Repression and Authentic Narrative in *Great Expectations*

In their psychoanalytic analyses of Charles Dickens’ classic novel *Great Expectations*, Michal Peled Ginsburg and Peter Brooks examine the central role that repression plays in the novel. Though their theoretical approaches target different aspects of Dickens’ story, for both authors, the repression they examine pivots one commonality: the opposition between Miss Havisham and Magwitch. For both writers, this opposition and the characters at the center of it are important to their theoretical approach; without these characters and this tension, the conditions necessary to examine repression would not exist. That this opposition features so prominently in their theories is not surprising, given that it captures perfectly the two extremes of the world Pip occupies—financial freedom and décor on the one hand and lawless squalor on the other—and represents the misunderstanding around which the novel’s plot primarily revolves. Moreover, it is this opposition that Pip himself struggles to negotiate throughout the novel, a central point of investigation for both authors as they examine the ways in which Pip attempts to make sense of the world around him. Ginsberg asks why he needs to see Miss Havisham as his benefactress, while Brooks examines how he constructs a cohesive narrative for his life. In both cases, Ginsburg and Brooks find that it is something like a repression of his relationship with Magwitch and a consequential elevation of his relationship with Miss Havisham that frustrates a clear answer for Pip. For Ginsberg and Brooks, repression—and overcoming it—is the novel’s central motif.

Each author presents an insightful and convincing argument in isolation and, taken in concert, the two arguments complement each other by expanding on their respective analyses—Ginsburg lends a study of motivation to Brooks, while Brooks lends a study of plot and structure to Ginsburg. Yet while these authors succeed in developing incisive arguments, they
simultaneously fail to incorporate a discussion of how these arguments are situated in the broader social context Dickens creates. That is, while fascinating individually, their arguments say little about the ways in which Pip’s story might change if it were to exist in a different time and place. Drawing upon Ginsburg and Brooks’ theoretical approach, I suggest that the repression they each identify goes deeper than Pip’s individual psyche and is instead symptomatic of norms of repression within Pip’s family and society more broadly. These norms undermine Pip’s experiences and contradict the personal truths he derives from them; in so doing, they combine with basic psychological drives to create the repression that both Ginsburg and Brooks discuss. Pip’s *bildungsroman* is, therefore, a story not about moral development, but about coming to value the experiences of his past for what they are and for the role they have played in his life. At the novel’s conclusion, Pip is both a more mature moral agent and more authentically himself, able to embrace that which his society has heretofore forced into repression. This, I argue, is the broader motif of Dickens’ novel.

In “Repetition, Repression, and Return: *Great Expectations* and the Study of Plot”, Peter Brooks similarly suggests that Pip’s journey is not so much about forward progress as it is about reconciling a past previously denied and repressed (685). Rather than stumbling toward dramatic self-revelations, Brooks instead sees Pip as searching for a cohesive narrative for his life. However, since Brooks’ commentary is structural, focusing on the evolution and role of plot in *Great Expectations*, such a projection of intentionality is an external interpretation, an extension of his theoretical perspective into other realms. Early on, Brooks suggests that while Pip is “in search of a plot” during the first two-thirds of the novel, Dickens' writing recounts “the gradual precipitation of a sense of plot around him” (681). Though Pip may be in search of a unifying narrative, he does not, according to Brooks, intentionally employ the quadripartite plot structure
that is at the center of Brooks’ analysis. Instead, the negotiation of repressed and dominant plots forms a metanarrative that exists outside of Pip’s conscious and subconscious reckoning.

Yet there is something to be said for extending this study in order to investigate how this metanarrative manifests in Pip’s psychology: even if he is unaware of it, how does it influence the novel’s action? Put another way, though Brooks’ analysis suggests that Pip does little intentional searching for a unifying plot, it is nonetheless possible to read the novel as expressing a veiled or subconscious attempt at doing just this. The repression, repetition, and return that Brooks identifies in his analysis, therefore, elucidates the novel’s plot structure and helps us understand Pip on a deeper level. These forces drive the novel, but they also exert influence over Pip’s psyche. Such a perspective might, for example, allow an alternative approach to Michal Ginsburg’s guiding question in “Dickens and The Uncanny: Repression and Displacement in Great Expectations”: “Why was it necessary for Pip to misinterpret the signs which pointed toward Magwitch as pointing toward Miss Havisham?” (699). Instead of, or in addition to, fulfilling the desire born of a manifestation of guilt, perhaps this need is an expression of some deeper narrative. I explore this possibility further below.

