Mary Wollstonecraft’s Principles Mirrored in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*: An Analysis of the Education, Economic Activity, and Marriage Relationships of Dickens’s Female Characters

There is no doubt that Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (hereafter *Vindication*) has been foundational for modern feminism and central to current feminist discussions. In recent years, she has been discussed in women’s studies, law, and religious journals, all in regards to feminist theory and thought. In 2016, Julie Murray wrote about Wollstonecraft’s modern conceptions of rights in the *Journal of Woman’s Writing*, and in 2015, Paul Kerry discussed Wollstonecraft’s concepts of equal capacity between men and women in BYU’s *Journal of Public Law*. However, while Wollstonecraft’s treatise seems to be widely discussed in feminist scholarship, *Vindication* is all but absent as a literary analysis lens. From law to feminism, scholars in these fields have commented on and analyzed *Vindication*. While there is some literary scholarship in regards to Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen, commentary using *Vindication* in the field of literary criticism seems largely untouched. This may be because *Vindication* is widely considered a political treatise and a foundational piece on feminist theory rather than a literary text. Despite the neglect, there is ample room for literary critics to discuss *Vindication* and its ramifications in popular British literature. From Jane Austen to Coventry Patmore, evidence of Wollstonecraft’s ideas and theories can be seen in British
literature throughout subsequent decades. Specifically, the female characters of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* stand as prime examples of *Vindication*’s continued presence in Victorian literature.

In 1861, Charles Dickens published *Great Expectations* as his thirteenth novel. By this time, Dickens had become a prolific writer and national icon. Described as the “quintessential Victorian novelist,” Dickens creates female characters who give us insight into views of women during the Victorian period. This period was a time of great progression, reform, and change for Victorian society. The decade leading up to the publication of *Great Expectations* especially saw an increase in the debate over women’s rights in both periodicals and the legal sphere. The Divorce Act of 1857 was passed in this decade, one of the first steps towards gaining improved legal status for women (Shanley 355-357). Periodicals addressing the “Woman Question” also began appearing, such as *Macmillan’s Magazine*, which in 1859 first presented articles both for and against expanded women’s rights (Broomfield 120-122). Situated in the midst of this rising debate, *Great Expectations* gives key insights into Victorian perspectives on women. By viewing Dickens’s characters through a lens of Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric, we can see that her ideas were relevant through the Victorian age and foundational for the period’s rhetoric on women’s rights. In particular, Wollstonecraft’s philosophies of women’s educational development, economic opportunities, and marriage relationships as discussed in *Vindication* are seen in Dickens’s novel. The characters Miss Havisham, Estella, and Mrs. Gargery show the consequences of maintaining traditional female stereotypes and standards, whereas the character of Biddy portrays the positive effects of improved female education. Dickens’s depictions of women illustrate that Wollstonecraft’s principles and theories had been incorporated in British culture and reflect their relevance in Victorian times.
**Women’s Educational Development**

Mary Wollstonecraft asserts that lack of female education is the cause of female vice, frailty, and weakness. She explains in *Vindication* that after having researched education she finds that “the neglected education of my fellow-creature is the grand source of misery I deplore; and that women in particular are weak and wretched because of it” (8). For her, the lack of female education has left women in a weakened state. They are not able to fend for themselves or use reason to cultivate a healthy mind. She continues that “like the flowers which are planted in too rich soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty” (8). Because women are not being educated, all they focus on is beauty and outward appearance. Their sole object is to please men. The consequence of this is to make women “alluring mistresses [rather] than wives” (8). As a result, women must resort to cunning and jealousy rather than wit and reason to achieve their aims.

Wollstonecraft also argues that women must be educated and allowed to use reason if they are to develop virtue. She says that both men and women “may become virtuous by the exercise of their own reason” (21). Education, exercising reason, and using one’s intellect is the means by which men cultivate virtue. If both men and women have souls and were created by God, then women should be able to develop virtue in similar ways. The neglect of developing virtue is what has rendered woman vain creatures of beauty. By cultivating virtue, they can become independent and gain unbiased respect from men (28). According to Wollstonecraft, developing virtue through intellect and reason will ultimately cause women to be better friends to their husbands, mothers to their children, and sisters to their brothers.

