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A Force of Love: A Deconstructionist Reading of Characters in Dickens's *Great Expectations*

Though literary critics differ on countless aspects of works in the Dickensian canon, one rarely disputed element is Dickens's masterful ability to create and develop superb characters. While evaluating his works, modernist poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot remarks on the Victorian's expertise in "[creating] characters of greater intensity than human beings" (Eliot 308). From Oliver Twist to Ebenezer Scrooge, each notable figure in Dickens's novels not only plays a principal role in the plot of the work itself but also represents significant ideas outside the text. Clearly, critiquing society through artistic expression was not a foreign concept to Dickens; themes of utilitarian economies, the mistreatment of children, and inhumane social structures often manifest themselves in Dickens's works through harsh chastisement. One major societal flaw often addressed in Dickens's works, particularly in *Great Expectations*, is what scholar Dorothy Van Ghent astutely titles "the calculated social crime"; Dickens despised the way in which dismissing truth and bending the rules allowed citizens in power to commit heinous offenses with impunity (Van Ghent 253). Critics note that Dickens dares to believe that an honest and true world—in which good and upstanding people can thrive without the advantages of money and high social status—can exist (Brown 86).

Though Dickens commonly created characters to represent specific societal flaws or with admirable qualities to foil these faults, scholar G. Robert Stange suggests that Mr. Jaggers, a key figure in *Great Expectations,* remains morally ambiguous. For a character, Dickens gives the

lawyer an extraordinary amount of knowledge and power and, further, brings the audience to thoroughly dislike the antagonistic figure. Undoubtedly, this lawyer remains less explored than several other lead characters, but his significance as a unique figure of power draws many direct connections to regimes of law in Dickens's day. Jaggers's adherence to and reliance on structures of power in the novel equate him with a literary structuralist facing the shadows of an upcoming wave of deconstructionists who threaten to dismantle his authority.

As a reaction to the work of nineteenth-century structuralists Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida developed the poststructuralist theory known as deconstruction. While structuralists argue for the importance of language as a structure and manifestation of truth, deconstructionists recognize the arbitrariness of language in its form itself, contending that truth must ground its roots in ideas and not in language itself. In Dickens's text, both the concepts of linguistic structure as power and truth and the deconstructionists' conviction of the arbitrary nature of language inform the novel, because his characters represent each of these differing viewpoints; Dickens displays his suspicion of these structures as determining forces of law and utilitarian thought. Though Jaggers exhibits his power over his subordinates through a hypercontrol of the structures of language and law, a number of deconstructive forces, especially love, threaten to dismantle his influence and control; after examining Jaggers's means of manipulation and instances in which he inflicts his power on other characters—specifically Molly, Bentley Drummle, and Pip—I will explicate Joe Gargery's conversation with the lawyer himself and ultimately reveal how Joe's linguistic anarchy positions him as a deconstructive pebble in the shoe of societal structuralism.

Through a combination of verbal manipulation and a thorough knowledge concerning her past, Jaggers's servant, Molly, becomes a primary victim of his power. Traditionally, the

possession of servants illustrates a distinct power differential, but the benefits of this exist in the master's own convenience, ordering others to perform minuscule tasks in one's place. Strangely, however, when readers see Molly in her master's home, Jaggers serves his party guests with his own hands, as a "dumb-waiter," or a rolling cart, carries the food and drinks given to his guests during the party (Dickens 214). Using visual trickery, Jaggers demonstrates a subordinate physical posture to gain respect from his guests; thus, Jaggers displays Molly in his home as a physical manifestation of his linguistic power.

As the scene continues, Jaggers's physical advances on Molly imply dominance over her, as "he clap[s] his large hand on the housekeeper's like a trap" (214). Further on in the novel, however, readers witness Molly's astounding physical strength; clearly, in a single moment, she could turn on her master and overpower him. Despite Molly's fortitude, Jaggers's linguistic manipulation demands her restraint through submission, and this first display of power through physicality looks dim in the light of his overarching emotional hold on Molly. Furthermore, Jaggers goes so far as to invite these physical threats, convinced that his ability to manipulate others through language and law overshadows all other forms of power. Gesturing to Molly's scarred and mangled forearms, Jaggers declares, "There's power here" (214). On the surface, this reference of "power here" refers to Molly's tenacity to endure; the choices of the ambiguous "[t]here's" and "here," however, suggest a subtler power. For a Victorian woman, this sign of submission reflects an "angel in the house" mentality, but as the story reveals, Molly has become a "fallen angel." Only by Jaggers's assistance does Molly return to the "womanly sphere" and, as John Wemmick describes, become a "wild beast tamed" (202). Thus, Molly lives indebted to Jaggers, and the "power here" refers to the obligatory dominance that Jaggers inflicts on Molly. Furthermore, Molly's silence as she exits the room further manifests her inability to ignore

