Pip truly feel his alienation from society – like Frankenstein and the De Lacey's do for the creature.

His feelings of exclusion, along with the guilt Magwitch inadvertently imparts to him, combine to create Pip's sense of his criminality. With his gentlemanly aspirations come feelings of desolation in equal measure. The criminal guilt Pip still harbours after his encounter with Magwitch plagues him with fresh vigour, aggravated by the shame induced at Satis House. By the night Pip arrives home to find his sister maimed by the long-lost file, the secrets that haunt his conscience have become so much a part of him that they "alienate him from all the people around him" (Hagan 58). Therefore, in this respect, Magwitch too creates Pip in a psychological way.

Magwitch himself is "twisted by his early induction into the world of crime, and above all, by the influence of Compeyson, the fake lover and phoney gentleman" (Crawford 628). Compeyson is accountable for the state of criminal alienation in which Pip finds Magwitch in Part I. Compeyson brought Magwitch out of his criminal lifestyle and into a kind of society, only to maliciously drive him out of it by framing him for fraud in a selfish attempt to preserve his own reputation. In his relations with Magwitch, Compeyson, like the creators of the creature and Pip, ultimately

alienates Magwitch further from society and reconstructs his status as criminal.

Although Pip also acts as Magwitch's creator, the nuances of their relationship are complicated. Their unique bond constitutes, on Dickens's part, an optimistic twist on Shelley's critique. Pip creates the man Magwitch will become, through his initial act of kindness towards Magwitch on the marsh. In turn, Magwitch also creates Pip's expectations, allowing him to sink to the basest depths of his character in order to eventually transcend the realm of gentleman and become a gentle man. In effect, Pip and Magwitch act as both creators and creatures, and their lives are intimately entwined. As Carl Dennis understands it, "Dickens believes that society is all one piece, that each part is linked inextricably to every other part, each class with all other classes, each man with all other men" (1243). Pip and Magwitch's reciprocal relationship thus provides a microcosm for Dickens' view of the interconnectedness of society.

Furthermore, the cyclical way in which both characters oscillate between creator and creature suggests flexibility in what *Frankenstein* presents as a strict system of condemnation through alienation. Victor

Frankenstein condemns his creature to a life of alienation, and neither Frankenstein nor society are willing to free the creature from his exile as a criminal brute. The creature thus remains cruelly trapped in his role as a creation, while Pip and Magwitch adopt both roles. Pip overtly takes on the role of creator in his attitude toward his servant, the Avenger, and in his internal dialogues about Magwitch. In his most explicit reference to Shelley, Pip acknowledges his position as such:

The imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made, was not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me, and recoiling from him with a stronger repulsion, the more he admired me and the fonder he was of me. (Dickens 363)

Thus, Pip is created by Magwitch, and is himself Magwitch's creator. In the moment their paths intersect at the end of Part II, the title of creator that has hitherto only fluctuated in an alternating motion between Pip and Magwitch finally merges. Dickens reveals them as simultaneously creative and created selves; their lives are inevitably entwined, and this bond enables Pip's eventual "softening" towards Magwitch (401). In contrast to

Frankenstein, in which “unrepentant pride and despair leave the creator tormented to the end, and his Monster [. . .] compelled towards suicide,” *Great Expectations* portrays “the loving reconciliation of creator and created” (Crawford 645). For Jerome Meckier, Dickens contends that “[s]ociety must cease producing creatures like Magwitch” (31). However, Dickens does more than underscore society’s responsibility for producing them. In Magwitch’s growth away from a “low” criminal state (Dickens 356), and in his tender creator-creature bond with Pip, Dickens also highlights the potential for such creatures to exceed the criminal expectations society imposes upon them.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens employs the creator-creature motive with acute consciousness of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Both authors explore the nature of criminality, and examine onto whom the responsibility for criminality falls. Frankenstein’s creature, Pip, and Magwitch all begin excluded from society, and experience radical alienation from society at the hands of an advantaged creator. Their imposed isolation propels them to develop criminal consciences. Dickens thereby places the blame on these gentleman creators, and the

society to which they belong, for alienating their creations and thus creating their identities as criminals. However, in a more optimistic vein than Shelley, Dickens suggests hope and mobility for these creatures. Whereas Shelley leaves the creature utterly traumatized, ready to destroy the creator and the society that have turned their backs on him, Dickens gives Magwitch and Pip the privilege of a unique creator-creature bond that offers them reconciliation, however bittersweet. Moreover, the cyclical way in which Pip and Magwitch operate as both creators and creatures lends fluidity to what is, in *Frankenstein*, a rigid system of alienation and criminalization from which the persecuted Other cannot escape. Thus, in *Great Expectations*, Dickens analyzes and builds on Shelley's *Frankenstein* in a way that both advocates social reform and sees hope for the criminal in society's intrinsic interconnectedness.

Works Cited

- Crawford, Iain. "Pip and the Monster: The Joys of Bondage." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 28.4 (1988): 625-48. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.
- Dennis, Carl. "Dickens' Moral Vision." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 11.3 (1969): 1237-46. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.
- Dickens, Charles, Graham Law, and Adrian J. Pinnington. *Great Expectations*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1998. Print.
- Hagan, John H., Jr. "Structural Patterns in Dickens's *Great Expectations*." *ELH* 21.1 (1954): 54-66. Web. 20 Feb. 2013.
- Meckier, Jerome. "Dickens, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the Importance of *Paradise Lost* to *Great Expectations*." *The Dickensian* 98.456 (2002): 29-38. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.
- Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*. David Lorne Macdonald, and Kathleen Dorothy Scherf Ed. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2004. Print.