

Lucille P. Shores (*Massachusetts Studies in English*, Fall 1972, pp. 91-99)

[In the excerpt below, Shores argues that the character of Estella, often regarded as cold and cruel, acts with genuine affection and honesty in her relationship with Pip.]

A close inspection of the speeches and gestures which Dickens gives to Estella in *Great Expectations* can easily give credit to the notion that she has a great deal of respect and affection for Pip, but Dickens never actually has Pip put this forth as a revelation, simply because Pip continues to remain ignorant of it. He does not even give the retrospective "if-I-knew-then-what-I-know-now" analysis of this situation that he does in the cases of Joe and Magwitch. We are probably not accustomed to this much subtlety in Dickens; we are used to having him spell out his meanings for us very clearly. But the possibility of Estella's sincere affection for Pip should not be dismissed simply because Dickens does not give it the heavy underlining he usually gives; for this is an area of emotion in which Dickens the man had a customary reticence.

Although Estella has been trained by Miss Havisham to be instinctively proud and insulting, it can be seen that as a woman she is consistently gentle with Pip--in her own way, of course. She has a deep-rooted dislike of all the Pockets, from her awareness of their malicious envy of her, and Pip early wins her favor by being her champion against them. Even as a child, she rewards him with a kiss when he bests Herbert Pocket in their senseless (but very believable) fisticuffs. And as an adult, she states clearly and unequivocally that the Pockets' ill-opinion of him only strengthens her favorable opinion of Pip and that she derives bitter pleasure from the fact that he is above their petty meannesses. Even at the height of his unjustified snobbishness, Pip never comes close to the pretentiousness, intolerance, and avariciousness of the Pocket clan (Herbert and Matthew of course excepted). It is Pip's enduring decency and essential simplicity that cause Estella to regard him, albeit rather grudgingly at times, as her hero; he is undoubtedly a refreshing contrast to all she has been used to.

But besides this rather abstract respect which Estella has for Pip, we can also infer that she is attracted to him as a man. The scene where Pip and Estella first meet as adults is handled with a restraint characteristic of Victorian fiction in general and Dickens in particular, but nevertheless it can give a remarkably clear impression, if attention is paid to it.

"Is *he* changed?" Miss Havisham asked her.

"Very much," said Estella, looking at me.

"Less coarse and common?" said Miss Havisham, playing with Estella's hair.

Estella laughed, and looked at the shoe in her hand, and laughed again, and looked at me, and put the shoe down. She treated me as a boy still, but she lured me on.

The shoe, of course, is a symbolic shoe (reminding us of Miss Havisham's bridal slippers), but it is also a very right detail in this scene. Dickens has intuitively been able to capture here the exact behavior of a young woman who is sexually attracted to a man and embarrassed by her feelings. Estella has long schooled herself in "perfect composure," but she is unable to conceal completely her physical awareness; Pip takes

this reaction, in a quite typically male way, as an enticement. It is her unexpected womanliness that causes him to retreat to boyishness.

Any post-Freudian reader should be able to discern that Estella's notorious pride is only a defense against her feelings of inadequacy. Even though she is not aware that she is in fact the daughter of such "low" characters as Magwitch and Molly, she knows all too well that she is only Miss Havisham's adopted daughter and that she has quite arbitrarily been placed in a position of gentility. It is probably this very defensiveness about the precariousness of her own genteel situation that makes her as a child chide Pip for his coarseness and commonness. She has been continually beset by Miss Havisham's relatives, who resent her as the heiress of fortunes that could be theirs; she has been made to feel like an usurper. And when the artificiality of her upbringing becomes contrasted with the naturalness of Pip's, she seems to become all the more resentful of this life that she has had forced on her without her consent. As a woman, she knows that Miss Havisham has warped her personality beyond repair, and she is ashamed of what she has become. But with an admirable matter-of-factness she accepts her own limitations, and quite unselfishly she refuses to burden Pip with them. Again and again she sincerely warns him away from her; there is nothing coy about her manner of doing so.

"Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt," said Estella, "Land, of course, if it ceased to beat I should cease to be. But you know what I mean. I have no softness there, no--sympathy--sentiment--nonsense."

She asserts that she cannot love, and in the conventional sense she is probably right. Just as with Pip, conventional notions do not apply to her. Pip's love is a strongly emotional and uncontrollable sensation; he knows it must appear absurd to other people, but he cannot help it. But Pip has repeatedly shown himself to be first a boy and then a young man given to extravagance and hyperbole. It is natural for him to behave as he does--for him to have an exaggerated love and to display it in an exaggerated way. It is equally natural for Estella, who from her babyhood on has had all her personality channeled into artificial restraints, to behave in the muted, subdued, tightly controlled way she does. She has been taught by Miss Havisham not to love, but then to Miss Havisham real love consists of "blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter." It is small wonder that Estella is not able to recognize her feeling for Pip as love.

Estella is only instinctively aware that Pip is different from all other people and that he somehow deserves a different and better treatment. Her rejection of Pip, which is almost universally condemned by critics as showing her pitilessness, is actually a very laudable sort of nobility and altruism. She knows that she cannot make Pip happy (Bernard Shaw is quite right in saying that Estella's character is not conducive to providing connubial happiness), and she has too much affection for him to link her unhappy life with his. When Pip reproaches her for flinging herself away on a brute like Bentley Drummle, her reply is incisive and illuminating.