Jaggers's bidding; in relation to linguistic power, not a soul matches Jaggers. In addition to his mere word choice, his tone proves paradoxical, as he speaks in a "leisurely critical" fashion (214). As he nonchalantly gives critiques to those around him while maintaining an attitude of friendliness, Jaggers's expertise in words allows for a concoction of contradictory form and meaning (214).

Following Molly's opening act in the novel, readers notice that Jaggers's servant is not the only recipient of this treatment, but the visiting men in his home experience a similar form of manipulation. Just as Molly's physical strength proves useless against Jaggers's manipulative words, Mr. Drummle's lack of eloquence and knowledge of language makes him perfect prey for Jaggers's linguistic jabs. From the beginning of their party, the narrating Pip goes so far as to articulate that he and his fellow guests began to share their secrets and stories "before [they] quite knew that [they] had opened [their] lips" (213). Jaggers's utter restraint and control enables him to convince others to loosen their lips and perform whatever he may desire. Though Jaggers influences all the men present, Drummle's extreme level of "surly obtuseness" distinctly allows him to serve as a foil to Mr. Jaggers (215). While Jaggers continues to create intricate new statements, the young Mr. Drummle's repetitive, parrot-like nature demonstrates his inability to generate his own original thoughts, as he responds to Pip's "I should think" with an enthusiastic "*You* should think!" (215). In this way, the guests, particularly Drummle, give Jaggers a sense of egotistical delight, serving as "a zest for [Jaggers's] wine," as Jaggers exudes confidence in his authority in his own home (215). Returning to his display of Molly's wrists, Dickens displays power's synonymous nature with the privilege of choice; Jaggers informs his guests that "[he] ha[s] had occasion to notice many hands" (214), implying that the master deliberately selects his servants and guests in order to inflate his own self-interest and display his authorial importance.

Reflecting upon the scene, I argue that the intricate word choice by Dickens, particularly in the selection of character names, draws distinct dichotomies between linguistic power and weakness: from Jaggers's striking name, reflecting an intellectual sharpness and cunning power, to Bentley Drummle's rhythmic, repetitive name, sounding like a clanging symbol rambling on without proper contemplation or meaning behind it. As Jaggers places himself in situations in which he will appear dominant, Dickens strategically arranges scenes in a way that pictures Jaggers's character as egotistical and strangely powerful.

Unlike Molly, Pip does not have remarkable physical strength or a legally tainted past, and in contrast to Drummle, he has the capability to form original thoughts; Jaggers must, then, utilize another form of manipulation in order to dominate Pip: the lawyer makes an appeal to Pip's great expectations themselves. As Jaggers sends a note for Pip, he does not threaten or strike fear but simply informs him that "he would be glad" if Pip joined him (287). Utterly enthralled by the idea of societal mobility, Pip willingly subjects himself to Jaggers's linguistic manipulation in order to be perceived as a "gentleman" in high Victorian society. The traumatically powerful influence of Jaggers remains in the text, even to the point of pervading the narration of the reflecting Pip.

As Pip articulates his first encounter with the lawyer, he narrates, "I said, or tried to say, that I was much obliged to him for his recommendation—." Jaggers interrupts him with "[n]o, my young friend . . ." (140). The words cut off by the lawyer do not come from the scene in which they converse but from the head of the narrator long after the scene taking place; still, Jaggers's dynamic speech pervades Pip's thoughts in a dark manner. As the tale progresses, Pip begins to shift from a reaction of fear to a response of aggravation toward Jaggers. Later, after Jaggers inquires where Pip is heading, the young man declares, "For the Temple, I think" (338).

