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**The Dickens Space:
A New Way to Read *Great Expectations***

Introduction

These days, *Great Expectations* (GE) is read almost exclusively by students or by scholars. This phenomenon is something of a decline from when the novel was first published. In 1861, when serialization of the novel concluded, Charles Dickens was England's most acclaimed author, and an inveterate best-seller. Serialized in *All the Year Round*, the magazine Dickens edited, GE raised circulation to over 100,000. Following serialization, there were five editions within the first year (Rosenberg, "Launching Great Expectations" 398). The novel has never been out of print since. Now, though, GE is a fixture in high school and undergraduate literature classrooms, where it has become that most dreaded thing: a 'classic'. To be a classic is to be a book that no one wants to read, though many may claim to have done so. To be a classic is to be a book that is so repeatedly glossed and summarized by study guides and essay mills that the true essence of the text is often lost.

On the other hand, the callow reluctance of high school students should not be reason enough to abandon GE to the increasingly occult studies of masters and doctoral students. GE still has a great deal to say to us on the topic of loyalty to inconvenient friends,

the nature of success, and much more. These days, we cancel dates and even break off relationships with text messages; loyalty and fidelity might be good virtues to cultivate. Our ideas of success are really tangled dreams of winning the lottery, buying the right stock just before it goes up, or getting discovered on a reality TV show. When was the last time you heard someone say hard work is the path to success? The confusion between luck and hard work is what Pip had to wrestle with throughout almost the whole of *GE*. He won the lottery, or at least he thought he had. He was willing to take the money that was handed to him without much concern for its source, but when he learned the truth – that he was Magwitch’s creature – he realized that someone is always working to make that money. Money never just grows on trees. As Hornback notes, “Pip finally comes to see himself, in his desire to be a gentleman, as the representative source of corruption in a corrupt world” (Hornback 25). Today’s readers could be moved to think about their own goals, after examining the steps and missteps that Pip took as he made his discoveries.

GE is also a text that teachers enjoy and one that is guaranteed not to “bring a blush into the cheek of the young person” (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 129). When parents complain that an assigned text is ‘inappropriate’ for their children, responding to the complaint can be a time-consuming nightmare. However, no such complaint will be made about *GE*. In the 1990s, college teachers across the country ranked it first among the novels they should most like to teach (Rosenberg, “Preface” xi). In *English Journal*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, there are several articles about how best to teach *GE*, and a Google search for “dickens great expectations lesson plans” turns up hundreds and hundreds of hits.

Despite these reasons for continued engagement in GE, the most recent print edition is 15 years old. Our technology and our culture have changed profoundly in those 15 years. The text is available online from Project Gutenberg, but it takes a great deal of self-discipline to read a text with no editorial apparatus, no illustrations, and few navigation aids. Several editions of GE are available for free or to purchase for the Kindle from Amazon.com, but making use of these editions requires that one have an Amazon account as well as a device on which to read them. None of the available electronic editions makes full use of technology now available, technology which could be employed to make the text more accessible to students and budding scholars. Edward Nawotka says, “A plain old book that offers footnotes, appendices and indexes will begin to seem cumbersome and inconvenient in comparison” with e-text (qtd. in Coe 2). Further, combining e-text with social media tools will enable teachers and students to create a new community of readers that is much expanded from the traditional community of the classroom (Gillespie). If students could engage with unfamiliar peers around a humanities topic, who knows what ideas might be generated (Lu and Deng)? In the following sections, I will describe the rationale for such an edition, as well as how it might function as a website.

Why E-text

People have been reading text on screens for decades now, and designers and publishers have learned a little about what to do – and what not to do – with such a text. In some contexts, the screen mimics the printed page, such as the Kindle’s new page flip feature, intended to make the e-text behave like print (Streitfeld). Often, the e-book suffers because “all of our attempts have been to render the print book electronically rather than developing a new technology that facilitates reading” (Coyle 161). We should be designing

e-books to do what a page never could, as in the online Shelley-Godwin Archive, where one can overlay two images of printed pages and identify the editions or variants visually.

