Title of Paper: **Imposed Identities and Buried Moral Instincts in *Great Expectations***

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Abstract:

Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* raises questions about identity formation, social influence, and morality. While others in the novel often try to impose identities upon individuals, the characters display moral instincts contrary to the imagined personas. Therefore, inner selves tend to conflict with imagined and imposed selves, creating identity crises for Magwitch, Estella, and Pip. Throughout the novel, the characters reveal buried moral instincts and shed the imposed identities, demonstrating that popular, crafted images of identities are not accurate reflections of the characters.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, identity, self, persona, society, morality, instinct, autobiography, narration

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Trending among Dickens critics are arguments that consumerism, self-narration, and social influence are crucial aspects of identity in *Great Expectations*. Rhetoric of creation and construction is frequently used regarding the identities of characters as built by others. I would like to argue that despite any external intentions to determine another’s identity, characters demonstrate existential agency, existing contrary to the imagined images. As Magwitch, Estella, and Pip come to reveal buried moral instincts underneath layers of superimposed selves, there becomes clear a contrast between what one is brought up to be and one’s suppressed self. None of these characters fulfill the roles that society or another has prescribed for them because the envisaged personas contrast with true selves buried beneath. By the end of the novel, though, and despite complications arisen from self-awareness, social image, and perspective, these sublayers have been unsheathed to reveal suppressed inner selves and instinctive morality.

Some critics of *Great Expectations* have considered the effect of others imposing a particular role upon an individual. Elliot Gilbert argues both others and the self are guilty of imagining identities: “in the abyss of idealism, everyone is necessarily the figment of someone else’s imagination, even while supposing himself to be the center of his own universe” (137-8). Imagined personas actually cloud accurate self-perception. The individual may not even realize this is occurring, which is quite the case with Pip, due to his pompousness. Since the characters cannot live up to the imagined personas, identity is not the result of building, but of shedding the imagined versions, which then gives access to an inner self and natural instinct. 

Complicating this further, identities are not just imagined by others, but forced upon individuals. For Jeremy Tambling, “*Great Expectations* certainly recognises itself to be about the creation of identities, imposed from higher to lower, from oppressor to oppressed” (18). When an identity is imposed by another, it more actively buries an inner self and instinctive morality. Estella has great difficulty escaping from the identity oppression she suffers under the hands of Miss Havisham, whereas Magwitch readily denies his criminality and acts in ways to disprove it. The novel is not so much, then, about how identities are created, but how inner selves try to emerge when suppressed by external influences. Because all characters respond to imposed identities differently, it will be worth considering Magwitch, Estella, and Pip collectively to show the ways imposed identities are not accurate reflections of their inner selves and morality.

I. The Angel of the Criminal Underground

There is popular agreement that Magwitch is both a victim of social oppression and society’s creation. Sean Grass notices two narrative presentations of Magwitch:

the official record authorized and produced by the law, in which he appears as the worst of a very bad lot, and the verbal account of himself that he gives to Pip and Herbert, which Pip writes into the novel and which recasts the legal narrative in ways that make the insufficiency of both narratives perfectly clear. (“Commodity and Identity in *Great Expectations*,” 631)
The narration of Magwitch presents a criminal identity determined by the courts as well as Pip’s transcription of a personal story of a man wronged. Grass feels both narratives are lacking, which makes it more difficult for the reader to see Magwitch’s true self. A third identity would be that imagined by the reader, which further complicates truly knowing Magwitch. With layers of imaginings occurring, then, Magwitch needs to emerge from the layers to expose his true self and morality.

Certainly an idea of Magwitch has been created by society, but Magwitch himself denies and disproves any resemblance to it. Society, in creating a criminal image, actually tries to destroy Magwitch’s inner identity. The true Magwitch is very self-aware and acknowledges society’s influence through dialogue with Pip:

‘What were you brought up to be?’
‘A warmint, dear boy.’

[Magwitch] answered quite seriously, and used the word as if it denoted some profession. (324).