Like a parent correcting a child's "can" to "may," Jaggers inquires, "Don't you know?" to which Pip replies, "I do *not* know, for I have not made up my mind" (338). Pip slowly begins to recognize the ramifications of his choice to follow Jaggers but does not contradict or dismiss it because of his commitment to entering the lifestyle of the "gentleman." Further on in the novel, as Wemmick dictates Jaggers's methods of law to Pip, a worker in the office asks about the current case: "What's [Jaggers] going to make of it?" (263). In all his cases, Jaggers manipulates members of the court to serve whatever purpose he sees fit. Wemmick continues to describe Jaggers's procedures and admits that in one particular instance, he "was altogether too many for the Jury, and they gave in [to his case]" (394). Though Pip and a vast number of other figures in the novel resolve to submit to Jaggers's methods of manipulation, Joe Gargery, another of the novel's characters, refuses to "[give] in" to Jaggers's schemes (394).

Though these various interactions prove that much of his power exists in knowledge concerning language and law, in part, Jaggers's power benefits from what other characters attempt to keep hidden: for Molly, her regretful past of criminality; for Drummle and Pip, their desire to possess the title of "gentleman." Joe, however, lives a life free of ulterior motives or a dark past. On this level, Joe's unashamed and unregretful attitude gives Jaggers an extremely limited amount of evidence to use against Joe; thus, regarding intimidation by blackmail, Joe will never be vulnerable to the lawyer's convicting claims. Joe becomes irate as the lawyer entertains the possibility of Pip's guardian having secret motivations beneath his simple words.

Despite some deeming them inarticulate, Joe unapologetically commits to his linguistic pronouncements; in Joe's doing so, Pip attributes the qualities of "simply faithful" and "simply right" to Joe (467). On multiple occasions, Joe fearlessly responds to others with his own pronunciations, as when Pip asks, "Joe, how are you Joe?" and Joe refuses to directly answer and

instead replies, “Pip, how AIR you, Pip?” (219). Joe’s deconstructive attitude manifests itself most clearly when Joe imposes his own vernacular on the lawyer himself. After Jaggers attempts to inflict his manipulation on Joe, the common man refuses to reject his own manner of speech, replying to Jaggers’s question, “It was understood that you wanted nothing for yourself, remember?” with “It were understood . . . it are understood. And it ever will be similar according” (141). In Joe’s lack of articulation, a quality society deems a weakness, Dickens gives Joe a unique strength and vital opportunity to disassemble this particular structure of power. Jaggers only “stand[s] or fall[s] by” his words because he has learned to perfect them as structures and believes they hold power; Joe, however, despite his imperfect use of language, heartily stands by his words in confidence because he knows their underlying purpose, fueled by love and justice (142). Joe’s commitment to his own linguistic style and rejection of Jaggers’s heightened language find their roots in Joe’s ultimate disapproval and hatred of oppressive regimes of power, because Joe sees society’s tendency to reject and neglect the importance of human love and emotional connection. This anarchy of grammatical form renders Joe a wrench in Jaggers’s linguistic and legal structures, furthering Dickens’s argument that love is a deconstructive force, used to dismantle modern regimes of power. Pip’s own observations of the interaction between these two men change throughout the scene, as Jaggers moves from viewing Joe as a “fool for his disinterestedness,” to viewing him as a “dangerous” figure in opposition to Jaggers’s power (138, 142).

Throughout his collected works, from *Hard Times* to *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens uses antagonistic characters to showcase his suspicions concerning the authorial figures of law and economic structure in Victorian England. The character Mr. Jaggers in *Great Expectations* acts as the verbal embodiment of the ideologies of England, while Joe displays Dickens’s own

disapproval of the oppressive modern regimes of power and advocacy of solutions. Dickens's unforgiving portrayal of Jaggers does not give the audience an ounce of sympathy or high regard for the character, since Jaggers's control and self-perceived superiority pervade his life to the point of his "frowning at his boots as if he suspected them of designs against him" (288). Near the work's conclusion, however, Pip finally combats Jaggers by revealing information unbeknown to him prior to the scene (411). After quietly standing for several moments, stunned, Jaggers makes one final argument; instead of threatening or dismissing Pip, however, the lawyer entertains an appeal to love. Though some may interpret this as a redemptive move, this scene truly only fuels the utilitarian structuralist attitude of the lawyer, because he attempts to diminish love by reducing it to a rational argument. He tells a man in his office, "I'll have no feelings here" (415). Though he makes an emotional appeal, Jaggers solely invokes this argument to sway an audience. Although the narrative ultimately shakes up Jaggers's structure of power, the novel's characters do not completely rid society of his presence, just as Dickens melancholically cannot perfect his own societal structures. Characters like Joe, however, foreshadow the inevitable deconstruction of these oppressive regimes that Dickens detests.

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