Male Models: Fatherhood and Gentleman-Making in the Victorian Bildungsroman

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Marianne Hirsch identifies several classifications for the Victorian Bildungsroman, or ‘novel of formation’: a linear narrative blending biography with social commentary – the youthful protagonist learning the ropes – and culminating in the reconciliation of the self with the expectations of society. Due to the didactic nature of the hero’s journey, we can see the Bildungsroman as a quintessentially Victorian genre, what I argue is the narrative form of the broader culture of Victorian self-help. The genre’s blend of character-focused, introspective psychological realism with the speculative nature of fantasy allows for various possibilities on the narrator’s didactic journey to maturity. Casual sociologist, newspaper editor, education campaigner and social lecturer Samuel Smiles’ 1859 essay collection Self Help configures ‘the gentleman’ as an aspirational figure within this culture. Smiles’ gentleman is a wholly rounded, masculine figure who benefits from ‘training all parts of [his] nature; the physical and moral, as well as the intellectual’ to build a suitable masculine character. While this figure can transgress class boundaries – provided an individual has the drive to access resources for his training – Smiles reinforces the traditional heteronormative capitalist family structure of firm husband and obliging wife raising children, with the well-rounded ‘gentleman’ as the ideal patriarch. I intend to explore the ways in which father figures and Victorian ‘self-help’ impact the development of burgeoning masculine identity in the male Bildungsroman.

In many cases the Victorian Bildungsroman rejects this heteronormativity in the family structure: Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh (1856), Dickens’ Great Expectations (1861), George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1879), and Ella Hepworth Dixon’s Story of a Modern Woman (1894) are notable for the absence of one or both parents of their heroes, this loss marking the beginning of their narrative of development. Scholarship on the female Bildungsroman has long examined the impositions upon orphaned heroines in an oppressive society, while assuming male protagonists to be the norm for the genre. I argue that the absence of the father in the male novel of development provides no clear example of ideal gentlemanly masculinity – thus, the hero’s development is specifically gendered in the choices from boy to man. Within the traditional heteronormative family structure of the Victorian period, the father is the model of masculinity: a hardworking, yet caring patriarch. When this paradigm is

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dismantled, the young male protagonist of the Bildungsroman is offered several alternate examples of masculinity, meeting or lacking different qualities of the Smilesian ideal gentleman, upon which to model himself in manhood. In *Great Expectations*, Pip is raised by his working class sister and her meek husband until a mysterious benefactor raises Pip’s great expectations to ‘traditional’ gentlemanliness; while the eponymous *Daniel Deronda* is raised as the ward of an English aristocrat, yet dissatisfied with his expectations. These various father figures offer different models of adult masculinity, each with their own agendas to shape our young male protagonists after their own desired image of the ‘gentleman’.

During his lectures in 1845 and his subsequent volume *Self Help*, Samuel Smiles attempted to redefine the figure of the ‘gentleman’ as a man of labour in order to be more accessible across social classes, reconfiguring him as an aspirational model for all, as opposed to one created by chance and social privilege. Traditionally, the gentleman at this time was an aristocrat, occupying a life of wealth and leisure, assuming – or at least, appearing to assume – the quality of honour. Both Dickens and Eliot explore attempts to create gentlemen based on the pre-Smilesian definition.

In *Daniel Deronda*, we see Sir Hugo as one such ‘gentleman-maker’. Having raised Daniel as his ward, he is preoccupied with maintaining English aristocratic tradition. The adoptive father embodies everything of the stereotypical Victorian gentleman: Sir Hugo Mallinger ‘had always been a Whig,’ his ‘watch chain and seals, his handwriting, his mode of smoking and of talking to dogs and horses, had all a rightness and charm.’ This ‘rightness’ and ‘charm’ is one of comfort: a system that Britain is used to, and a system that has enabled Daniel to want for nothing materially. Privileged thanks to a long chain of aristocratic inheritance, an elite education, and parliamentary career, Sir Hugo offers to Daniel the model of a traditional English gentleman. In raising Daniel, he offers that same mould of aristocratic, hegemonic masculinity that is preoccupied with elite Englishness, granting Dan permission to study abroad on the condition that, ‘for God’s sake boy, keep an English cut, and don’t be indifferent to bad tobacco!’ His vast resources have been used to procure Deronda an elite education, a ‘passport in life’ modelled in Sir Hugo’s own image.