Magwitch is not innately a bad man; he acknowledges that this is what he was “brought up to be.” He is repeatedly told he is a criminal, and although guilty of committing crime, he distinguishes himself as a better man than Compeyson. Once sentenced harsher punishment than Compeyson, Magwitch realizes that society has failed him due to its preconceived ideas about class, criminality, and identity. Magwitch is brought up to be a criminal, then, by a society that tells him he is a criminal. He realizes that his morality actually reigns higher than that with which society would credit him. Though Magwitch was not brought up to be moral, he still holds onto his moral compass, which leads him to provide for Pip. Pip’s remarks that being a “warmint” is like a profession suggests a parallelization between upbringing and prescribed role, both of which are guided by another more so than the self. Pip, likewise, is brought up to be a blacksmith and then later a gentleman, while Estella is brought up to “wreak revenge on all the male sex” (172). Yet upbringing and professions do not define a person’s interior self or morality. Magwitch eventually proves to be a good man despite being labeled a criminal.

Before Magwitch proves himself morally good, Pip is guilty of the same offence as society in imagining a negative image of the man. Pip feels an “insurmountable aversion” toward Magwitch and is tortured and tormented by his presence (325). Yet when Pip realizes that Magwitch the man is not quite the monster he imagined him to be, his view changes, and ultimately, he elevates his benefactor to a higher moral ground than himself:

My repugnance to him had all melted away; and in the hunted, wounded, shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (442)

Pip’s own sense of self becomes complicated in realizing that a man who has been cast as a vicious criminal is in fact a “better man” than he, who has been cast as a gentleman. Pip’s vision of Magwitch here is sympathetic, as he witnesses how the “affectionate,” “gracious,” “generous” man has been “hunted, wounded, [and] shackled.” Keith Easley considers the effect of Pip’s narration on the reader:
“Magwitch dies in dignity because Pip has made a hero of him” (183). Yet, Pip making Magwitch into a hero could potentially be another façade imposed upon a character. This raises the question as to whether Magwitch really is a hero, or the reader is swayed by Pip’s slanted narration. Complications arise for the reader who gets pictures of Magwitch as both criminal and hero. Though denying the severity of his criminality, Magwitch does admit to a history of crime. On the other hand, Magwitch’s story and behavior cause Pip to sympathize with him and acknowledge his morality. Despite Pip’s initially imposed appalling façade, Magwitch ultimately does remove the layer of imagined persona to reveal a better self underneath, proving that he is as good as the hero that Pip eventually does imagine him to be.

Even though the narrative perspective potentially leaves questions as to Magwitch as real hero or Magwitch as imagined hero, he does prove himself as morally good by his actions. It is not just Pip’s opinion or sympathetic language, but also Magwitch’s behavior that allows readers to see his moral goodness. When Magwitch is first recaptured, he lies to save Pip from getting in trouble for helping him (Dickens 37). Magwitch demonstrates a morally grounded lie for the protection of the young boy. Further, since an older Pip expresses a more intensified fear and revulsion toward the criminal than he did when he was a child, Pip’s education has enabled him to be more judgmental, rather than open-minded and sympathetic. Once Pip’s journey as a gentleman is halted by the return of Magwitch, and the two men are confined to one space, Pip’s moral education can begin. This is how Magwitch serves as an angel of the criminal world—he provides Pip a moral education in the confines of private space. Magwitch’s goodness proves society’s superimposed vision of him as an insidious criminal has been falsely adhered.

The Magwitch plot may also considered as heavily driven by a desire for revenge on society for its harsh treatment on him and leniency on Compeyson.1 Yet, I should like to argue that Magwitch’s private journey is to prove to himself that a good man can rise out of the trenches into upper class society. This is not for revenge on society because society does not know, nor can ever know, what he has done. The revenge pot is confined to the Magwitch-Compeyson toils, while Magwitch’s plan for Pip is for his own self-satisfaction and to benefit someone who helped him in a time of trouble. Magwitch wants to prove a gentleman with lower origins can be a better man than Compeyson. But the only person he will ever be able to prove this to his himself; it is to his inner satisfaction, then, to know that he has been a surrogate father and helped a poor boy become a gentleman. With pride, Magwitch says, “If I ain’t a gentleman, nor yet ain’t got no learning, I’m the owner of such” (318). Though seemingly somewhat selfishly motivated, Magwitch cannot be deemed entirely self-serving. He is genuinely proud of Pip because he thinks he has done the boy some good, returning the favor the child once paid him. He tells Pip, “You acted noble, my boy... And I have never forgot it!” (313). Magwitch’s plan, therefore, is both self-serving and good-willed charity for another. He has proven to himself that his criminality does not solely define him; he is capable of actuating class and moral transcendence.

