

# A mother's unconditional love

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A mother's unconditional love for her child is unlike any other human bond. Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* follows the story of a young boy named Pip as he grows into a man and his quest for the maternal love he was denied as a child. Orphaned at a young age, Pip is forced to grow up with his vengeful sister, Mrs.

Joe, and her husband, Joe Gargery. Later, he starts visiting Miss Havisham, a wealthy woman who was betrayed by one she trusted, and becomes infatuated with her adopted daughter, Estella. These women use Pip for their own self interest, and his thirst for love and acceptance leaves him vulnerable to their emotional torture.

At the end, he realizes that Biddy, one of his childhood friends who is always kind to him, is the maternal figure he was searching for. Pip's idea of maternal love is corrupted by Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham through their physical and emotional abuse prompted by their desire for societal vengeance; their death exonerates Pip, and he is finally able to experience true maternal love from Biddy through little Pip. Dickens tries to reinforce the status quo so that instead of focusing on their place in society, women will be able to provide for their children physically and emotionally. Mrs. Joe's anger at having to marry young for financial support, along with having to raise Pip, generates a growing sense of frustration which she takes out on Pip through verbal and physical abuse. Growing up, Pip has heard Mrs. Joe endlessly accuse him of being the cause of her misery: I may truly say I've never had this apron of mine off, since born you were. It's bad enough to be a blacksmith's wife (and him a Gargery) without being your mother (Dickens 11).

Throughout the novel, Mrs. Joe constantly complains about being married to a blacksmith signifying that she is unsatisfied with her social class. Mrs. Joe has never taken her apron off or had a break; she never had the chance to live her life because she was always busy taking care of Pip and feels trapped in her role. This growing frustration can not be repressed; Mrs. Joe blames Pip for suppressing her rise in social status and causing her misery.

After Pip starts visiting Miss Havisham, she invites Joe over one day while Mrs. Joe goes into town: We walked to town, my sister leading the way in a very large beaver bonnet, and carrying a basket like the Great Seal of England in plaited straw, a pair of patterns, a spare shawl, and an umbrella, though it was a fine bright day (Dickens 123). Mrs. Joe's eccentric outfit screams desperation; she is desperate to be a part of the upper class and receive the respect she believes she deserves. The various items she holds prove that she is able to afford all of them and once again displays her desire to be a part of the higher class. At this point in the novel, it seems as though Miss Havisham will take Pip under her wing; Mrs. Joe is ecstatic because she believes that Pip's emerging upper class status will lead to the rise of her own. Climbing the social ladder is the focus of her entire life instead of her family's needs, and this selfish behavior is exactly what leads to her demise. Additionally, Mrs. Joe's violent treatment leads Pip to associate it with affection and establishes corrupt ideas of love.

To be raised by hand means to be bottle or spoon fed during infancy rather than receiving breast milk; however, young Pip seems to have a different definition in mind: My sister had brought me up ? by hand.' Having at that

time to find out for myself what that expression meant, and knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand I supposed that I [was] brought up by hand (Dickens 9). Pip, unaware of the true definition of being brought up by hand, concludes that it must mean through severe beatings because it is what Mrs. Joe often does to him. This is how she has treated Pip his whole life, and now, he thinks this is how real mothers are supposed to act; he believes this is Mrs. Joe's way of displaying her love for him when in fact, it is the exact opposite. Being raised by hand, Pip lacks breast milk as well as maternal love because he has never experienced it. Mrs. Joe's verbal and physical treatment of Pip leads him to have corrupt ideas of love which impact his future relationships. Humiliated after being left at the altar, Miss Havisham desires vengeance against the society that essentially destroyed her and utilizes Estella to do so.