The Smilesian ideal of the necessary apprenticeship to gentlemanliness is here configured in Sir Hugo: ‘I should like to have you with me, pulling at my elbow’ in parliament. That said, this apprenticeship neither suits Daniel’s nor Smiles’ vision. Susan Colón writes, in her analysis of Daniel’s professional development, that his disinterest in Sir Hugo’s apprenticeship is his difficulty in reconciling elite professionalism with his altruism at a time when ‘advocates of the professions sought to explain their own professionalisation in terms of public service, while fending off often satirical criticisms of their alleged self-interest,’ and that Daniel’s eventual career choice of Zionist scholarship allows him to reconcile his professional education with his altruism and curiosity for his Jewish heritage. Colón fails to note one integral conflict within Daniel’s narrative: his rejection of Sir Hugo’s apprenticeship, thus his

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6 Ibid., p. 152
7 Ibid., p. 146.
8 Ibid., p. 145.
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old-fashioned model of gentlemanliness. Sir Hugo altruistically adopts Daniel, preparing him for a life of financial comfort and a career in English politics. It is the English notion of gentlemanliness that Daniel rejects: while he ‘would like to be a gentleman’ as a child, 10 as he matures he chooses his own vocation motivated by the ‘scant sympathy in intolerant English Society [...]’, where morality is merely the leftover mores of a “social contract” that has decayed to civil tolerance,’ as put by Carole Jones. 11 The selfishness of the hegemonic elite within this class structure, embodied by Sir Hugo, betrays Daniel’s (and Smiles’) concerns for morality and fairness.

Like Sir Hugo, Magwitch eagerly fashions himself as a ‘gentleman-maker’ in Great Expectations, using his resources accumulated through his criminal career to fund Pip’s ‘great expectations’ into societal privilege. Unlike Sir Hugo, however, Magwitch is grossly misinformed about what this means: his own models of gentlemen used their societal power not honourably but sadistically. Indeed, Compeyson, ‘set up fur a gentleman,’ whose ‘business was the swindling, handwriting forging, stolen bank-note passing, and such-like,’ is not merely a dishonourable gentleman but oppressive and physically abusive to his wife and Magwitch. 12 Magwitch’s hope is to apprentice Pip as a gentleman deserving of the ‘learning’ and resources afforded to Compeyson: honouring his debt of freedom to Pip, while backhandedly employing Pip in his scheme of vengeance. Furthermore, his conception of ‘gentleman-making’ and fatherhood are clumsily entwined: as benefactor he asserts his right as Pip’s ‘second father.’ 13 In a further act of paternal kindness renames himself ‘Provis’, which Anny Sadrin rightly identifies as a simultaneous claim to ‘providential’ fatherhood, while distancing Pip from his original name so as not to besmirch his ‘son’s’ respectable position in society. 14 While his motives are questionable, Magwitch does the best he can as a father figure in terms of resources: elevating Pip in society as best he can, and conforming to the correct forms and procedures as Sir Hugo has done with his transfer of inheritance to Daniel, as Vincent Pecora notes, in his employment of Jaggers as trustee. 15 Unlike Sir Hugo’s adopting and funding of Daniel’s upbringing however, Magwitch’s self-proclaimed fatherhood feels distinctly unnatural to Pip, and rightly so: Sir Hugo’s adoptive paternity is driven out of love, while Magwitch’s claim over Pip is one of malign vengeance.

Dickens’ striking formation of Magwitch’s ‘Frankenstein’ fatherhood is key: 16 both ‘second fathers’ attempt to form their young male wards in their own or a misformed ideal image, yet fail in practice. Their altruistic uses of resources as patriarchal paternal provisions are accepted in the hero’s development, but ultimately not enough. Both Pip and Deronda accept help but ultimately reject their 'apprenticeships' to go their own way: Deronda eschewing Sir Hugo’s projection onto him of absolute Englishness, while Pip learns the importance of self-reliance, responsibility, and work that Magwitch

10 Eliot, Daniel Deronda, p. 142.
12 Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, ed. by John Bowen (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1992).
13 Dickens, Great Expectations, p. 273.
16 Dickens, Great Expectations, p. 287.
aimed for him to ‘be above’.\textsuperscript{17} Both Eliot and Dickens demonstrate through these characters that there is more to fatherhood than providing for a son, while critiquing hegemonic gentlemen for being intolerant, slothful, or even villainous.