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1 See Sadrin, 103; Easley, 181–182
Magwitch, therefore, rejects his criminality as a part of his interior self. Magwitch as immoral criminal is a misrepresentation that Pip corrects, even though society never does. Magwitch seems to be one character who truly knows himself. He knows that he was wronged by society, and he credits society for making him into a criminal. But he uses all the means he can to reject this image, even if it is only to himself. Therefore, Magwitch has a clear sense of self, and acts according to this self.

II. The Heart of the Maneater

Like Magwitch, who rejects the role society has cast for him, Estella, too, comes to deny the image that Miss Havisham crafts for her. Critics argue that Estella is created, constructed, or authored by “Miss Havisham’s deforming hands” (Easley 181) Tambling, in a similar vein, says, “Estella might have turned out one way as one of the 'fish' to come to Jaggers's net, yet she is constituted differently (though almost as nihilistically) by the identity she receives from Miss Havisham's hands” (Tambling 20). The rhetoric of constructing identities draws attention to physical building, that is, with the hands. Being constructed by the hands (like Pip, who was also “brought up by hand”) objectifies the individuals. Further, Grass argues, “like a commodity, [Estella] originates in a financial transaction” (“Commodity and Identity in Great Expectations,” 634). Estella as product makes her the doll, the puppet, of a woman hell-bent on revenge. Miss Havisham has selfish intentions for Estella, and therefore, does not treat her as a human, but as an object that she can impose upon an identity of her choosing.

Estella initially seems to accept her objectified self, though she ultimately follows in Magwitch’s suit and rejects the identity imposed upon her. She removes her hardened shell to expose a softer, sentimental self beneath the layers. From the onset, though, Estella acts to appease Miss Havisham’s whims. For Gail Turley Houston, “clearly Estella views herself as Miss Havisham’s ornamental object, to be dangled before men to tantalize them and break their hearts. Thus, groomed to be the absent center of the Victorian male’s affections, Estella incites obsessive emotional responses in men while she herself is without feelings” (157-8). Houston’s observations seem to ring true, as Estella behaves according to Miss Havisham’s grooming and even declares she has no heart: “no softness there, no—sympathy—sentiment—nonsense” (234). Claiming to lack feeling and sentiment would suggest she accepts her objectified self, that the superimposed self has become her actual self; however, her behavior toward Pip suggests she does have sympathy, despite her attempts to bury it. When Pip asks Estella about deceiving other men, she tells him, “all of them but you” (308). She displays compassion in the only way she can, by trying not to break his heart. Pip would be an easy target for her because he is brought before her for that purpose, but even though she denies having a heart, Estella refrains from intentionally hurting Pip, displaying a deeply buried moral sentiment.

Estella realizes throughout the course of the narration that she has only lived as a crafted image. This realization ultimately allows her to shed her hardened shell at the end of the novel. A key moment exposing Estella’s self-awareness is when she argues with Miss Havisham in front of Pip. She says, “I am what you have made me” (301), acknowledging herself as constructed. She also confesses she is “only a little tired of [herself]” (300), suggesting that the self she has adopted is not the true self.
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she wants to be. Estella’s confrontation with Miss Havisham reveals her inner conflict between her buried self and the shell of a self superimposed by her adopted mother: “When have you found me false to your teaching? When have you found me unmindful of your lessons? . . . Who taught me to be proud? . . . Who taught me to be hard? . . . Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?” (302). Estella acknowledges that her pride and hardness comes from the training of Miss Havisham; they were not qualities she was born with. Estella has realized that she does not want to be the person that Miss Havisham raised her to be. There is another identity deep within her that wants to emerge but is suppressed by conditioning.

