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Examining the 'romantic poetic fictions' of the past within nineteenth-century literature.

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Abstract:

Initially written as a final essay for an honours course entitled *Modern Love: Victorian Poetry and Prose*, this article explores Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, George Meredith's *Modern Love* and George Gissing's *New Grub Street* in relation to classical sonnet form and traditional ideas of romantic love. Cynthia Tucker's assertion that the 'romantic poetic fictions' of the traditional fourteen-line sonnet provide an unstable foundation for genuine love features heavily, for each of the texts evidence characters revisiting their own past and hugely romanticising their distasteful memories in order to affect change upon their present and future selves. Pip, of *Great Expectations*, does this in attempt to set aside his past and ascend the stratified social world of Victorian London, dismissing his humble background and criminal encounters in favour of a rich and mysterious benefactor. Conversely, the narrator-husband of *Modern Love* seeks to rewrite his present infidelity into something more palatable, and therefore edits his past marriage into a loveless affair and his wife a cold and distant figure. Finally, after Reardon of *New Grub Street* loses his career to ill health and economic necessity, he squanders all hope of literary redemption by whittling away his hours imagining how his life may have turned out differently had he made different decisions in the past. Each is unsuccessful in editing the past, for the foundations they create for their new and alternate selves are entirely fictitious; their lies are unstable and illogical, preventing them from realising the goals that they desire. Of all of the characters in each of the texts, Pip is the only one who we are able to see moving forward with some success; with help, he is able to revisit his past and accept the truth of his memories, providing him with a surer foundation from which to grow.

The place of the past the nineteenth century is somewhat fluid, for characters within literature revisit and revise their own history with the intention of reimagining their presents and their futures. This essay will use Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, George Meredith's *Modern Love* and George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, in conjunction with Cynthia Tucker's argument that 'romantic poetic fictions' provide a weak foundation for growth, to posit that the protagonists of nineteenth-century texts frequently reinvent their own pasts due to the lack of stability in their present and future (354). Unstable familial foundations are also central to these texts, and romanticised fictions of the past are applied to memories of the domestic home in order to justify deviant actions. Characters are repeatedly seen to reach into the past and create new, errant realities, which are then projected forwards for create excessively fabricated worlds. This essay will therefore outline the methods through which these romanticised fictitious pasts become essential, for they justify and motivate present and present action; Pip, of *Great Expectations*, is forever transient until he returns to Joe's forge and confronts his true past; the husband-narrator of *Modern Love* provides a one-sided and highly edited review of his marriage in dissolution in order to justify his adultery; and *Grub Street*'s Reardon escapes into his past to forget his present and future woes.

Pip's romanticisation of his own past is interrupted when Magwitch confronts him in his Temple rooms, for he forces Pip to abandon his future ambitions and to confront a less savoury past that he has tried to suppress. Pip comes 'face to face' with the convict of his past and is reminded of his own offences against his family, for 'the intervening years', the degrees of separation that the past afforded and the romantic poetic fictions that he has been able to create for himself are 'driven away' (271). Prior to this encounter, the back-and-forth dialogue between Pip as he was and Mr Pirrip the narrator – as titled by critic Jerome Meckier – distorts the perspective of the novel, mimicking Pip's directionless life. This forced confrontation with a figure from his past provides Pip with purpose; he ceases to live

his extravagant faux-life and instead recognises the value of the familial love that he finds through Joe. Mr Pirrip addresses Joe on multiple occasions espousing his goodness; he 'feel[s] the loving tremble of [Joe's] hand upon [his] arm, as solemnly this day as if it had been the rustle of an angel's wing!' (121). Love of Joe, as the guardian of Pip's childhood and adolescence, becomes a grounding force between his two personalities. Pip is able to move forward (aided by the provision of a new child-Pip), to become an independent partner of Clarriker and Co. and to actually act as an adult. He is no longer hindered by his fictious past, and may become an active and equal participant rather than approaching mature conversations from the perspective of 'a forgiven child' (407).

