English 4/2
Deller

Gender and Class in Dickens: Making Connections

PETER SCHECKNER

CHARLES DICKENS PREFERRED workers the way he preferred Victorian women: grateful for favors received, humble, patient, and passive. Conversely, although he understood the profound inequality and exploitativeness of Victorian society, Dickens feared the consequences of workers—among the most oppressed of these were women—taking their social destiny into their own hands. This paper attempts to make these points and to suggest that for the most part women in Dickens function as a close metaphor for workers. It was important for the author that male workers and their mates be saved from themselves. As we reached a degree of gender parity at the end of this end of this century, it is appropriate to make these gender and class connections.

Great Expectations is Dickens's thirteenth and next-to-last completed novel and, unlike *Hard Times*, published seven years earlier (in 1854), social class is not its central focus. Nevertheless, the genealogies in this work show that virtually everyone is a victim of oppressive circumstances, if not of economics, then of a sexual or domestic disaster. Pip is from a family of five brothers, all deceased while they were still infants. Joe Gargery's father beat his wife. Pip, Biddy, and Estella were orphaned or abandoned by their parents. Miss Havisham's mother died when the girl was quite young. In this novel only Biddy appears to have emotionally survived a less-than-nurturing childhood. Molly, Jaggers's housekeeper and Estella's mother, as a youth had become a nasty girl when she strangled a rival in love.

In such a pathological male world it is no wonder most of the women in *Great Expectations* don't sit by the hearth darn-

ing their men's socks. The sympathetic reader will come to understand and eventually forgive the craziness, coldness, or callousnesss of such troubled women as Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham, Molly, and Estella. For these characters are no match for the novel's true villains: Joe's father, Compeyson, Drummle, and Orlick are genuine bad guys. They beat, abuse, or kill other people, usually women. The remainder of the men, while not nice people, notably Uncle Pumblechook, Jaggers, and Abel Magwitch, are nonetheless more humane; certainly they are not in the same league with Orlick and company.

Nevertheless, when it came to the portrayal of women and madness, Dickens reveals many of the contradictions the author was little able to resolve. In his portrayal of women in *Great Expectations,* Dickens saw the world with almost the same unbalanced perspective as does Pip when Magwitch turns him upside down in the churchyard. *Great Expectations*, for example, contains four truly interesting women, "interesting," that is, in their separate pathologies. Two are rather on the masculine side: Georgiana Maria "Mrs. Joe" (who raises Pip and often her husband "by hand") and Molly (whose chief physical characteristic is her powerful—homicidal?—wrists, not her womanly charms). The two others are the witch-like Miss Haversham and the emotionally impoverished Estella. Biddy, the fifth major female character, is the novel's one truly virtuous, patient, domestic woman, but as a character she is by contrast bland, like most "good" women in Dickens.

Crazy or crazed, cold, calloused, or criminal start to describe Miss Haversham, Estella, Mrs. Joe, and Molly in that order. Biddy is, well, *custodial.* In any event these adjectives don't add up to a well-rounded portrayal of women. As early as June, 1841, thirteen years before the publication of *Hard Times*, at least one critic observed Dickens's sexual stereotyping. That year the writer made a trip to Scotland. During a dinner in Dickens's honor, John Wilson, a writer for *Blackwood's Magazine*, remarked that the only flaw in Dickens's

works was his failure to portray the female character in all its fullness and complexity.

"Great" expectations include "repressed" as well as social and class expectations in this book, and when the women fall victim to such expectations they go nuts. The thwarted sexual passions of Molly and Miss Haversham and the sexually repressed Mrs. Joe and Estella begin to explain why these women are unhappy. This fundamental contradiction in *Great Expectations*, between a passionate nature and a social life which frustrates this passion, has a biographical basis in the author's own life.

Although Dickens clearly means no maliciousness to women in this work or in any other, the great Victorian marital upheaval of June, 1858, is illustrative of Dickens's ambivalent attitude towards women, especially toward strong women.