While Estella is aware of the conditioning, she still has difficulty distinguishing herself from it. To Pip, she says, “it is in my nature,” and then, “with a stress upon the words, ‘It is in the nature formed within me’” (357). Estella has blended her natural self into her constructed self because she cannot find a way to separate the two. She knows she has been trained, but since she knows no other way, she cannot break free from existing as the conditioned doll of Miss Havisham. When Pip tells her, “you speak of yourself as if you were some one else” (262), he recognizes the layered selves within Estella. He does not presently associate her words and behaviors with her true self. Because Estella’s instinctive self is so deeply buried, it has trouble emerging.

It is not until the end of the novel that Estella finally doffs her hardened shell for the opportunity for her natural, moral self to emerge. Easley argues that it is through Pip that Estella comes to an understating of her self: “In gaining knowledge of herself through Pip’s authorship, she may achieve self-possession…Pip offers Estella the consummating power of an author, and the hope that belongs to a heroine, without which passion makes everything nothing” (Easley 216). There is a personal agency involved that Estella never had when controlled by Miss Havisham. While Easley argues the physical novel itself is the means by which Estella will achieve self-possession, Pip’s autobiography is actually never physically presented as text. The narrator exists in an undeterminable future. While Pip may have the ability to show Estella how she can learn who she really is, this does not occur within the confines of the narrative text. What does occur is a de-shelling that shows that difficult life experiences have allowed Estella to realize her shell is not who she is, and thereby she can remove it to discover a deeply buried self.

Dickens limits the reader’s access to Estella’s buried self, and instead, focuses on change. Estella realizes she is not the same person she was in the past. She tells Pip, “I am greatly changed. I wonder you know me” (478). Physically, Estella has changed, as Pip also notes, but internally Estella is also not the same person. She says, “I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape” (480), acknowledging her change and the violent life experiences that stimulated it. But she also hopes that her current self is better than her former self, suggesting this self is the one that wanted to emerge all along, but that was perpetually suppressed by her adopted mother. Pip’s observations note both Estella’s physical and internal changes, but also argue they allow for the emergence a sentimental self that Estella never before could fully expose:

The freshness of her beauty was indeed gone, but its indescribable majesty and its indescribable charm remained. Those attractions in it, I
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had seen before; what I had never seen before, was the saddened,
softened light of the once proud eyes; what I had never felt before was
the friendly touch of the once insensible hand. (478)

Though Estella’s eyes may be “saddened” and “softened,” her change has given her a
“friendly touch” that never previously existed. Estella needed to be softened in order
to remove her superimposed, hardened, man eater shell. She also cries looking over
the remains of Satis House, displaying emotion and sentiment that she has long
suppressed.

Most importantly in considering Estella’s buried self, though, is her admission
that she does in fact have a heart. Estella tells Pip she has often thought of him:
“There was a long hard time when I kept far from me the remembrance of what I had
thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth. But since my duty has not been
incompatible with the admission of that remembrance, I have given it a place in my
heart” (479). This realization suggests that Estella has always had a heart, but it was
so deeply buried that she could hardly access it, and compassion could not
materialize. Estella’s ignorance came from the training and conditioning of Miss
Havisham. When Estella’s difficult life experiences cause her to realize that the self
that was imposed upon her was not her actual self, nor the person she wanted to be,
she is able to look back upon the past, deep within herself, and find her heart.

III. The Existentialism of the Wannabe

Discovering the roots of Pip’s identity can raise conflict between whether Pip
is self-created or created by others. On one hand, Pip is argued to be self-created
because he names himself, and therefore, throughout the novel, he may be seen as
self-imagined. He does not face the same persona oppression as Magwitch and Estella
except through himself. Pip’s identity fluctuates because he chooses to adopt the
personas that he thinks are most appropriate to him at a given moment. Because Pip is
the narrator, many critics have also focused on narrative writing as a means for
constructing one’s identity. Sean Grass argues that solitary space, specifically the
metaphorical prison, has the power to “not only to shape Pip’s identity but also to
control and impel his construction of that identity through language” (“Great
foster self-creation for a first person narrator. Keith Easley argues, “the older Pip
authors his hero, his younger self, providing the means for him to see himself from
the outside, thereby further developing the movement towards self-possession” (207).
For Easley, authoring helps Pip eventually experience self-discovery. This can occur
only in retrospect, though, as a younger Pip’s does not view himself clearly, and
instead, imagines the self he wants to be.