In many ways, the quadripartite plot structure Brooks identifies resembles the opposition that is central to Ginsburg’s analysis. Brooks writes that the novel contains four plot lines, two of which deal with Pip’s relationship with Magwitch and two with his relationship with Miss Havisham. Moreover, for each pair, there is an official plotline that stands above and masks a repressed plotline (681). The core of Brooks’ argument is that Pip, whose empty entry into the story leaves him bereft of a cohesive narrative, is condemned to return to experiences that bring about a repetition of the dominant narrative—that is, until he is able to acknowledge his past qua past. The dominant plotlines that Brooks’ theory features—that his relationship with Magwitch is
contemptible and that Satis House represents possibility—align neatly with the story Ginsburg constructs: that his encounter with Magwitch “does not simply create, or originate the feeling of guilt; rather it confirms a feeling of guilt which predates it and is equivalent to life itself” (700). For Ginsburg, this guilt, initially repressed, manifests as an intense desire for that which Pip does not possess, embodied in Estella and the establishment of Satis House. Where Brooks addresses structural components, Ginsburg speaks more to Pip’s motivation, finding in it some fundamental aspect of Pip’s psychology; the guilt Ginsburg identifies is “equivalent to life itself.” Taken together, though working towards somewhat different ends, these theoretical approaches both identify the primacy of the dominant narrative in Pip’s life: they suggest that it is his shame in having dealings with Magwitch and his idolization of Satis House that drive the novel’s action. These approaches, however, show a study of the interactions between the narrative of repression and the filial and social norms in which Pip is immersed. Thus, with a conceptual framework indebted to the work of these theorists, I return to more refined and focused versions of my previous question: How can Pip’s journey in this novel be understood as the result of subconscious attempts at navigating dominant and repressed narratives, and what relationship do these narratives bear to the broader context in which Dickens sets this story? What is the origin of the dominant-repressed dichotomy?

As Brooks and Ginsburg suggest, I turn my investigation toward Pip's relationship with both Satis House and Magwitch. As Pip’s childhood understandings of the world around him color his experience with each, the stark difference between these two characters develops rapidly and in such a way as to shape the rest of the narrative. The key to this dichotomy, I suggest, lies in the innocence of an uncultured and undeveloped childhood, one that allows the dominant culture of his time insidious access to his innermost self. Chief among the forces that
act upon him in this impressionable period are the authoritarian paradigm, as embodied by Mrs. Joe and the British penal system, and the paradigm of deficiency, as enabled by his introduction to Satis House, but also as deeply connected to the authoritarian paradigm. Both are manifestations of Brooks’ two examined plots, and in their childhood beginnings, give a nod to Ginsburg’s theory.