On that date Dickens sent a deed of separation to his wife of twenty-two years—Catherine Hogarth—who had borne him no fewer than ten children. Dickens's marriage ended in disaster and public humiliation for everyone, most of all his wife. Dickens told his side, only his side, of the separation in a statement published in the *London Times* and later in his periodical *Household Words*.

The breakup took a series of nasty turns. Dickens forbade his wife to see her own children, and when their son Walter died suddenly in 1864, Dickens did not even send Catherine a note. Even Dickens's death in 1870 did not ease his wife's pain and exile: no one apparently thought to invite her to the funeral. Perhaps the most definitive observation made about this famous marital disaster was made by Phyllis Rose in her study of five famous Victorian marriages, *Parallel Lives*. "For us," Rose concludes, Dickens "provides a fine example of how *not* to end a marriage" (191).

Nevertheless, Dickens cannot be easily stereotyped about gender or class issues. At the height of his own fame Dickens helped further the career of at least three women writers, among whom was the prominent Elizabeth Gaskell, the au-

thor of *North and South* and *Mary Barton*, which incidentally are about strong, unDickensian women. Dickens published her works in *Household Words*. Although the infamous playwright Oscar Wilde thought that Dickens's sentiment regarding women was overly sentimental and even phony ("it would take a heart of steel *not* to laugh at the death of Little Nell," Wilde said), most of us probably do shed tears for her and for Little Dorrit. Little Dorrit and her family spent time in the same jail—the Marshalsea prison—as did Dickens and his family for four months when Charles was only eleven.

Crying over lost women, repentant prostitutes, and dying impoverished girls—provided none of these women were wives or political reformers—were causes Dickens loved to champion and did. In 1847 Dickens organized for the millionaire Baroness Angela Burdette-Coutts Urania Cottage, a home intended for reforming prostitutes.

But how will Dickens be read in the beginning years of this century given *au currant* nationwide curriculum transformations that seek, in the words of a New Jersey state-sponsored project, "to integrate issues of women and gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality into the curriculum"?

Held up to the light of class and gender considerations, Dickens will probably fare contradictorily. As to the politics of social class, Dickens feared social upheavals and the organized working class more than anything else. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *Hard Times* (1854), and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) Dickens makes clear that for him the only thing worse than social oppression is the dreadful spectacle of Chartists, Gordon rioters, trade unionists, or French revolutionaries taking to the streets. On the race question Dickens was at best conservative towards the natives of color in the British empire, especially when they rebelled, as they did in India and in Jamaica; and on the question of gender, things get more complicated and sometimes rough.

Here are the arguments that Dickens was, as a male novelist, both typical and rather conservative of his day: First,

Dickens wrote as if he believed a woman's place was mostly in the home, doing domestic things and supporting her husband. Mrs. Joe Gargery is an example of what happens when a woman tries to boss a man. Even though Mrs. Joe stays home by the hearth, when she gets too assertive she becomes very unattractive and may even deserve a strong smack on the head—which she gets, as we know, from Orlick. Biddy, on the other hand, is exactly the kind of woman needed to end this troubled book: she's gentle and kind; she bears children she loves; and she takes good care of her man.

Second, Dickens is unsympathetic with women who socially rebel and who have public causes. Such women become either terrible (Dickens gives us the example of Joan of Arc in his *Child's History* or the "tigress" revolutionary Madame Defarge in *Tale of Two Cities*) or ludicrous (Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, who educates the natives in Africa but neglects her own family).

Third, as to female sexuality, Dickens's women are passive (for example, Biddy) or, as in the case of Miss Haversham, Mrs. Joe, and Molly, they have raging hormones and spell trouble. For a variety of reasons, women in Dickens who exhibit passion of any kind are tortured by other women or abused by men, perhaps because Dickens himself began to become more and more a misogamist as his marriage to Catherine fell apart.

In *Great Expectations* Miss Havisham is jilted by a man, driven mad, and then dies in a type of auto da fe. She spends her adult life with near-perfect success teaching her pupil Estella to hate all men. Perhaps the darkest example of this inexplicable torture of women, especially of women as would-be lovers, occurs with Mr. Jaggers's housekeeper Molly (Estella's criminal mother). Molly is too physically strong and too passionate for her own good. Loving too well, Estella's mother strangled her rival, probably had great sex with Magwitch (aka Provis), but now, given Dickens's strict morality in these matters, must be punished by being Mr. Jaggers's servant.