Yet, language is complicated by self-deception, which prevents Pip from
knowing his true self, as he gets caught up in his own imagined vision of his identity.
“Pip has not only deceived himself in the past but continues to do so even as he tells
the story of his previous self-deceptions. The cumulative effect of these examples is
to suggest the impossibility of ever distinguishing completely between truth and
falsehood” (Jordan 29).2 When Pip has difficulty perceiving his faults, he is blind to

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2 Elaine Scarry also notes Pip’s difficulty in distinguishing between artifice and reality (Scarry 63).
his own true nature. John O. Jordan argues that narrator Pip is also self-deceiving; however, the autobiographical form allows narrator Pip to reflect upon and admit his own childhood ignorance. He confesses, “I was lost in the mazes of my future fortunes” (Dickens 139). The narrator Pip, who is more self-aware, can admit ignorant self-deception. As young Pip perpetually deceives himself, it becomes increasingly more difficult to gain an understanding of his inner, natural self beyond that it is prone to self-deception. Pam Morris notes a “forging of self” when Pip “construct[s] the appropriate style of wealth” (Morris 114). Pip imagines a gentleman self that he tries to live up to. But this vision is based on the criteria of removing the abhorred “commonness” from his identity, not any sort of inherent or natural trait. It is both forged and forced. Pip cannot be credited with creating himself because he does not really know himself. He adopts multiple personas throughout the text: a criminal, a common boy, and apprentice, a gentleman. Narrator Pip has realized that his younger self took on roles because of deeply buried self-conflict: “It is possible that I may have been, without quite knowing it, dissatisfied with myself” (Dickens 142). Young Pip does not admit to feeling any dissatisfaction, and instead, gets caught up in fulfilling the role of a gentleman. But by the end of the novel, Pip has seen (through Joe and Magwitch) what it really means to be a “good man,” realizes he has failed in this capacity, and lives his life more self-aware and self-reflective.

While on one hand, Pip constantly imagines personas for his identity, there are also outside influences that try to shape his identity. Critics have credited several examples, from society to specific characters, which raises the conflict between self-created and created by others. Gail Turley Houston looks at consumerist society: “Fallen in to the world of production and consumption, Pip is not born; he is made” (161). Sean Grass views Pip as a commodity “owned” by other characters (“Commodity and Identity in Great Expectations,” 621, 635). The other characters in the novel do envision roles for Pip that he typically adopts. Eiichi Hara actually argues that these other “authors” impose identities on Pip that he could not create himself (Hara 601). One example of this is Estella, writing Pip’s identity through her ridicule (Grass, “Great Expectations, Self-Narration, and the Power of the Prison,” 175). Indeed, after Estella’s criticism, Pip views himself as common: “I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it” (Dickens 57-8). Pip loses appreciation for his life and wishes it were different. He realizes, in retrospect, that his attitude was poor, but a naïve Pip readily accepts the imposition of identity by others, whether positive or negative. Therefore, Pip’s imagined self is the result of the selves others also imagine for him. Pip is not so innovative as to reinvent himself, but he accepts the identities that others give to him, making him both self- and socially imagined. Pip behaves as he imagines his persona should, as when he is given the means to become a gentleman and tries to blend into that life. Later, when he learns his benefactor’s true origins, he shuns Magwitch and his money. Pip was perfectly content to live the role of gentleman prior to this knowledge. Once he reunites with Magwitch, though, suddenly his existence feels tainted and he fears the social stigma of being associated with a criminal.
One of the most popular attributives to Pip’s identity is Magwitch. Hara remarks, “the author of the story is not Pip but Magwitch, who has been devising, plotting, and writing Pip's story. Magwitch is a character representing the double meaning of ‘author’: the writer and the father” (593). Magwitch certainly makes this claim, saying, “I’ve made a gentleman on you!” (Dickens 316) and repeatedly calling Pip “my gentleman” (326). Magwitch wants to create a better man than Compeyson, for his experience with this corrupt gentleman makes him want to rectify the gentleman race, but he fails by choosing Pip because Pip lacks the moral sympathy needed to be a pure and good gentleman. Even though the money was intended to do good, Pip does not have the same moral capacity of someone like Joe or Magwitch. Magwitch sees something in Pip that makes him hope to raise a good gentleman, but without his physical presence as part of Pip’s upbringing, Pip cannot achieve the moral goodness ascribed to Magwitch. The paradoxical situation is that if Magwitch were present in Pip’s life to give him both financial means and a moral education, Pip would resist it because it was coming from a supposedly morally disinclined criminal. However, without Magwitch’s physical presence, Pip lacks a moral model. Ironically, Dickens casts a criminal as such a moral model and father figure.