Dickens introduces the authoritarian paradigm early in the novel, both in the form of Mrs. Joe’s persistent aggression towards Pip and the subtle and overt lessons on its instantiation in society at large; it is this paradigm that Pip internalizes and that eventually becomes the dominant narrative responsible for repressing his relationship with Magwitch. Given the central importance of this orientation, it is no surprise that Dickens begins the novel with what are, arguably, two of its most powerful agents: Christianity, as embodied in the celebration of Christmas, and the penal system, as embodied in the echoes of prison warning cannons. Alongside signaling to us the central role that this paradigm will play, Dickens’ choice to begin the novel on this note allows Pip to encounter it at a vital point in his development. As Brooks argues, though Pip begins the novel as a sort of metaphysical orphan, his conscious self-awareness irrupts into the story and begins a search for plot, for an authority that can justify his existence (680 – 81). Though Dickens’ authoritarian introduction does not provide Pip with a positive justification, in its negative prescription, it nonetheless powerfully shapes this search and demands that the plot Pip develops for himself ultimately has nothing to do with that which the authoritarian paradigm sanctions. That is, the prevalence of this paradigm and the message at its core will, in Pip’s future, be responsible for repressing that which does not conform to it: Magwitch and Pip’s relationship with him.
Examining the beginning of the novel from this perspective, this paradigm is ubiquitous. For example, when Pip inquires of Mrs. Joe about the meaning of the warning cannons, she answers: “[p]eople are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad; and they always begin by asking questions” (8). Such a lesson instills in Pip the foundational idea that convicts are bad and that any associations with them are bad, a lesson that disastrously shapes Pip’s relationship with Magwitch and, even in the moment, affects him: “I was clearly on my way there. I had begun by asking questions, and I was going to rob Mrs. Joe” (9). Already internalizing this lesson, it is easy for Pip to take the next step and see himself as a convict, see in himself the same depravity that Mrs. Joe speaks to in this moment and reinforces regularly through her generalized aggression and lamentations on his disobedience. This truculent disposition also reveals the important role that both Christianity and Christmas play as instruments of social control; religion, as seen at the novel’s beginning, is not an agent of benevolence, but rather the authority by which shame and guilt can be justified: “I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality” (15). As the chief arbiter of justice in their household, it is Pip’s nominally moral waywardness that Mrs. Joe berates continually, frequently drawing upon Christianity to instill Pip with the sense of being a burden that he reports just above. Combined with the authoritarian norms the penal system enforces, these aspects of Pip’s childhood conspire to shape fundamentally the psychology that defines his future self. If, as Ginsburg argues, his encounter with Magwitch confirms and creates a primal guilt, then it is this instance that establishes the psychological power structures that condemn their relationship repression—until, that is, it can be once again honestly acknowledged.
The tension that arises out of Pip’s early encounter with Magwitch depends upon his developed understanding of authority, its relation to the penal system, and the nature of his relationship with Magwitch; were this relationship built on contempt, there would be little cognitive dissonance. Instead, Pip’s naïve understanding at the beginning of the novel—recalling Brooks’ argument—imbues his relationship with Magwitch with honesty and authenticity; the “small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry” finds in Magwitch a connection otherwise absent (1). Ginsburg’s later characterization of Magwitch as Pip’s second father manifests at the novel’s beginning. Shortly after, however, this connection opposes the demands of the authoritarian paradigm that surrounds Pip, as discussed above, and brings into conflict the two equally powerful realities that define his world at this point: his own and that projected onto him by Mrs. Joe and the world at large. Echoing Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic* and speaking to the social inertia of systems of thought across time more broadly, the dominant paradigm becomes primary, demands that Pip eschew any connections with the convict and, in so doing, represses the paradigm that this connection to Magwitch introduces.

At least one part of the repression that underlies this story can be traced back to Pip’s early childhood. Likewise, in looking ahead to the rest of the novel and to the effects of this childhood repression, one can gain an understanding of its enduring power. For example, midway through the book, in the midst of attempting to embrace the dominant paradigm, Pip’s visit to Newgate prison forces him to confront this childhood conflict:

I consumed the whole time in thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime; that, in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening, I should have first encountered it; …that, it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement. While my mind was thus engaged, I thought of the
beautiful young Estella, proud and refined, coming towards me, and I thought with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her. (174)

In this quotation, Pip’s word choice betrays the operation of the mechanism described above: “taint,” “prison,” “crime,” childhood,” “lonely,” and “pervade.” The authoritarian paradigm governing Pip accommodates his relationship with Magwitch only on its own terms, those that reinforce it by reifying the idea that the convict and any connection with him is necessarily immoral. Yet despite this conceptual limitation, this realization is insightful precisely because it captures this conflict and the moment in which Pip’s repressed relationship attempts to escape its circumscribed nature. He recognizes—in the most fitting sense of the word: re cognoscere, to know again—the bond that he developed early on with Magwitch but, unable to express it in any other light, necessarily resorts to expressing it disparagingly. Nonetheless, an important part of him in this instance reaffirms the inescapability of the moment of connection that transpired between the two many years ago.

Brooks notes that the middle of the novel, around the time of Pip’s visit to Newgate, is characterized by repeated returns to his home environment, where the dominant paradigm is reaffirmed and causes Pip in some ways to regress to the image of the “common boy” (683). In so far as Pip’s above reflection represents his recognition of his relationship with Magwitch and his inability to honor this relationship, his visit to Newgate is in many ways a similar kind of return, for it replicates the repression first introduced on that cold winter’s night. This analysis suggests that the dominant paradigm has, up until this point, guided Pip’s journey and defined the narrative he has spun for himself. As much a role as Satis House, Estella, and Miss Havisham play in his story, it is primarily the dominant paradigm that drives the novel, that drives Pip’s
The above reflection presents an opportunity to segue into a discussion of the novel’s secondary dominant paradigm, that of deficiency, as seen through Pip’s exposure to Satis House but also, as suggested above, deeply entwined with the authoritarian paradigm. While Brooks develops little interrelation between these paradigms, for Ginsburg, they are intimately connected; Satis House is that object upon which Pip’s repressed guilt manifests itself as desire. Ginsburg writes that although this connection may be accidental—his exposure to Satis House is the uncanny for which Ginsburg titles his paper—its importance rises primarily from Pip’s treatment of it. Namely, Pip chooses to embrace this accident “as revealing his own truth,” rather than as supporting another story (702). While appealing, there is something unsatisfying in the failure of Ginsburg’s account to create a necessary connection between Magwitch and Satis House. That is, Ginsburg’s theory describes the mechanism by which Pip’s repressed guilt might manifest in Satis House, an underdeveloped proposition that leaves too much to chance.