The most comical example of a character rewriting their own domestic past is the mental gymnastics of Mr Pumblechook. Whilst Pip and Mr Pirrip exemplify 'moment-to-moment… fluctuations' (Meckier, 30), none of their inconsistencies are quite as paradigm-shifting as Mr Pumblechook's opportunistic attitude towards Pip. Initially, Pip is 'not allowed to call him uncle, under the severest penalties' (20), and is addressed with the designation 'boy' (21). However, when Pip comes into property, Pumblechook asserts that he was Pip's 'favourite fancy' and first benefactor; Pumblechook appropriates past physical proximity into domestic companionship, creating dramatically different poetic fictions of the past in order to leech off of Pip's elevated reputation in the present (132). Upon Pip's reduction in fortune, Pumblechook goads him into a reaction and then publicly denounces 'him as [he has] seen brought up by hand' (409). His consideration of Pip comes full circle, and he is once more a silly and ungrateful boy, unworthy of Pumblechook's notice. This is compounded by Pumblechook's remembrances of Mrs Joe – 'Let us never be blind… to her faults of temper, but it is to be hoped she meant well,' indicates that he was very much aware of the child abuse that was occurring in his relative's household, and yet chose to permit it and even to engage himself (132). This evidences more than Pumblechook's fickle personality; it

demonstrates that Pip's childhood was full of toxic individuals and that his life as a gentleman was not built on strong moral foundations. Regardless of whether Pumblechook was Pip's 'chosen friend' (132) or not, he was certainly a present adult and role model; Pip's early adulthood mimics this changeable nature, where in one instant he arranges financial aid for Herbert and the next moment he assaults Avenger.

Contrary to the fickle Pumblechook, Joe Gargery is a solid and dependable figure throughout Pip's life. Correspondingly, he is also the character who is the most secure with his past; he even plans to engrave on his abusive father's grave 'Whatsume'er the failings on his part, Remember reader he were that good in his hart' (39). Joe is able to return to his past, make his peace with reality rather than romanticising his memories, and then state that 'what have been betwixt us – have been' (406). He's content to declare that he 'done what [he] could' in order to protect young Pip, and this is enough to secure his own domestic foundation even whilst Pip's is fractured (406). John Gordon posits that Pip is unable to see into his own future into the same way that Joe can be certain of his domestic happiness 'because he still cannot see clearly into the past.' (249). This is certainly true in the mid-third of the novel, for summer and time have 'softened even the edge of Tickler' and Pip seems to permit the abuse that he suffered (238). However, following Magwitch's death and his own illness, Pip is able to identify the 'wonderful difference' between 'the servile manner' of Pumblechook on Pip's acquisition of property, and on his 'ostentatious clemency' in shaking hands when his fortunes were diminished (409). His vision of the past is clearer, which potentially springs from his knowledge of and love for his benefactor; Pip may begin to resolve the past and move forwards because no mystery remains. This is evidenced in the very structure of the novel, for it is incredibly symmetrical and interlocking due to its initial publication as a weekly and monthly serial (Meckier, 39). However, true 'classical symmetry' is forfeited in order to avoid an intense sense of closure at the end of each

instalment (Meckier, 29). This slightly uneven structure ultimately allows Pip to grow; although the story is cyclical, it ends with a definitive two-chapter instalment that brings Pip home to address his past at the hearth, and then to meet Estella which provokes speculation about the future. The arc of moral rise and fall is closed, and the very structure of the novel itself instructs Pip to resolve his unclear past in order to move forwards with his future.

Conversely, the structure of *Modern Love* deliberately undermines the content of the poem. In the nineteenth-century, writers generally used 'the sonnet form to record observations and philosophical reflections, rather than amatory expressions' which were a thing of a bygone era (Houston, 101). By bastardising the sonnet sequence with sixteen lines per stanza, Meredith twists both the new formal associations and the traditional romantic intent; *Modern Love* becomes a 'painfully authentic dissection of the end of love,' and explores the inner philosophy of a man desperately trying to justify his hedonistic and callous actions (Houston, 112). Unlike *Great Expectations*, the concerns over domestic felicity are very much in the present, and therefore the romanticised poetic fictions are retroactively applied to justify the narrator-husband's current viewpoint. Their love is established in the first stanza as something of '[m]emory and [t]ears' (I.9). This calls into question whether it ever existed at all and, if it did, it is as firmly relegated to the realm of the past as the narrator-husband claims. Contemporary critic Richard Hutton furthered this by declaring that Meredith's poem would be 'more accurate' if it were known as 'Modern Lust' (Hutton, 95). By questioning the presence of lust instead of love in a patriarchal era, it becomes more credible that the narrator-husband's interest in his wife should wane; it removes the strength of devotion behind the sexual attraction, and devalues their relationship by establishing an inevitable sense of failure from the very outset. However, maintaining the title as *Modern Love* was perhaps a deliberate move to scandalise critics such as Hutton; whilst Gissing's narrative portrays a highly dramatized marriage, it also evidences a more real relationship