Wollstonecraft’s claims that lack of educational opportunities causes female vice, folly, and misery carry on into the subsequent century as evidenced in the female characters in *Great
Throughout the Victorian period education for women continued to be limited. The philosophy of separate spheres meant that women were still mostly educated to perform domestic duties and that formal education was not widely accessible for most Victorian women. In her book *A History of Women’s Education in England*, June Purvis describes how in the period between 1780-1850 the idea of separate spheres “became sanctified in middle-class thought and practice” (Purvis 2). She further describes how this separation of spheres meant that “extensive, systematic education was not advocated as an essential aspect of the ideal of the ladylike wife and mother” and that “intellectual education was supposed to make a woman into that monstrous being” (7). One result of this ideology is showed by an 1850 census record which recorded only 10.8% of women attending day school (12). Clearly, formal female education throughout the first half of the 19th century was still limited, validating Wollstonecraft’s concerns about lack of women receiving the opportunity to exercise reason and cultivate virtue.

Female education surely would have been among issues discussed as “The Woman Question” became increasingly debated in the 1850s. In an article describing the rise of “The Woman Question,” Nancy Anderson states that, “The moderate demands of the 1850s did, however, stimulate a larger debate on the general question of the nature and role of women, a debate which came to be known simply as the Woman Question” (137). In this state of increased interest in female issues, Dickens would have been aware of female education plights. Catharine Golden points out that Dickens had an awareness of women victimized by villainous men, and was progressive in his treatment of children, the poor, and education (Golden 1). It is in light of this context that Dickens wrote his novel *Great Expectations*. The female characters in this novel highlight aspects of debates over female rights, and illustrate Wollstonecraft’s philosophies concerning the neglect of women’s education, which may have been shared by Dickens.
In particular, the female characters Miss Havisham and Estella display the cunning, jealousy, and vice that Wollstonecraft says result from a lack of education. Estella is raised by Miss Havisham to focus on her beauty and use that beauty for power. When Pip first meets Estella he describes how Miss Havisham compares Estella’s beauty to a jewel and then comments that “one day, my dear, you will use it [her beauty] well” (60). Miss Havisham’s comment insinuates that Estella should use her beauty to usurp power over men. This is reinforced when Miss Havisham tells Estella that she can use her beauty to break Pip’s heart. Wollstonecraft warns that this focus on beauty as a form of power leads to tyranny and cunning. She says, “Mistaken notions of female excellence produces a propensity to tyrannize and a birth to cunning” (11). Because of her upbringing, Estella tyrannizes over Pip, manipulates his emotions, and leverages her power for gain. The behavior continues as Pip and Estella come into adolescence, and Estella allows Pip to spend time with her to believe that Miss Havisham wants them to be together, all the while telling him that she will break his heart.

Miss Havisham illustrates the consequences of poor mothering in her upbringing of Estella. She constantly encourages Estella to “break their [men’s] hearts and have no mercy” (95). In later years Estella describes how she had her “wits sharpened” growing up in Miss Havisham’s house. This supports Wollstonecraft’s claim that if women do not receive more learning they will never be sensible mothers. When children are not correctly instilled with moral character, a great part of their later upbringing deals with trying to correct faults instilled in their younger years. Miss Havisham later conveys her remorse of how she raised Estella, telling Pip “When she first came to me I meant to save her from misery like my own. . . . But as she grew, and promised to be very beautiful, I gradually did worse” (399). This behavior reflects Wollstonecraft’s theory that such women will be poor examples to their daughters and perpetuate
a cycle of vice and folly (45). It also contrasts with the kind of woman that Wollstonecraft describes who has “tolerable understanding” and comprehends moral duties and human virtue, a woman who will later “see the virtues she endeavored to plant” in her children (45-46). In contrast to this mother, Miss Havisham portrays a mother who has not cultivated virtue or fulfilled her moral duty. Instead she perpetuates a cycle of vice and folly by teaching Estella to use her beauty and cunning for power and gain.