After Estella returns from studying abroad in Paris, Miss Havisham pressures Pip to fall in love with her: I adopted her to be loved. I bred her and developed her into what she is, that she might be loved. Love her!'... if the often repeated word had been hate instead of love – despair – revenge – dire death – it could not have sounded from her lips more like a curse'(Dickens 295). Miss Havisham immediately turns to revenge hoping it can mend her broken heart. Her past experience with love was like a curse; it consumed her just like her desire for retaliation is doing now. If Pip represents all men in society, by getting him to fall in love with Estella and having her break his heart, she will get her revenge and finally be at peace. Bred is a term usually used for raising animals, however Miss Havisham utilizes it to explain how she raised Estella. This portrays that she has no affection for Estella and the

only possible love she feels for her is selfish because she is the one who will enact Miss Havisham's revenge.

In her essay, Raphael argues that this craving for retribution consumes her to a point where she is not able to understand her surroundings: The tragedy of her life is that she fails to understand the system that works against her she seeks to revenge herself against society on its own terms She acts on the belief that it is only through dehumanizing and often brutal deceit and abuse that desire can be fulfilled (Raphael 5). Miss Havisham hallucinates that she has power in a society where rich, white males dominate and uses that to enact revenge. Due to her high status, Miss Havisham feels entitled to revenge against society as a whole rather than just those who betrayed her trust. She does not understand that she allows herself to be used by society which leads to her self-imprisonment. Miss Havisham's emotional abuse carried out through Estella combined with Pip's original corrupt ideas of love from Mrs. Joe only confuse him further; Pip is still not able to recognize what true love is. Due to Pip's abusive relationship with Mrs. Joe, he confuses this new emotional abuse for love.

After settling in London, Pip comes back to Kent to visit Miss Havisham, but can not get Estella out of his mind: I knew to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason against all discouragement that could be I loved her none the less because I knew...I had devoutly believed her to be human perfection (Dickens 286). Estella treats Pip badly which makes him miserable and he is well aware of that, yet he still loves her against [all] reason. Because of how Mrs. Joe treated him, he often

associates this feeling of pain for love since it is all he knows. He does not truly love Estella; he only loves the idea of being in love with someone as wealthy and powerful as her because at this point in the novel, that is all that Pip has on his mind. Mrs. Joe has always wanted wealth and power and Pip being an impressionable youth at that time believed those things were necessary for happiness.

He believes that wealth equals happiness and Mrs. Joe was only miserable because she was not wealthy. Pip is also pressured by Miss Havisham forcing him to love her and believes it is what he believes society expects of him. Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham realize the effect their selfish behavior has on Pip after they become physically impaired and ask him to forgive them, proving that they do care for him. One day after Pip returns from town, he is shocked to find his once loud and violent sister now an invalid after an attack: ... lying without sense or movement on the bare boards where she had been knocked down by a tremendous blow on the back of her head, dealt by some unknown hand when she was facing the fire (Dickens 147). The fact that she was hit when she was facing the fire has significance; the fire represents her anger and frustration at being a part of the lower class, and she is hit because she was so preoccupied by it.

The attack itself is also significant because Mrs. Joe receives a blow to the head which alludes to her positive change in behavior as the novel progresses. By physically impairing Mrs. Joe, Dickens proves that mothers who fantasize about climbing the social ladder instead of attending to their responsibilities will be punished. When Mrs. Joe becomes an invalid, Pip is

freed from her abuse and controlling nature; however, it has impacted the way he perceives love. Similar to Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham also becomes an invalid and begs Pip for forgiveness. When Pip returns to see Miss Havisham for the last time, she begs for his forgiveness and then punishes herself for the torture she put him through by burning herself: ... I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment, I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high'(Dickens 495). The fire symbolizes her anger and desire for vengeance; this is ironic considering that the passion that drives her ends up consuming her and leads to her demise. At this point, Miss Havisham finally realizes that making others feel the same pain she did brings misery instead of justice to Pip and her.