than the traditional and static fourteen-line sonnet. His approach forces love to descend from the unachievable and sterile pedestal on which the traditional sonnets of the past place it, and to enter the modern dialogue – and in order to be real, love must exhibit flaws. Resultantly, the narrator-husband describes a united presentation of the façade marriage to their guests as 'a most contagious game' (XVII.6), and claims that he and his wife 'ply the ball' (XVII.5) and '[a]dmire each other' in jest as they host (XVII.11). He uses the authority of his narrative voice to rewrite the present, claiming that the pair are in agreement over their public pretence and united in their contemptuous emotions. In reality, no conversation with his wife consenting to such a façade is ever mentioned. The game becomes one sided and cruel, and the reader left uncertain whether the wife's feelings of love were ever truly requited by the lustful narrator-husband.

Tucker combines these two approaches to sonnets, using the 'past sonnet worlds' to emphasize the 'chasm' that exists between past and present (354; XVI.3). Unlike the typically 'sterile' sonnet form (Tucker, 353), *Modern Love* becomes something dynamic and assumes a life cycle, for 'nature… confesses love can die' (VI.3). Contrasts are repeatedly highlighted, such as in the past when the narrator-husband 'gave love' but will now only 'take!' (XXVII.14). Moreover, the present is intensified, as the narrator-husband 'live[s] / Again, and a far **higher** life' near his mistress (XXXI.1-2, own emphasis). The past is deliberately diminished and "othered", to focus on the vitality of the present and thereby justify the extra-marital transgressions. The husband claims that his 'breast will open for thee at a sign!' (VIII.7), yet he desires a sign from the past wife that he lusted after rather than the 'complex demands and monotony of everyday married life' (Golden, 269). The past becomes 'shipwreck'd days' (XVI.1), isolated and distant from the couple's present reality. A key distinction between past and present is this idea of vitality; in the past, the couple were united through both love and lust, whereas in the present they are unknown to one another. The

narrator-husband, during a rare conversation with his dying wife, remarks that she 'Seem'd / The wife he sought, tho' shadowlike and dry.' (XLIX.5-6). The lust-lifeblood of their relationship departs, and therefore the real present can never hope to match the romantic fiction of the past.

The final death knell for the couple's relationship is the gradual forgetting of the past – it is no longer merely twisted, but instead lost completely. Physical aids such as love letters remain to fill the gap of present devotion (XV.12), but the 'dead black years' and 'blank walls' provide a physical barrier to memory (I.12; I.13). This is not the 'magnanimous' forgiving of Pip and Herbert's childhood fight (149), for the narrator-husband deliberately represses the "good times" in order to justify his victimhood and affair with his mistress. He questions 'Is it true we're wed?' when denied intercourse (VII.12) and is 'haunted by that taste! That sound!' of love that he claims he cannot remember (XVI.16). This calls the reason of the wife into question, for the narrator-husband holds authority due to his dual and vocal role, whereas she is merely a silent 'summer joy' that he cannot quite look back to (XLVII.3). She is driven to drink poison to release her husband from this marriage that he indicates is incredibly burdensome. Tragically however, he has already left their union and remains her husband in name alone; he 'taste[d] forgetfulness' as soon as he met his mistress (XXVII.9).