In contrast to Miss Havisham and Estella, Biddy’s character is kind, intelligent, and proves to be a good friend and wife as a result of her education. She too is an orphan and is raised by her grandmother, who owns a small shop and runs a night school with which Biddy helps. In fact, Pip explains that the grandmother neglects both the night school and store, leaving Biddy the responsibility of managing these two functions (Dickens 44). It is from this night school that Biddy likely gains her education, and in later years she becomes the mistress of her own school house. As a result of her education, Biddy proves capable and resourceful in any task she is given. Pip describes her as “the most obliging of girls,” saying she would immediately “carry out her promise within five minutes” (73). Throughout the novel, she is an example of a productive and amiable woman, which points to the positive effects of female education.

Biddy’s positive qualities and traits validate Wollstonecraft’s claims that educating women will allow them to better fulfill their duties as mothers, sisters, wives, and home makers. Biddy, though not directly a mother, is happy to help Pip learn in various ways and proves to be an effective teacher and manager. Wollstonecraft also claims that allowing women to cultivate their minds will make them better friends to their husbands. Biddy is a great friend to Pip not only by teaching him but by listening to him. Pip describes that it felt “natural” to convey his feelings to Biddy, and that she expressed “deep concern.” It seems that Biddy’s education has
also rendered her an apt listener and able to connect with Pip, her male counterpart. These parallels show that Mary Wollstonecraft’s philosophies continued to be evident in females into the Victorian period.

Biddy’s character also shows how education can help working class girls as well. While Mary Wollstonecraft did not address female class distinctions to any great extent in *Vindication*, Dickens portrays the effects of education on lower class females in *Great Expectations*. Biddy is clearly in the working class due to his descriptions of “her hair always wanted brushing, her hands always wanted washing, and her shoes always wanted mending” (Dickens 44). Her work of arranging her grandmother’s shop transactions and housekeeping for Joe when Mrs. Gargery is gone also falls in line with lower class job expectations. Purvis describes how expectations for lower class women included being a practical housekeeper, “who did her own cooking, childcare and general housework – all in a thrifty, methodical and prudent manner” (Purvis 8). Biddy is described as being very capable of these duties. Pip relates how Biddy was “a blessing to Joe” in caring for Mrs Gargery after her accident, and explains how she “took charge of her as though she had studied her from infancy” (Dickens 124). It can likely be deduced that Biddy not only helped Joe with the care of Mrs. Gargery, but helped with domestic affairs as well. Pip refers to Biddy’s domestic skills when he says, “She managed her whole domestic life, and wonderfully too” (124). Biddy appears to be very capable of carrying out domestic duties prescribed to lower-class working girls.

Biddy’s ability to effectively carry out her duties contrasts with Mrs. Gargery’s fulfillment of these duties. Mrs. Gargery too fulfills domestic duties, but she does so with violence and contempt. Her resentment for taking care of Pip and Joe is shown when after throwing the “Tickler” (a beating rod) at Pip she yells, “I’ve never had this apron of mine off,
since born you were. It’s bad enough to be a blacksmith’s wife without being your mother” (9). She fulfills her household responsibilities and duties as a wife and mother, but does so grudgingly towards the men in her house. Her lower class speech denotes a lack of education, whereas Biddy is very articulate and expressive. These two characters illustrate that despite being from the same class, education has helped Biddy become cultivated and she is able to better perform her duties as friend and caretaker. Here Dickens as a reformer amidst social change in the 1860s is able to apply Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on education for women not only to the upper-class women, but to lower-class females as well.