E-reading offers benefits to the reader that a traditional book never could; “it is important to realize that ebooks are not just print books (pbooks) in another format” (Browne and Coe 289). These days, dictionaries are built in to ebooks, an advantage for student readers who are struggling with vocabulary (Bucolo, “Stay Tuned for Our Next Episode” 33). There’s no more guessing about what a word means; you can look it up by simply touching the word, even if you don’t have an Internet connection (Lu and Deng). E-text can also include illustrations of all kinds, in ways that just wouldn’t be feasible with a printed book. For example, some illustrations might be intended to accompany the text, while others were included to give additional information about an important element of the plot. Pip is much distressed by what Estella says about his thick boots (Dickens, *Great Expectations* 52) – but what kind of boots were they? How did they compare, set beside a pair of boots belonging to Herbert Pocket, who is a gentleman’s son? Seeing photographs or drawings might spur the imagination of someone who had recently been teased for not having the latest pair of sneakers, or who just had no idea what the rich or poor boy wore on his feet in the 19th century.

Photographs and drawings are not the only possible addition to e-text; readers could also have access to video clips. GE has been adapted for television or film nine times (further proof that it is a story worth telling). There are also video clips that could show what a blacksmith’s forge was really like, or a crowded London street, or even something as simple as riding in a carriage. Finally, annotations and other similar elements would be much more accessible in an e-text edition (McGann 145). Depending on how the system is

designed, readers could click a link to open a window with additional information, or the annotations could simply be visible to one side of the text (Hirsch 60). One of the constant challenges of editorial apparatus is where to put the notes (Eggert 116); with an e-text edition, this problem finally disappears.

The e-text edition of GE that I propose would be arranged in the original weekly serial installments. These installments create stopping points where Dickens clearly intended them to be, and they are less intimidating to students than being handed the novel and being told to have it read by a particular date (Bucolo, “Stay Tuned for Our Next Episode”). It is also difficult to read a long document on the computer screen. By breaking the text into the original installments, readers don’t need to face this challenge.

An e-text edition would also make feasible a constantly expanding collection of critical commentary on the text. Some commentary could be solicited, but links to extant criticism would also be available. This collection might be edited by an individual or committee, or it might be curated by the crowd, using a system of up-votes and down-votes.

Creating an e-text edition would lead to profound changes in the visuality and materiality of the text, requiring readers “to develop a new kind of relationship with the stories, text conventions, and the reading process” (Felvégi and Matthew 42). Site designers could play with these changes and perhaps create positive changes in the reader’s response. For example, students who consider themselves poor readers may well be intimidated by the thick, doorstop quality of a Dickens novel. However, by accessing the text online or through a smart phone, their attention can be distracted from the novel’s

length, so that they are led to think instead about the poor choices Pip is making, or to wonder why Dickens so frequently personified the urban landscape.

Reading Tools

Active reading is a valuable collection of skills that teachers have been making use of in K-12 classrooms, but also at the postsecondary level. Students who engage in active reading interrogate the text as they read, pausing to summarize, make notes, and ask questions. Unfortunately, e-reading can make active reading a challenge, though certain applications have added the necessary features (Lu and Deng). Readers need the ability to highlight text, to make notes and link them to certain areas of the text, and to create bookmarks, in order to return to areas in the text. Such reading tools will help students engage in active reading, and lead them to understand what they are reading as a conversation. Through the website design, students would be able to store their work with the text. Teachers could review the students' work; other students could respond to comments the students made.