Both Dickens and Eliot interrogate, like Smiles, class-based notions of privilege being integral to gentlemanliness. In their fiction, however, they go further to interrogate gender roles and heteronormative family structures, redefining ‘gentlemen’ in their creations of gentle men. In the fatherly figures of Joe Gargery and Mordecai Cohen, gentler, domesticated men forge healthy homosocial relationships with the novels’ young heroes, which prove to nurture and nourish, offering a different education to the benefactor father figures. Joe Gargery, Pip’s first surrogate father in \textit{Great Expectations}, is in many ways a gentleman hindered by his social class. Smiles laments the prevalence of ‘genteel-men,’ who ‘acquire a taste for dress, style, luxuries and amusements, which can never form any foundation for gentlemanly or manly habits,’\textsuperscript{18} a warning to the contemporaries of Magwitch. As a blacksmith, Joe is a ‘common,’ standard working class everyman in both his physically laborious, skilled trade and his lack of formal education as demonstrated by his illiteracy and non-standard pronunciation; though he is redeemed by his qualities as a gentle man. Dominated by his gruff wife, both physically and within the domestic power hierarchy, he is Pip’s moral guide and driven by his sense of loyalty and fellow feeling. Explaining his lack of literacy to a young Pip, he explains his more pressing duties,

“\textbf{Well!}” Joe pursued, “\textit{somebody must keep the pot a-biling, Pip, or the pot won’t bile. [...] Consequence, my father didn’t make objections to my going to work; so I went to work at my present calling, which were his too, if he would have followed it, and I worked tolerable hard, I assure you, Pip. In the time I were able to keep him, and I kep him till he went off in a purple leptic fit.”\textsuperscript{19}

In spite of his abusive father, Joe remains a gentle soul: even lacking the choice of his own apprenticeship and vocation, as Pip is given later, he remains diligent in his work ethic not for personal success but to support others however he can, from his parents to Pip. Catherine Waters argues that Mrs Joe is defined by her ‘lack of maternal qualities and her perversion of domestic values,’ being ‘coarse’ and ‘rough’ instead of embodying a soft, traditionally feminine touch. In her deficiency, these maternal qualities are implied in Joe, as a ‘gentle’ man, who ‘sanctifies’, ‘sustain[es]’, and ‘nurture[es]’ Pip.\textsuperscript{20} By silently accepting his fate in order to keep the peace, Joe takes on traditionally feminine emotional labour in addition to his physical labour in the forge. While he lacks the formal, privileged education of Sir Hugo, or the traditional gentleman, Joe demonstrates the necessary Smilesian qualities of physical and moral strength. Smiles notes that the holy trinity of ‘the physical, moral, and the intellectual’ must be developed, ‘yet each must sacrifice something to the others’ in order to create a wholly rounded gentleman.\textsuperscript{21} This is more
closely within Joe’s reach than Sir Hugo’s, in the former’s ability to placate his abusive family members and revel in his sense of duty in managing the forge demonstrate great emotional intellect. While Pip loves Joe very much, upon receiving his ‘great expectations’ he makes a point to avoid ‘dear Joe’ due to the latter’s great moral compass; betraying his surrogate father’s teachings in the foolish pursuit of wealth and privilege. As Pecora notes, the turning point of the novel is Pip’s realisation that ‘all the “ineptitude” that has plagued his life, from his inauspicious origins and shaming twists of fate to his failures in business and love, had all along “been in me” and not others.’ In short, it is up to him to ‘keep the pot-a-biling.’

While Joe is a more obvious figure of paternity, or at least parenthood, Eliot’s introduction of Mordecai into *Daniel Deronda* demonstrates a different type of homosocial relationship. Part tutor, part friend, and part wise father figure, Mordecai and Daniel feel a kinship from their very first meeting, strengthened by their discovery of Daniel’s Jewish ancestry: ‘his face met Mordecai’s inward gaze as it had always belonged to the awaited friend,’ a sense of belonging to each other. Burdened by consumption, his ‘choking of life,’ the obstacle to his full professional potential, he continually develops his mental prowess through continued research and teaching of Jewish scholarship. Like Joe, he is motivated in his professional ambition and good nature by loyalty and the love of his people, ‘with a delight which was the beginning of a recovered energy: his attitude was more upright, his face was less worn.’ Indeed, his physical frailty allows him to occupy the space of care and nurturing within the novel: his ‘maternal action’ to young Adam Cohen, his support during Daniel’s identity crisis, to Mirah’s rejection of their father. The absence of Daniel’s mother, a lifelong loss, forms an emotional void in Daniel partly filled by Mordecai, who both seeks family as well as occupying domestic space. Carolyn Denver, in her psychoanalytic reading of the novel, argues that Daniel projects his need for a mother onto Mirah, both in her femininity and his search for her mother. However, while his sensitivity and parallelism with Mirah may drive him to project his loss of mother in his search for her mother, this desire is more literally projected onto Mordecai. The generational difference between the men is indeed one argument for a paternal, rather than fraternal relationship, as Mordecai, according to Anne Aresty Naman, is Eliot’s emblem of ancient Judaism, “a finely typical” likeness of poets and prophets, while Daniel’s face ‘does not suit the type of Jew he turns out to be,’ he is the future of a new, mixed, global generation of Jews.