**Women’s Economic Opportunities**

The mid-19th century was a time of economic change and turmoil, and the question of woman’s position in that economy was central to these changes. Amidst stock frauds, bankruptcies, and bank crashes of the middle decades, woman began to increasingly argue their right to enter the work force. Debates concerning female rights to own property as a “feme sole” also arose. Using this context, Nancy Walsh in her article entitled “Bodies of Capital: ‘Great Expectations’ and the Climacteric Economy” argues that Miss Havisham acts as a symbol for mid-century Victorian economics. Drawing on traditions of comparing physical bodies to environments, as in Plato’s *Republic* or Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, she argues that Miss Havisham’s barren home represents the turmoil of the 1850s economics (Walsh 75). She also asserts that Miss Havisham’s “fairy godmother” role in Pip’s mind represents a “nineteenth century pattern of advancement in which young men’s economic agency is partially underwritten by female relatives” (74). I agree with Walsh’s assertion that Miss Havisham reflects Victorian economics, and further argue that the female characters throughout the novel represent female economic
constraints on women’s ability to work, own property, and earn independently because of limited opportunities. Further, the representation of these issues in *Great Expectations* displays evidence of Mary Wollstonecraft’s philosophies on female economic troubles, showing that her arguments carried into Victorian times and appeared in Dickens’s writing.

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft argues that women are subject to a kind of slavery that “chains the very soul of woman” because of her economic situation (Wollstonecraft 67). She discusses how wealth has rendered men and women “weak” because they have no duties or responsibilities to discharge. A man is generally able to find “loopholes for himself” by seeking various modes of employment, but women are trapped due to their inability to pursue occupations (67). She also argues that people have two duties: one to themselves as “rational creatures,” and the second “as citizens,” which for women includes motherhood. Wollstonecraft says that in order to discharge these duties a woman must not individually lack “the protection of civil laws,” or “be dependent on her husband’s bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after death” (67). Wollstonecraft fears that women who depend on men for everything become weak “in body and mind” (68).

On the other hand, women who are allowed to work and gain independence will cultivate dignity and character. This in turn will help them discharge their duties of citizenship. Wollstonecraft suggests that women should pursue occupations in healing, nursing, and midwifery (Wollstonecraft 68). She points out that more work opportunities can save women from prostitution, which she declares earlier in her treatise is often women’s “only refuge” if she is no longer able to marry and must provide for herself. In short, Wollstonecraft desires more work opportunities for woman so that she can better fulfill her duties as mother and wife, stand independent, and provide for herself in needed.
Dickens was most likely not in favor of full female emancipation, but was sympathetic to societal reform, as evidenced in several novels, and his sympathies for reform of female working conditions is evident in the female characters of *Great Expectations*. Estella is an example of Wollstonecraft’s warning that women who rely on inherited wealth, rather than their own independence, will leave women without character and virtue. Estella’s dependence on wealth causes her to focus her talents and abilities on obtaining a wealthy husband, rather than on cultivating virtue. Pip tells Estella that Bentley Drummle has “nothing to recommend him but money” and yet she allows Drummle’s courtship to continue (Dickens 311). Wollstonecraft warns that women who have no option to support themselves will use their beauty to seek a husband. This seems to be the case with Estella, who appears more concerned with elevating her status than finding an equal marriage partner. When Pip learns of Estella’s engagement to Drummle, he pleads with her to “bestow yourself on some worthier person than Drummle” (363). To this she responds that “I am tired of the life I have led, which has very few charms for me, and am willing enough to change it” (363). Here it seems that Estella has become bored with her present life and wishes to seek after more pleasure, status, and comfort by marrying a wealthy suitor. This appears to be the exact consequence Wollstonecraft fears. She says concerning women who are endowed with wealth and have no occupation that they will be “rendered weak and luxurious by the relaxing pleasures which wealth procures” (Wollstonecraft 67). She explains that women raised in wealth will neglect their duties of citizenship. Estella, who has grown up in the care the wealthy Miss Havisham, has certainly been accustomed to material comfort. As Wollstonecraft warns, this lifestyle has caused Estella to neglect developing character and virtue. In place, she has sought great wealth and higher status which a marriage to Drummle can provide. This basis for marriage proves to be an unhappy one. Wollstonecraft
describes this sort of woman who is “proud of their weakness” and “guarded from care” will not willingly “resign the privileges of rank and sex for privileges of humanity” (Wollstonecraft 70). This statement perfectly represents the proud Estella who is willing to trade dignity for wealth by marrying Drummle. This situation helps illustrate social consequences of not giving women more economic opportunity.