Seeing the damage she has caused, Miss Havisham seeks Pip's forgiveness, the only thing that will let her leave the world in peace. In his essay, Schneckner argues that Dickens punishes Miss Havisham by trapping her in guilt which is symbolically portrayed through fire and reinforce the status quo: 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 Havisham (Schneckner 7). Women who go against societal norms to benefit themselves, end up being punished. By focusing all that time and energy on enacting their revenge against society, they are not able to focus on providing their children with the love and adoration they deserve. Because she spends all her time obsessing over revenge, Miss Havisham is not able to genuinely care about Pip. Dickens tries to enforce the mother

stereotype and portray the importance of maternal love; those who do not experience this love at an early age have a hard time figuring out what it is, and this confusion about love will make them miserable like Pip.

After he is exonerated from Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham and the false ideas of love they brought, Pip is finally able to experience true maternal love through Biddy, the ideal Victorian mother, and little Pip. After Mrs. Joe becomes an invalid, Biddy moves in to take care of her and Pip realizes that Biddy is the kind of woman he wishes he could want: She was not beautiful – she was common, and could not be like Estella – but she was pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered she had curiously thoughtful and attentive eyes; eyes that were very pretty and very good.(Dickens 155). There is an inherent goodness to Biddy that is not expressed in the other characters. Eyes are often used as a metaphor for one's soul, so when Pip states that Biddy has eyes that are pretty and good, he is also saying that about her. Biddy is described as thoughtful and attentive proving that, unlike Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham, she does not seek societal vengeance of any sort because she is content with her way of life. She is quick to help Mrs. Joe and take on the role of a caretaker; this displays her maternal instincts and also proves that Biddy is the only female character in the novel that genuinely cares for others' wellbeing.

In addition to being the only female character that exhibits good behavior throughout the novel, Biddy proves to be the mother Pip needs. After working with Herbert in Egypt for eleven years, Pip comes back to visit Joe, Biddy, and their son who is also named Pip: Biddy looked down at her child,



and put its little hand to her lips, and then put the good matronly hand with which she had touched it, into mine. There was something in the action and in the light pressure of Biddy's wedding-ring, that had a very pretty eloquence in it (Dickens 595). This simple action is the most meaningful sign of affection Pip receives from any maternal figure. Dickens highlights the fact that Biddy touches Pip with the same hand she touches little Pip to prove that she treats them both with love.

Naming Biddy and Joe's child Pip signifies that he is reborn and given a second chance at maternal love through Biddy. Her gentle touch and affection for her child deeply contrast the harsh beatings of Mrs. Joe and cold attitude of Miss Havisham. In his essay, Axton argues that Biddy's relationship with Joe provides as a contrast for all the other ones in the novel: Thus where other relationships further revenge for wrongs done by another, these forgive and forget where others promote the differences of rank and status, these level all to a common moral egalitarianism based on simple gentleness (Axton 70). In the novel, Biddy repeatedly proves that she is a wonderful mother; she does not utilize Pip's newfound status for personal gain or use him to further her revenge like Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham because she genuinely cares for him.

Biddy and Joe's relationship is one of the few that are based on true reciprocated love; they are also the only characters in the novel that stay good throughout the entire novel. Biddy is the only mother to receive a happy ending because she embodies how Dickens thinks a real mother should act: She truly loves her child, exhibits compassion when helping Mrs.

Joe when she was an invalid, and acts selflessly. Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham abuse Pip physically and emotionally because they are unhappy with their place in society and corrupt his idea of maternal love. Pip is only able to experience true maternal love from Biddy after the selfish maternal figures in his life have passed away. Dickens attempts to reinforce the status quo so that women will be able to provide for their children physically and emotionally instead of focusing on their social status. Pip's lack of maternal love from Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham leads him to confuse the abuse he received for love.

By killing them off in the novel, Dickens reveals that selfish mothers will be punished for their actions and exonerates Pip from his former idea of love. Today, many people confuse abuse from someone that is close to them for love just like Pip did. It is our responsibility as society to tell them that abuse is not love and educate them; by doing so, we can help them recognize the abuse, get them out of the situation, and prevent them from being trapped in a similar situation later in life. If we educate everyone, not just the victims, we can give administrators of abuse the ability to realize what they are doing and prevent violent acts before they happen, because no one deserves to be abused.