On the contrary, the past of *New Grub Street* is near idolised as Reardon desires nothing more than to return to it. Tucker's theory of romantic poetic fictions as an unstable foundation becomes insufficient; rather than merely providing dubious footings, the pervasive conditions of the novel imagine alternative timelines which actively damage the domestic hearth. Characters are disconnected from familial happiness in the present and seek to resolve this by reimagining themselves in the past. Reardon exclaims to Amy 'I wish you had been alone in the world and penniless,' imagining how different his life would have been had Amy no support network or middleclass ideals (385). As well as being emotionally

abusive and isolationist, Reardon's remark evidences that he imagines this whole separate world where he could achieve happiness, which compounds his misery in their present timeline. Reardon even begins to 'dislike the[ir] child' Willie, and laments that Amy loved him with an 'undivided heart' prior to the infant's birth (189). He desires to return to the 'lover's' world where they were childless; Reardon's problems all resolve when returning to an increasingly distant past (190). He informs Biffen that 'Amy was not my fit intellectual companion, and all emotion at the thought of her has gone from [him]' (405). Love becomes wearisome over the course of just a few months, despite his own declarations in the autumn that Amy was his 'breath of life' (82) and that his happiness was entirely dependent on her. Upon moderate reflection however, he wishes to revoke the years that have passed since their meeting, and believes that only then could he be contented. Moreover, in discussions with Milvain and Biffen, he laments not having the means devote himself to the 'life of a scholar', and exalts the classical world (108). Forays into the past are evidently an exercise in escapism for Reardon and distract him from the struggles of his present and future; he imagines himself in classical scenes from millennia ago rather than actually theorising plausible economic solutions to relieve their present poverty.

That's not to say that Reardon does not design strategies to remove himself from poverty. The only caveat to his plans, is that they require 'all the events of the last few years [to] be undone', in order for not a 'soul dependent [to be] upon him' (180). This reversal directly contradicts the leap forwards to the congenial final scene of Jasper and Amy, where they celebrate their success together. This moment is bittersweet, for Jasper applauds Amy's political acumen within the literary world and exclaims that he 'owe[s his] fortune' to her (549) – perhaps if Reardon had also taken Amy's advice and gone to 'some quiet country place', his health and fortunes may have recovered (228). However, Reardon's refusal to compromise with Amy catalysed their marital dissolution, and the subsequent conflicts

damaged his health and ended with his death - which ironically occurred in a seaside town, visited out of concern for Willie's health. This evidences that the romantic fiction of the past flounders when actualised in present realities; a lovely holiday is not the cure for crippling 'depression' or consumption (103). In an inversion of the key juncture at which Pip's delusional narratives were shattered by Magwitch's arrival in his Temple apartments, Reardon's critical moment of decision making – the moment when he decides to marry Amy – allows him a point to return to in memory where he may affirm his delusions. Unlike Pip, who's lies are undone by Magwitch's arrival, Reardon's relatively simple life becomes complicated post-marriage. Not only is Reardon's life more difficult and fraught when lived, but he also conjures complex and divergent lives in which he and Amy 'should have lived in a couple of poor rooms somewhere, and – [they] should have loved each other' (404). Just like the narrator-husband of *Modern Love*, Reardon dominates this alternate world and alternate wife. He pictures an ideal fictional moment, blind to the reality of committing his life to supporting and surviving with someone in such a capacity as marriage. He ironically creates the perfect 'romantic poetic fictions' for himself which he cannot achieve in his literary works; he loses all reality to the past and, in doing so, denies himself a present and a future. By focussing so intently on the past possibilities, he forgets to engage with society in the present and thereby cannot actualise future redemption.

In conclusion, the characters of these nineteenth-century texts all either address, create or become lost in the 'romantic poetic fictions' of the past, which they apply to their own domestic lives in an attempt to resolve unhappiness. Arline Golden advances that the married couple of *Modern Love* attempt to 'conceal the "skeleton" of their marriage by draping it in the robes of romantic ritual' (269). This is in fact true of all of the texts on this course, for romantic fiction is used to obscure disappointing realities, and to either imagine a better world or to justify action that betters the individual at the expense of others. Dorothy

Mermin best surmises this disconnect between past and present, for ‘only in the mind of an omniscient narrator can the past live on in the present, and certainty be attained without endless dole’ (117). Whether it be via the narrative control of the narrator-husband or the outrageous lies of Mr Pumblechook, controlling the past ultimately controls the present, and therefore dictates the future. Those who cannot or will not confront their true past do not have a clear future at all.

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