In Eliot and Dickens’ considerations of ‘feminized’ father figures, the gentle men possess nurturing qualities and become a source of affection as well as moral and spiritual guidance for the heroes. In being pseudo-mothers rather than father figures, these men offer warmer, softer, models of

25 Ibid., p. 393.
26 Ibid., p. 434.
27 Ibid., p. 397.
masculinity compared with the hegemonic gentlemen masculinities offered by Sir Hugo and strived for by Magwitch. They are able to reconcile ‘the character gap between the stern father and the loving mother [which] made it extremely difficult for a growing boy to accommodate feelings of tenderness and affection in his masculine self-image’ which Tosh argues was central to the ‘stiff upper lip’ masculinity of the mid to late Victorian age.\(^{31}\) In this sense of class and gender criticism through representations of emotional labour, both Dickens and Eliot offer the alternative gentleman defined by gentleness rather than gentility.

While the identity crises central to the Bildungsroman genre are, in the case of Pip and Daniel Deronda, resultant of the absence of their ‘real’ biological fathers, their echoes are still spookily present throughout the novels through the heroes’ imaginations, and anecdotes from others. The absence of these figures creates an ambiguity of self-identity negotiated through stories and imagination – the lack of presence is an influence in itself.

In *Great Expectations*, we are ‘introduced’ to Pip’s parents through their headstones at the opening of the novel. Excepting his sister Mrs. Joe, neither Pip’s parents nor other blood relatives are spoken of by other characters. Consequently, Pip must forge his impressions of his ancestry through the limited resources he has. ‘The shape of the letters [on his father’s tombstone] gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair.’\(^{32}\) This concept of his father is based on Smilesian gender norms. Furthermore, we know that Pip is named after his father, Philip Pirrip, which implies the model of a patriarchal family man, yet he is not present to confirm: only his name is confirmed ‘on the authority of his tombstone and my sister, Mrs Joe Gargery.’\(^{33}\) What we can infer from Philip Pirrip’s tombstone is his working class position, though we have no clues as to his gentlemanly qualities – only that he is ‘late of this parish,’\(^{34}\) and thus a member of the community. Importantly in this identification process, it is not the tombstone (and thus the departed father) which is imparting the information to Pip, but Pip interpreting the visual style of the lettering through his own lens of experience: Waters notes that the masculine gender characteristics of ‘stoutness’ and ‘darkness’ of the typography is imposed from Pip to the tombs, that the ‘language is already gendered,’ and furthermore transfigured into the patriarchal family structure, a pyramid diagram of power held by his father, then his mother ‘wife of the above,’ and their infant children.\(^{35}\)

Compared with the active, and sometimes over compensatory role of his father figures Joe and Magwitch, his true father was neither a benefactor nor caregiver, with Anny Sadrin noting that he is ‘cheekily dismissed as “name transmitter”’ in his life, who at that was ignorant of gentlemanly conventions of naming the first-born child for oneself, rather than the last-born child, as Pip is.\(^{36}\) It is this hurt and seeming abandonment of his father in giving up on life and Pip’s future that Pip reaches his Smilesian gentlemanly growth in one aspect early in life. His self-identification as ‘Pip’ is the self-making

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32 Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 3.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 2.
35 Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family*, p. 151.
36 Sadrin, *Parentage and Inheritance*, p. 27.
of his future identity, the name by which he is henceforth known and will leave to potential heirs. He himself is offered the chance to be ‘Pip’ as either smith or gentile: because he never quite reconciles the two professional masculinities, he thus is heir to nothing but himself.