Fourth, some women in Dickens's novels just get in the way—of men, that is. We see a few of these women in *Hard Times*. Possibly because she is too dull to utter an intelligible thought, Mrs. Gradgrind is made miserable by her husband; their daughter Louisa (not unlike Estella in *Great Expectations*) is deprived of any chance to enjoy love and sex with any man other than her brother. In the same novel Mrs. Sparsit is totally humiliated when she becomes too meddlesome in the affairs of men. Interesting, too, that Sparsit is one of the few women in Dickens who actually have a full-time, out-of-the house job. And of course Mr. Bounderby's mother is just a doormat for her overly-ambitious, capitalist son. The one woman who ultimately survives everyone else's hard times is, of course, Sissy Jupe. She alone, like Biddy, is allowed to prosper—primarily by being fertile and very family oriented—probably because like Dickens she was "in art"; her father ran a circus.

Fifth, apparently Dickens believed that a man's nature, his psychological, emotional, and intellectual makeup, differs inherently from that of a woman. That is, men are rough and injurious; women are capable of healing. This is what *Hard Times* is largely about and explains Biddy's role in *Great Expectations*. Gradgrind and his son Tom, Josiah Bounderby, M'Choakumchild, James Harthouse, and Bitzer hurt the three most vulnerable groups in Dickens: women, children, and the poor. The three angels of mercy in *Hard Times* are Rachel, Mrs. Pegler, and Sissy Jupe. Rachel, a spiritual healer and a worker, is fairly canonized. She is described as "a woman working, ever working, but content and preferring to do it as her natural lot, until she should be too old to labour any more" (298). Rachel is Dickens's perfect heroine: giving, self sacrificing, and with rarely a thought in her head.

To be fair, however, neither Dickens's male nor female characters have profound inner intellectual lives. The perfect example of this in *Great Expectations* is Biddy, who rather passively falls in and out of love with Pip and then effortlessly

moves on to Joe, who can never be more than a father figure to her.

Which of these five accusations against Dickens applies in particular to *Great Expectations*? Actually a lot, since it is impossible to read Dickens and not realize that two major threads running through *Great Expectations* and most of his other fifteen novels are class—specifically class differences, class aspirations, and class exploitation—and gender, relationships between the sexes, and the emotional and sexual plight of women in mid-nineteenth century industrial England. What, in addition, is the relationship between Dickens's treatment of social class and his portrayal of women?

Our understanding of Dickens has matured a great deal since the 1930s when the Marxist critic T.A. Jackson declared in an ideological paroxysm that Dickens was almost a Communist revolutionary. Still, in 1986 the popular novelist John Irving wrote an Introduction to *Great Expectations* in which he states, quite correctly, that Dickens was ever "the champion of the *un*-championed," and that "vice and cruelty were not randomly bestowed on individuals at birth but were the creations of society." Understanding that social and political institutions were to blame for human misery and not the poor themselves must have been fairly strong stuff in 1986 when the Reagan administration was busy installing bigotry, greed, and a aggressive get-rich-quick way of life.

Yet, as George Orwell pointed out over fifty years ago in his 1939 essay on Dickens, the great irony is that "Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everybody and antagonizing nobody. Naturally this makes one wonder whether after all there was something unreal in his attack upon society" (49). Perhaps also, something may have been unreal about his portrayal of the two kinds of characters Dickens felt were the most abused in his time—workers and women (children of course fell into both categories).

Orwell advises us to start defining Dickens by what the latter was *not*. First and foremost Dickens was decidedly *not* radical or subversive, either in his characterization of women

as sexually or socially oppressed, or of workers as an exploited class. As a matter of fact, Dickens rarely wrote about industrial or agricultural workers. The majority of England's men, women, and children who labored in the fields or in factories and who produced all of England's food, clothing, and everything else for that matter rarely hold center stage. When laborers do find themselves "between the covers of a book," Orwell observes, "it is nearly always as objects of pity or as comic relief" (50).