An alternative to Ginsburg’s theoretical approach, however, is the idea developed herein that, upon this introduction, the repression of his relationship with Magwitch necessitates that the novel’s secondary paradigm take root in Satis House, as an expression of all that is right, clean, and legal—all that Pip desires and believes he does not yet have. For this reason, echoing Ginsburg, I refer to this as the paradigm of desire and conceptualize it as a secondary force within the novel, one that enables Pip to further act out the story demanded of him by the authoritarian paradigm but not a foundational paradigm in itself. Put differently, if the authoritarian requires that Pip distance himself from the connection he had with Magwitch—if this paradigm represses this connection—then, upon encountering Satis House, Pip adopts the
framing of desire because it allows him to do just this. More specifically, the authoritarian paradigm labels this connection as the source of dirt or contamination, both literally and figuratively. Following the logic of this essay, the dominant narrative that Pip develops for Satis House is a way for him to cleanse himself, to further bleach the stain that the authoritarian paradigm reaffirms daily. Pip must see Satis House as an emblem of this cleanliness and of opportunity, for in so doing, he can further act out the narrative the authoritarian demands of him.

Throughout the novel, Pip finds himself unable to escape thinking about his childhood connection with Magwitch, a sign that, to an analytic eye, the truth of this connection is repressed within him. Likewise, in the case of Satis House, Pip is surrounded by symbols that otherwise indicate to him that Satis House is not the seat of opportunity, but is instead the seat of death and loss, as Brooks notes (682). When Pip first enters Miss Havisham’s room, for example, and observes “that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago,” he does not shudder at the decaying dress or the deathly lighting; he sees in place of this the proud Estella and his own lacking existence beside hers (39). If, through its social connotation and its contrast to Pip’s household, Satis House does not already allure Pip, then Estella’s parting remarks to him secure this belief: “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” (39). Estella, emblematic of Victorian materialism, kindles within Pip the tinder that England’s broader social consciousness provides and that forces him to unknowingly internalize the fiction that the lower classes are fundamentally inferior. Estella also speaks to the insecurity that the authoritarian paradigm enforces, and it is in this that her power lies, for she censures Pip for his deficiency and provides
him an avenue by which he can overcome it: Satis House and its ostensible opportunity for financial gain, social training, and cleanliness.

As with the authoritarian paradigm, for the majority of the novel, Pip remains in the grips of the paradigm of desire, blinded by obsession over Estella and all she represents: “The unqualified truth is, that… I loved Estella… simply because I found her irresistible… I knew to my sorrow, often and often… that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be” (153). He pursues her with an almost unnatural obsession and refuses to recognize her own admonishments that she cannot love, that she has no heart with which to feel. The power of the two dominant narratives to give his life a cohesive narrative, as Brooks would see it, is all encompassing and irresistible. For Pip to cast off Estella is for him also to recognize his relationship with Magwitch and therefore to express the worldview consistently repressed within him. Though Pip eventually succeeds in this, it is understandably difficult and requires a powerful external trigger.

Together with the authoritarian paradigm, the paradigm of desire governs Pip’s worldview and fundamentally affects his psychology. Like Brooks, my perspective sees these paradigms as structural elements of the novel’s metanarrative; like Ginsburg, however, I also recognize that they critically inform Pip’s understanding of the world and that they fit into his enduring search for narrative within a world that rejects his foundational experiences of it. The world Pip enters and his childhood relationships with Magwitch, Mrs. Joe, and Satis House all have real consequences for him and ultimately shape his behavior, whether overtly or subconsciously. As both Brooks and Ginsburg suggest, to varying degrees, Pip’s journey in *Great Expectations* is a journey born of attempting to navigate these influences and live up to the demands of the authoritarian and desire paradigms—for example, by shunning Joe and his
pastoral childhood home, repressing his memory of Magwitch, obsessively pursuing Estella, and searching for evidence that Miss Havisham is behind his expectations. For the majority of the novel, until Pip’s discovery of his true benefactor, these forces are at the helm of the novel’s action. Dickens’ narrative, however, is far from static, and the power of his novel lies in its ability to return to its beginning, to bring that primal connection between Pip and Magwitch, so forcefully censored for most of the novel, to the surface. It is this perturbation that allows Pip eventually to overcome the grip of the dominant paradigms and, therefore, to convey the novel’s ending moral of the good to be found in embracing one’s past.