"On whom should I fling myself away?" she retorted with a smile. "Should I fling myself away upon the man who would the soonest feel (if people do feel such things) that I took nothing to him? There! It is done. I shall do well enough, and so will my husband. As to leading me into what you call this fatal step, Miss Havisham would have had me wait, and not marry yet; but I am tired of the life I have led, which has had very few charms for me, and I am willing enough to change it. Say no more. We shall never understand each other."

"Such a mean brute, such a stupid brute!" I urged in despair.

"Don't be afraid of my being a blessing to him," said Estella; "I shall not be that. Come! Here is my hand. Do we part on this, you visionary boy--or man?"

Several things should become obvious upon inspection of this passage. One is that Estella is certainly not marrying Drummle for his money, as most critics blithely state in their summaries of the novel's plot. She is also not acting mechanically as an instrument of Miss Havisham; she is, in fact, defying Miss Havisham and seeking escape from the life her foster mother has subjected her to. But more importantly, she is surely marrying Drummle because she feels herself to be unworthy of Pip; she has chosen Drummle precisely because he has nothing to recommend him and she feels he is the only sort of husband to whom she can do no harm. And again her attraction to Pip should be clear just in a phrase like "you visionary boy--or man"; this is a charmingly revealing kind of thing that a woman would say to a man whose quixoticism she regards with affectionate humor.

Up to the very end, Dickens has her maintain this reserve with Pip--and it is a reserve rather than an actual coldness. She has been willing through all these years not to see Pip, and even when they meet again she has not sought him out; she gave him up thoroughly, even though the passing of years has evidently made it harder rather than easier for her to forget him. The last dialogue she is given to say is a declaration that even though now they have forgiven each other old wrongs and agreed to be friends, they must continue apart. Even now, she does not trust herself with Pip's happiness.

But of course the point is that Pip does not really want to be happy--again, in the conventional sense. He has said repeatedly that he is not happy with Estella, but even less happy without her. And the fact that all these people who condemn the "happy ending" miss is that it is not happy at all. Pip and Estella come together quite by accident; neither has determined to redeem his life by seeking out the other. Each has been shattered by many disillusioning and trying experiences. And Dickens leaves the actual conditions of their reunion quite ambiguous. "I saw no shadow of another parting from her." There is no reason, except maudlin sentimentality, to suppose that this means that they got married and lived happily ever after. It should simply mean that Pip no longer feels threatened by a separation from her, in his old desperate way. At any rate, it should be clear that if Pip and Estella do at last come together, it is only because now finally they can understand each other (as Estella supposed they never could) and admit their mutual need, which has grown more subtle but not less urgent with age.

It is often dismissed as mere sloppiness on Dickens' part that he did not go back and revise Pip's early observations of Estella if, in fact, eventually he is to win and marry her, as the new ending seems to suggest. But Dickens was almost never a sloppy writer, and certainly not in *Great Expectations*. An author who would be careful enough to change a proposition in Bidley's letter would certainly not let something as crucial as a major inconsistency of tone slip by him. If he left the strain of melancholy in Pip's retrospective remarks about Estella, it was surely because he felt that this tone continued to be appropriate, even with the revised ending. Pip's and Estella's meeting is not a joyous reunion and a promise that now everything will be all right: it is the somber and solemn merger of two people who realize resignedly that each is the other's fate.

The years and her harsh experiences have only rendered Estella more humble in her regard for Pip. Because now she has had ample time to think about her feelings for him and to realize consciously what she only sensed instinctively before: that he has always been for her, in his own bumbling way, a hero. A woman who can speak with quiet restraint of "the remembrance of what I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth" shows no traces of Edwin Charles's wilful girl who finally triumphs by bringing Pip to her feet.

The name Estella of course means "star," and much has been made of the symbolism of Estella both as a star and as a jewel. One of Pip's first remarks about Estella is that "her light came along the dark passage like a star." There are occasions when Pip regards the stars as being cold and distant and perhaps even hostile, and they provide a contrast to the heat and brightness of the light of Joe's forge. But even though a star may seem cold and distant, it is always accepted as a reliable beacon and guide; and Estella, for all her reserve, is never false to Pip--never, in fact, anything but perfectly candid and also sound in her assessments of human nature. She says to Pip in the end, "I have been bent and broken, but--I hope--into a better shape." She has passed through the homely blacksmith's fire, just as Pip has, and she no longer possesses the same sort of lofty removal from things as she had in her reflected, starry light.

This is not a fairy-tale sort of happiness that Dickens is presenting us with. It is the very real sort of compromise that men and women make to each other, when life inexplicably but inevitably thrusts them together. Bulwer Lytton was probably reacting with basic human sympathy when he insisted that Pip and Estella should be reunited; there is nothing forced or contrived about such a circumstance. Dickens created in Estella a character who could not be denied her rights as an individual. If we react to what Dickens actually shows us of Estella's character, then we cannot make facile judgments of her as a heartless she-monster who will make Pip's life wretched and whose union with him is therefore inappropriate. Dickens has succeeded, almost in spite of himself, in portraying an honest and attractive woman who deserves the hero Pip proves himself to be.

Source: Lucille P. Shores, "The Character of Estella in *Great Expectations*, in *Massachusetts Studies in English*, Fall 1972, pp. 91-99.