What is true in *Great Expectations* is generally true of Dickens's novels: his characters are mainly middle or lower-middle class types—lawyers (as in Jaggers), shopkeepers, innkeepers, artisans (a blacksmith like Joe Gargery), servants (Molly), clerks (most of Pip's friends), and criminals (like Magwitch). Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*—he is a worker in a mill—is a notable exception. But blacksmiths, lawyers, clerks, and criminals were hardly representative of the English working class during the 1840s and 50s when Dickens wrote most of his novels.

In the whole of his works Dickens portrays no agricultural worker who is a major character. However, Stephen Blackpool is a significant character, not because Dickens created a strong willed, socially conscious, or political aware person not, for a change, from the middle or upper classes. Just the opposite is true. Blackpool, like virtually all of Dickens's female characters, is the very opposite of being socially subversive. He hasn't a clue as to why the world as he knows it is in such "a muddle." Since Dickens was always guided by the principle that neither workers nor women should rebel against their oppression, Blackpool turns to his worst oppressor, Josiah Bounderby, and says (and I am paraphrasing Stephen's heavy dialect), "I can't be expected to know how to end my suffering. Don't look to me for a solution. Its up to my betters to figure that out" (150).

In some ways Stephen Blackpool is a prototype of the Dickensian worker and of a certain type of female character. The poor are best when they suffer or pass their days pas-

sively, quietly, and in a state of stupefaction. This is the way Dickens most prefers them because, in extreme contrast, the working poor act out control. In the 1840s Dickens portrayed rampaging agricultural workers in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and in his Christmas Book, *The Chimes* (1844), and drunken, anarchic workers in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), an historical novel about the Gordon Riots which took place in London in 1780.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859, Dickens's only other historical novel), insurrectionary workers and women as harpies are combined. Both are portrayed as lunatic as and possibly even more malevolent than the aristocracy they are trying to pull down. "The men were terrible in [their] bloody-minded anger with which they looked down into the streets," but, writes Dickens, "the women were a sight to chill the boldest. . . . They ran out with streaming hair, urging one another, and themselves, to madness with the wildest cries and actions" (212).

Novels like *Barnaby Rudge, Hard Times,* and *A Tale of Two Cities* represent Dickens's response to the actual and violent class warfare raging in England until, roughly, the 1850s. In these works the poor had abandoned Dickens's central moral message, applicable to both workers and to women. It is an appeal expressed both ironically and seriously in *The Chimes* by Sir Joseph Bowley, Baronet, Member of Parliament, and "Friend and Father of the Poor," to the destitute laboring class:

> The one great moral lesson which that class requires . . . is entire Dependence on myself. They have no business whatever with—with themselves. If wicked and designing persons tell them otherwise, and they become impatient and discontented, and are guilty of insubordinate conduct and black-hearted ingratitude. . . . I am their Friend, and Father still. It is so Ordained. It is in the nature of things. (106-7)

Presented as caricature, Sir Joseph's sentiments are precisely what Dickens novels end up articulating. Workers and women—with some exceptions—stand and should stand de-

pendent before the governing class of righteous men. At the end of *The Chimes*, Will Fern, an out-of-work field hand, makes an appeal to One in Authority, in this case an Alderman, because to whom can the oppressed turn?—certainly not to themselves:

> Give us, in mercy, better homes . . . better food . . . kinder laws . . . and don't set Jail, Jail, Jail afore us, everywhere we turn. There an't a condescension you can show the Laborer then, that he won't take, as ready and as grateful as a man can be; for he has a patient, peaceful, willing heart. But you must put his rightful spirit in him first . . . [for] his spirit is divided from you at this time. Bring it back, gentlefolks, bring it back! Bring it back, afore the day comes when even his Bible changes in his altered mind, and the words seem to him to read . . . thy people are Not my people; Nor thy God my God! (133)

"Nowhere," as George Bernard Shaw observed in his "Introduction to *Hard Times*," "does [Dickens] appeal to the working classes to take their fate into their own hands and try the democratic plan." Workers should appeal to the ones in authority to save them from themselves, from the fires of rebellion which rage in their hearts sometimes out of control. So, too, should women be counseled by understanding men.