Miss Havisham also displays Wollstonecraft’s philosophy that women of wealth will neglect their domestic duties. When Herbert Pocket relates Miss Havisham’s history to Pip, he describes her as a “spoilt child” and explains that when her father died he left her family “well off” (Dickens 180). It appears that this life of wealth caused Miss Havisham to seek the “protected, guarded care” of a man rather than developing her own mind and talents (Wollstonecraft 70). Thus, she neglects the first duty of women, which Wollstonecraft describes as to develop “themselves as rational creatures” (67). As a result, she is forever fixated on her lover, who leaves her before their wedding, freezing herself in time, becoming obsessed with revenge towards men, and causing her to neglect other duties as well. When Pip first arrives at Satis House he describes the brewery as “empty and disused,” and much of the house is also dark and neglected. Miss Havisham has neglected her duties of managing household affairs and her father’s brewery because of her obsession with her lover. Wollstonecraft alludes to the fact that this state of mind which causes “neglect of domestic duties” occurs because women don’t have the same economic opportunities as men to keep their “faculties from rusting” (67).

As mentioned earlier, Wollstonecraft also includes the duty of motherhood among the duties of a citizen. Miss Havisham has also neglected this duty by raising Estella to break men’s hearts. In an exchange between Miss Havisham and Estella, Miss Havisham accuses Estella of being “stock and stone” for not returning affection to her (Dickens 304). Estella replies, “I am
what you have made me. Take all the praise, take all the blame; take all the success, take all the
failure; in short, take me” (304). Estella insinuates that her desire for wealth, her tyranny over
men, and inability to return affection are all due to Miss Havisham’s mothering. Any folly or
vice she has is due to Miss Havisham’s own upbringing. Miss Havisham later laments what she
has done, saying, “I meant to save her from misery like my own. . . . But as she grew, and
promised to be very beautiful . . . I stole her heart away and put ice in its place” (399). Miss
Havisham recognized that her own wealthy upbringing and subsequent folly has been
perpetuated in her upbringing of Estella. It is her own fixation on manipulating men that has
caus[ed Estella to do the same. Thus, the relationship between Estella and Miss Havisham
illustrates Wollstonecraft’s warning that “women are told from their infancy, and taught by the
example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning. . .
will obtain them the protection of a man” (Wollstonecraft 19). Without the opportunity of
occupations to earn independently, wealth will cause women to shirk their duties of citizenship
and motherhood.

**Marriage and Women’s Roles in Marriage**

In 1857, the Act for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes was passed by British Parliament
signaling a shift in the parameters for divorce. While this bill still only provided narrow grounds
for divorce and limited grounds for owning property after divorce, it marked the growing debate
in the 1850s over expanded women’s rights, particularly in regards to marriage. The debates
involved gaining more liberal ground for women to divorce and expanded rights for them to
maintain property after their divorce (Shanley 355). While known to have conservative views on
women, Dickens himself supported reforms for the improved status of women in relation to
marriage laws (Fix 138). In 1854, Dickens allowed Eliza Lynn Linton, a contributor to his weekly periodical *Household Words*, to publish an article endorsing the efforts of Caroline Norton, who championed the cause to increase property rights of women separated from their husbands. These events and the debate over expanding women’s rights mark the decade leading up to the publication of *Great Expectations* as a time concerned with the status of women in regards to marriage.

Mary Wollstonecraft was also concerned with the status of women in marriage and its function in society. In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft says:

> If marriage be the cement of society, mankind [men and women] should be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve ever the name fellowship, nor will women ever fulfill the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men. (Wollstonecraft 75)

She claims that for marriage to properly function and “cement” society, women must be allowed to be educated and subsist on their own. This does not mean that women should be completely separate from men, but that for marriage to function properly women must be allowed to stand as strong and independent creatures. Wollstonecraft says this will cause women to be “companions rather than mistresses,” cultivating cunning and timid natures (75). For Wollstonecraft the danger of not educating women and not allowing them to support themselves is that women will continue to develop a nature of cunning for influence rather than a nature of virtue. She says that without this nature “marriage will never be sacred” (76).