Upon first encountering Magwitch, Pip’s surprise is intermixed with disgust and revulsion as the narrative he has created for himself over the course of years comes crashing down: “I could not have spoken one word, though it had been to save my life. I stood, with a hand on the chair-back and a hand on my breast, where I seemed to be suffocating—I stood so, looking wildly at him… when the room began to surge and turn” (211). After regaining control, however, Pip’s initial revulsion quickly turns to fear, anger, and contempt under the authoritarian paradigm, condemning Magwitch as the convict he was, as someone whose hands “might be stained with blood” (213). Upon their first encounter, Pip is therefore unable to accept that the expectations he assumed to stem from Miss Havisham came from that which he has denied his whole life. It is this upset, however, that begins the chain of events and reasoning that unravels the dominant paradigms. That is, the jolt that Magwitch’s revelation gives Pip’s psyche is such that, in destroying the foundation of the dominant paradigms, it forces him to reconsider all of his relationships and the histories he has thus far written about them.

Shortly after Magwitch’s revelation, for example, the effects of this disturbance are clear as Pip laments his treatment of Joe, born of the desire paradigm, itself born of the authoritarian
paradigm: “But, sharpest and deepest pain of all—it was for the convict, guilty of I knew not what crimes… that I had deserted Joe” (214). Still enchained by the authoritarian paradigm’s condemnation of his connection with Magwitch, this moment of realization nonetheless addresses the “state of chronic uneasiness” Pip reflects upon earlier “respecting my behavior to Joe” (180). As he shifts his understanding of his relationship with Joe, he comes to embrace his relationship with Magwitch and, in revisiting Kent, to see Satis House for the seat of death that it has been all along. As a result of this moment and realization, by the novel’s conclusion, the forces that have previously defined Pip’s psychology are absent; as he reconciles with Joe and Magwitch and the novel spotlights these relationships, the agents of the authoritarian and desire paradigms, Mrs. Joe and especially Miss Havisham quietly disappear into the background. In the end, Dickens brings this novel back to its beginning, but a fresh beginning. Where Pip’s journey begins with a domineering Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham, it ends with a resilient and mature Pip, once again navigating his relationships with Magwitch, Joe, and Estella, but doing so on his own terms, through a paradigm he created himself.

Drawing upon the psychoanalytic perspectives of both Peter Brooks and Michal Peled Ginsburg, I have argued that repression is the central motif of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, that it represents the novel’s plot structure, as Brooks argues, and, more importantly, that it helps us understand broadly Pip’s behavior and trajectory within the novel. Through the theoretical framework developed in this paper, I have specifically argued that Pip’s journey in *Great Expectations* is centrally guided by two dominant paradigms—the authoritarian and desire paradigms—born of his early childhood encounter with Magwitch and with Satis House, then facilitated by the filial and social norms that condemn the illegal and extoll the elite. This dynamic finally requires Pip to repress under the dominant narrative any relationship he has
with the convict or with his family in Kent—for to do otherwise is to risk the rupture of the social and psychic realities that provide narrative cohesion to his life.

Rather than a story of growth and development, *Great Expectations* is a story more of reconciliation, of learning to honor the experiences that define one’s past, and of gaining the perspectives necessary to cast off the dominant paradigms that society projects onto all immersed within it, in favor, that is, of paradigms more generative, personal, and authentic. As Peter Brooks summarizes eloquently at the end of his analysis, Pip’s story ultimately suggests the power of narrative, at once to give meaning and structure to life and to retain a grasp so strong upon the individual that it engenders bad faith. In the final assessment, we can reliably read hope into Pip’s journey: by reclaiming narrative one reclaims its power to scaffold and justify positive alteration; too, one becomes able to manifest and process repressions, to understand themselves more intimately, and in the end to live a more examined, empowered life.
Works Cited

Brooks, Peter. “Repetition, Repression, and Return: *Great Expectations* and the Study of Plot.”