Although women in Dickens present a more psychologically complex case than do workers, the former too have their place in society and need to stay in it. "Bad" women in Dickens appear to get their just desserts. When women deviate from a sexual norm, when they overreach themselves, or become too intense about anything, the social status quo for Dickens is threatened. When women are too passionate, they go completely crazy like Miss Havesham, or are everlastingly punished, like Molly. When Mrs. Joe assumes a masculine role, she is critically injured by a man insecure about his own masculinity—that is, Orlick. Taught to be a man hater, Estella is only "saved" for society when she is punished by her brutish husband, Bentley Drummle. When women aren't downright angelic (and only women without husbands qualify for angelhood), like Rachel and to a lesser extent Louisa by the end of *Hard Times*, or Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, they

need to bear their disappointments stoically, in relative quiet, as does Biddy in *Great Expectations*.

The end of the passage in *Tale of Two Cities* about the rampaging revolutionary women contains within it a small moral. "Numbers of the women," Dickens writes, "lashed into blind frenzy, whirled about, striking and tearing at their own friends until they dropped into a passionate swoon, and were only saved by the men belonging to them from being trampled under foot" (213). The men may have "belonged" to these overly-passionate women, but it was the men who ultimately had to save their wives and sisters from their own self-destructiveness.

In *Great Expectations* we learned that female passion can only lead to disaster of one form or another. When Orlick justifiably calls Mrs. Joe "a foul shrew," Pip's sister begins to shriek, and rather than take her side against Orlick, Pip remarks:

> I must remark of my sister, what is equally true of all the violent women I have ever seen, that passion was no excuse for her, because it is undeniable that instead of lapsing into passion, she consciously and deliberately took extraordinary pains to force herself into it, and became blindly furious by regular stages. (107)

Ultimately, Molly, Mrs. Joe, and even Estella are tamed or softened by men, though most often brutally. Miss Haversham, too far gone in her throes, is consumed by that which nurished her madness. In the absence of workers, rebellious or otherwise, in *Great Expectations*, Dickens had no need to ridicule them as he did when he attacked their efforts at organizing through Dickens's only union organizer—the satirical character Slackbridge in *Hard Times*. Nevertheless, the earlier novel and *Great Expectations* are instructive about gender and class in Dickens, and both works point to a fundamental irony.

Perhaps no other writer of Dickens's generation more consistently and convincingly expressed the sexual and social outrages perpetrated against workers and women as a direct result of nineteenth-century predatory capitalism. In *The*

Chimes Dickens showed the nature of class outrages, especially as they affected the daughters of the working class. In this, the most bleak and politically satiric of Dickens's Christmas tales, Lilian and Margaret have seen their health and youth robbed from them by impoverishment:

> Such work, such work [Meg tells her friend]! So many hours, so many days, so many long, long nights of hopeless, cheerless, never-ending work—not to heap up riches, not to live grandly or gaily, not to live upon enough, however coarse; but to earn bare bread; to scrape together just enough to toil upon, and want upon, and keep alive in us the consciousness of our hard fate! How can the cruel world go round, and bear to look upon such lives! (127)

Dickens never more sharply and less apologetically expressed the fundamental contradictions of capitalism as he did in this tale. "I believe I have written a tremendous book. . . . It will make a great uproar, I have no doubt," Dickens wrote to Thomas Mitton on November 5, 1844. He was right: the Chartists made a big fuss over it, but the Liberal *Morning Chronicle* (December 17, 1844) said that Dickens had "gone into the very opposite extreme of ranging party against party and class against class." As Alderman Cute said in *The Chimes* "It's almost enough to make one think, if one didn't know better, that at times some motion of a capsizing nature was going on in things which affected the general economy of the social fabric" (130).