The dangers Wollstonecraft fears are illustrated again in Estella’s character. As discussed previously, Estella is raised to value class and pride more than virtue and morality and to use her
beauty to manipulate men. Wollstonecraft warns that women brought up with these “mistaken
notions of female excellence . . . give birth to cunning” (11). Evidence of this is seen later in the
novel as Estella enters society and uses her beauty and cunning to attract men as a social climber.
She admits using these skills to entrap suitors, telling Pip that she “deceives . . . all of them”
except for him (Dickens 312). The consequences of Estella’s cunning and social climbing are
revealed in the last chapter of the novel. Pip learns that Estella led “a most unhappy life” having
had a “cruel” marriage with Drummle because of his “pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness”
(482). As Wollstonecraft warns, rather than friendship and companionship, Estella’s marriage
with Drummle led to misery and tyranny. This marriage seems to be a sad example of what
Wollstonecraft describes will happen to women who do not receive a suitable education, and
these are the types of marriages that will lead to the degradation of society.

Joe’s marriages in the novel also portray examples of both an unequal and equal
marriage. Joe’s first marriage to Pip’s sister is harsh for both Pip and Joe. Mrs. Gargery’s
character is reminiscent of Wollstonecraft’s statement that “women . . . obtaining power by
unjust means . . . become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants” (Wollstonecraft 41). Mrs.
Gargery appears to become the latter as she constantly tyrannizes over Pip and Joe, and Pip
narrates how he was “brought up by hand” by his sister (7). Pip even suggests that his sister
forced Joe marry her through similar methods. Mrs. Gargery’s violence suggests that her and
Joe’s marriage is far from an equal partnership. Judging through a Wollstonecraft lens, it is Mrs.
Gargery’s lack of education which causes her to tyrannize over Pip and Joe. As described earlier,
Wollstonecraft claims that if “marriage is to be the cement of society . . . the virtues of both
sexes must be founded on reason” (75-76). To have virtuous marriages of charity and friendship,
both spouses must be able to cultivate reason.
In contrast to his marriage to Mrs. Gargery, Joe’s marriage to Biddy is much more of an equal partnership. Pip says to Biddy towards the end of the novel “You have the best husband in the whole world,” and to Joe he says, “You have the best wife in the world!” (Dickens 479). Wollstonecraft would argue that both are perfect for each other because of their virtues developed on reason. Thanks to her education Biddy is kind, amiable, and friendly. Joe shares these traits, and, thanks to Biddy teaching him to read, his virtues are also founded on education and reason as well. Thus, when Pip tells them on their wedding day that they are both “in charity with all mankind” it is because they have formed on equal marriage partnership based on virtue and reason (479). Once again, Wollstonecraft’s principles are vindicated through Dickens’ fictional depiction.

**Conclusion**

Throughout *Great Expectations* Wollstonecraft’s ideas, philosophies, and arguments regarding women can be seen in the female characters. While it is not clear that Dickens read Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, it is clear that he shared similar opinions on the degrading effects on women when they lack opportunities to cultivate their minds, their talents, and their virtuous character. Dickens and Wollstonecraft mutually inform and affirm each other’s observations of women, which shows how perceptive both authors were in observing female character and women’s conditions of their respective time periods. Estella and Miss Havisham display the dangers of focusing solely on beauty and developing cunning, while Biddy portrays virtuous traits that can be developed through education. Biddy also shows how these traits founded on reason allow her to have a happy and equal marriage partnership with Joe, whereas Estella, who focuses on class and social climbing, ends up in a difficult and unhappy marriage
with Drummle. These characters display the importance of creating opportunities for women to work, and the negative consequences of allowing women to grow up indolent because of inherited wealth. All these ideas are framed within the increased debate over women’s rights and opportunities in the decade leading up to Dickens publishing *Great Expectations*. The presence of these ideas in Dickens’s novel show that though Wollstonecraft wrote sixty-nine years earlier, her influential philosophies regarding women remained influential throughout the Victorian era.
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