Magwitch does greatly impact Pip’s life; however, Pip’s moral deficiency, not his newfound wealth, causes him to run up debt and shun Joe. Perhaps his new place in society makes it more difficult for him to recover or even acquire a moral code of conduct, but this weak moral compass existed even before Pip’s social climb. Pip imagines himself a gentleman, and Magwitch imagines him a morally inclined gentleman. However, Pip’s own selfishness blurs his sense of morality, making it impossible to live up to the moral standard Magwitch desires in a gentleman (fortunately for Magwitch, he is ignorant to Pip’s shortcomings). Before Pip’s class awareness, he demonstrates a confused sense of morality. He aids the convict out of fear for his own life: “I was in mortal terror of the young man who wanted my heart and liver” (13). Pip fears his own life, not his family’s. Meanwhile, Joe does not disprove the convict stealing from him: “We don’t know what you have done, but we wouldn’t have you starved to death for it, poor miserable fellow-creature” (38). Joe feels a moral obligation to humanity, where Pip only feels a duty toward himself. After exposure to the upper class, Pip continues his moral decline, criticizing Joe and his station in life (62). Pip also makes conscious, selfish choices, as when he does not return to visit Joe after telling Biddy he would (282). His catapult into upper class society does not make him selfish, it only allows his selfishness to grow. Pip’s inner self as selfish and lacking strong morals frequently emerges, proving that personas cannot cover his true moral tendencies.

However, it has been noted that Pip’s “moral regeneration” (Morris 117) is a result of his interactions with Magwitch. Henri Talon argues that Magwitch’s return allows Pip to finally find some balance between his past, present, and future, where he has “achieved existential transcendence” (131). Easley looks at contemporary definitions of individuality to claim, “the self simply constitutes and validates itself through its own activity. We make ourselves what we are” (Easley 199). Again using

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3 Lelchuk calls Magwitch’s return, “the artist viewing his creation” (412).
rhetoric of constructing. Easley views the “making” of the self occurring for Pip through consideration of his past and writing his autobiography. Pip’s “making” of himself throughout has largely been due to the influence of others. Yet, by the end, he does not actually “make” himself. Instead, he reflects on his life to discover himself. Realizing he is not as moral as Joe or Magwitch does not actually make Pip more moral; it just brings awareness to the limitations of his existing morality. Pip can now reflect upon his life through writing his autobiography with a clearer sense of self than he had in his self-deceiving past.

Despite identities imagined and imposed by others onto individuals, they ultimately are unable to be fulfilled because they are not actually reflective of the character’s true selves or instinctive moralities. Dickens demonstrates throughout his novel that when false identities are imagined, they put limitations on individuals. If people do not have a clear sense of self, then life becomes a struggle as inner identities fight to emerge. The three characters discussed, though presented very differently, all struggle with conflicts between public and inner selves. By the end, we can be satisfied that imposed identities have not prevailed, and the true individuals have emerged to provide better self-awareness and understanding.

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