The Chartists must have been drawn to the open class warfare in *The Chimes*. In a rare reference to a Chartist activity, Will Fern tells Margaret:

> There'll be a Fire tonight. There'll be Fires this winter-time, to light the dark nights, East, West, North, and South. When you see the distant sky red, they'll be blazing . . . think of me no more; or, if you do, remember what a Hell was lighted up inside of me. (147-48)

He is referring to rick-burning, a practice in the late 1830s and early 40s in which agricultural workers took revenge against farmers who paid them starvation wages. These same fires of rage blazed before among the harridans of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Dickens obviously was drawn to women like Lilian and Margaret and workers like Will Fern and Trotty as portrayed in *The Chimes*. They are not so much towers of strength and resistance are they are victims and proponents of great endurance, patience, humility, and passivity. Most of the tale is a vision of young workers' lives "sinking lower and lower; [the wife] enduring, poor thing, miseries enough to wear her life away" (143). Lilian achieves near sainthood by dying young, a penitent woman who had been forced into prostitution. As she expires she tells Meg, "He suffered her to sit beside His feet, and dry them with her hair" (137), a reference to Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of repentant prostitutes.

Toward the end of this work, Trotty sums up what lessons he has drawn from the long nightmares he has had of his family and friends who live, when they are able, merely to work. It is a speech of great emotion, but of equally great disempowerment:

> I know that our Inheritance is held in store for us by Time. I know there is a Sea of Time to rise one day, before which all who wrong us or oppress us will be swept away like leaves. I see it, on the flow! I know that we must trust and hope, and neither doubt ourselves, nor doubt the Good in one another! Oh Spirits, merciful and good, I am grateful! (151)

The Chimes ends the way Dickens often liked to end his works which illustrate irreconcilable social and class differences—with an outburst of domestic joy: the men tamed, the women in a maternal mode. In his 1912 introduction to *Hard Times*, Shaw wrote that the novel "is Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter, rising up against civilization itself as a disease, and declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible; that it is not our criminals but our magnates that are robbing and murdering us."

Nevertheless, the genuine radicalness of the novel is undercut by Dickens's equally fixed bourgeois conservatism. *Hard Times*, which in most respects takes an unflinching look at capitalist antihumanitarian values, ends with a romantic and irrelevant tableau of Sissy Jupe and her family: "Herself

again a wife—a mother—lovingly watchful of her children" (298). Dickens pleads with the reader, presumably a middle-class audience which could effect social change, "It rests with you and me whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be!" he entreats (299).

With this same idealism, Dickens concludes *The Chimes*. Richard and Meg get married. The music of a band, the chimes "in lusty operation," and dancing couples fill up the background. Again an appeal is made, this time to the Listener, to "try to bear in mind the stern realities from which these shadows come [of Trotty's nightmares, which make up most of *The Chimes*]; and in your sphere—none is too wide, and none too limited for such an end—endeavor to correct, improve, and soften them" (154). The working poor and women—"not the meanest of our brethren or sisterhood," Dickens writes—should not be "debarred their rightful share in what our Great Creator formed them to enjoy" (154).

The Chimes and *Hard Times* are explicitly critical of workers taking matters into their own hands. The union organizer Slackbridge in *Hard Times*, as Shaw pointed out in his introduction, "is a mere figment of the middle-class imagination. No such man would be listened to by a meeting of English factory hands." Women fare a lot better than do labor leaders, probably because they are all better victims. Rachel, Louisa, and all the mothers in this novel—Bounderby's, Bitzer's, Louisas—are tormented to one degree or another. Not showing any aggressiveness, they are treated kindly. Sissy shows strength, but it is of a private, close-to-home nature, and she is the book's undeniable heroine.

In *The Chimes* social class and gender are similarly linked: those destitute men and women who stay close to home, even when they temporarily stray like Lilian, deserve our mercy. Will Fern has, he explains to Margaret, "a Hell . . . lighted up inside of me." He doesn't really want to do what he's doing. In both works, Time, Fate, and the goodness of the Masters are the forces to which Dickens ultimately makes his great appeal.

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