Daniel Deronda, comparatively, lacks concern for his father, but sees his grandfather as holder of the ancestry from which he was disinherited by his mother. Dissatisfied with the life of an English gentle man, ‘more and more mixed with criticism’ of that life emblematic of Sir Hugo,\(^37\) he later learns he is heir to his grandfather, Daniel Charisi’s name and scholarship, among other parallels such as Daniel’s mathematical prowess\(^38\) from his grandfather’s skill as a physician.\(^39\) This belated and mysterious inheritance gives Daniel the confidence to pursue his own career path as a Jewish scholar, with the papers his grandfather left him and the chance to travel to his Jewish ‘homeland’ in order to understand both himself and Mirah’s ancestral histories, both supporting each other as relative outsiders to their religion and genealogy. Significantly, like Pip’s late father, Daniel Charisi is absent and thus unknown, Daniel’s and readers’ impressions of him delivered exclusively by his estranged daughter, the Princess. In her brief narrative describing him, she links Daniel and his grandfather not only by blood but by her estrangement of them, and their expectations of her traditional feminine role and duty to them both. Describing Daniel Deronda as having ‘the spirit of my father,’\(^40\) we discover that among these skills and loyal desires of the two men being parallels, he has moreover inherited his grandfather’s appearance and ‘learnedness’. His genetic gift of a ‘wonderful mind’\(^41\) enables him to succeed in Sir Hugo’s hoop jump of elite education, as well as Mordecai and Daniel Charisi’s implied apprenticeship for him as a scholarly apprentice, and consequently Daniel’s choice of self-exile in the pursuit of specialised knowledge at the novel’s conclusion. The discovery of his mother, and hence his grandfather and his race is the key to unlocking his sense of ambition, direction, and chosen type of masculinity: he rejects the ideal of hegemonic gentile, muscular English Christianity modelled by Sir Hugo and Hans Meyrick in favour of gentle Judaism.

Eliot and Dickens both, in spite of their orphaning of the *Bildungsroman* protagonists, demonstrate that biological fathers and ancestry are, for them, the key to the inheritance of identity. The absence of Pip’s father deprives him of physical inheritance – even the one quality he obtained in his name he refuses to make his own, although he finds this difficult to negotiate as he approaches manhood. In an almost complete contrast, Daniel Deronda’s discovery of his inheritance from his grandfather unlocks his future and solves his identity crisis, giving him Smiles’ all-important sense of vocation and more importantly, belonging and kinship within this. We see in Daniel’s discovery a sense of resolution denied to Pip.

Within the *Bildungsroman*, the essential narrative of personal development allows Eliot and Dickens’ heroes the chance to meet multiple models of masculinity, and consider influences that fit within and outside the quintessential model of ‘gentlemanliness’. Both Pip and Daniel express the desire

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 148.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 525.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 520.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 522.
as boys to fit within the hegemonic model of the gentleman for their futures, but upon integration into this type of masculinity learn its pitfalls and thus reject this hegemonic ideal, critiquing it to fit their now learned preferences. Pip’s experience as a society gentleman, thanks to Magwitch’s ‘fatherly’ gift, distances him from his ‘dear Joe,’ his only true and consistent caregiver and friend due to the capitalist vices of greed and sloth that his new social position affords him, in comparison to Joe’s humble and altruistic work ethic. In an opposite vein, the hegemonic English gentlemanly qualities embodied in Sir Hugo alienate Daniel Deronda, whose innate ‘foreignness’ and desire to engage with his mysterious roots and better his ‘true’ people directly conflicts with the imperial values of Sir Hugo and his plan. While Pip and Daniel both enjoy their gentlemanly upbringings, both feel a sense of unease at the expectation to fulfil a sort of traditional father-son family trade apprenticeship. In spite of the paternal nurturing both have received, it is their sense of friendship with their father figures of Sir Hugo, Joe, and Mordecai that distinguishes them as older role models and not fathers: betraying the father figure’s planned apprenticeship is an essential component in the journey to building their own model of manhood to conclude their Bildungsroman.

The absence of blood fathers, in contrast with traditional Victorian values of father-son inheritance and lineage, within the Bildungsroman offers variety in examples of masculinity that draw from different social classes, conceptions of morality, and vocations. The traditional conclusion of the genre is indeed followed in Daniel Deronda and Great Expectations, with both protagonists resolving to leave their surrogate fathers and their different homes to journey to the East. Although neither quite solves his identity crisis, both heroes opt for self-exile as a firm decision to open the next narrative phase of their lives: their Bildungsrome having followed them from boyhood to young manhood, they are ready to enter the next phase of their lives to take them from being young men to patriarchs of family, scholarship, and business. In Smiles’ terms, they have learned the importance of ‘self-help’ and strive to continue learning as they negotiate manhood.
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