Another aspect of web editions that is not available with a printed book is the ability to include lesson plans and other ancillary materials. Of course, there are many 'teacher's edition' copies of various textbooks, but the materials they include are generally poorly conceived and executed. There are also 'how to teach' books for certain texts, like those published by the Folger Library that offer advice and support for teachers of Shakespeare plays. However, there are no such books for GE. With a web edition, lesson plans could be included, and teachers could be invited to upload their own lesson plan materials. As with the critical commentary on the text, these lessons could be curated by an editor or by the teachers who use the site, with up-votes and down-votes. Reviews and ratings have

become a familiar means of interacting with content for many, so there would be little difficulty in extending the concept to ancillary materials.

Social Media

Throughout this discussion, there have been repeated references to students and teachers uploading content to the site. This is perhaps the most important aspect of a web-hosted edition of GE. As students interact with the text, they can share their comments and reactions via social media on the site. As Leslie Bofill notes, social media and content creation tools (often called web 2.0) give students the chance to help each other learn (31). Teachers would be responsible for curating the material their students submitted, so the social aspect of the site would be restricted to work with the text. However, students could upload brief videos of their reactions to different aspects of the text. They could share their own notes and commentaries, choosing to make them public just to other classmates, or to students from other schools who were also using the site. To add a service-learning component, undergraduates and graduate students studying the text could interact with high school students, answering questions and suggesting lines of inquiry. To have students at such different levels communicating about the text would create a 'zone of proximal development' where more advanced students could guide the less advanced (Bofill 32). Teachers could also communicate with each other, developing new nodes of their social networks and exposing themselves to new information.

This kind of social media, directly connected to the study of the text, would create a virtual community of readers, all focused on the same text. These days, high school or undergraduate students reading a book together in a classroom comprise almost the only example of a community of readers, other than a book club. Through class discussion of the

text, reading takes on an extra dimension as students learn to recognize varying points of view and to see that others may have completely different interpretations of the ambiguities present in the text. The social media aspect of the web-hosted edition of the text could help students to see that they are part of a larger community that is interacting with this text.

Website Design: An Overview

Users: The users of this website would be registered teachers and their students. Unregistered individuals would have access to the text and annotations, but not to content uploaded by students or teachers.

Content: The content of the website would be of two kinds. First, there would be the content of the novel and all of the associated materials. The text of the novel would be arranged in chapters, with chapters organized by the original serialization of the novel. While this would divide the novel into 36 installments, it would also create logical divisions of lengths suited to the average high school student's patience and ability to read and understand (Bucolo, "Stay Tuned for Our Next Episode"). It is possible, and potentially more successful, to spread the novel across several terms of the school year and integrate the reading with other reading assignments. Bucolo quotes his students comparing their experience of reading the novel to their experiences of their first year of high school, as well as saying that the novel is more suspenseful when read in installments ("Survivor" 29). It's significant that students were even willing to make positive comments about the text.

Materials associated with the text would include glossary entries, annotations, illustrations, photos, and video clips. The second kind of content would be ancillary materials; these would include commentary uploaded by students, lesson plans and

commentary uploaded by teachers, and critical commentary uploaded or linked by scholars. Scholars who upload commentary might be encouraged to communicate with students who had offered comments on their text.

Functionality: Teachers would request registration by forwarding a copy of their teacher ID and using a school email address. If the site is run as a non-profit, a committee of teachers could be responsible for checking the IDs of new registrants; otherwise, this would be the job of site administrators. Following teacher registrations, they would create registrations for the students in their classes who would be using the site. At the time of registration, teachers would decide if their students could communicate with students from other classes and other schools, or if they would just interact with students in their own classroom.

Following registration, students would log in to the site and be able to read the text. A number of reading tools would be available, including highlighting, bookmarking, and note-making. As students read through the text, they might be assigned to create a certain number of highlights, or to comment on the text a certain number of times. The teacher could see a summary of the class's responses to the text and click through to look at individual comments, highlights, and bookmarks. In this way, the teacher would be able to determine if there were aspects of the text that needed further explanation, and she would also be able to develop discussion questions that drew from the students' comments.

If the teacher enabled it, the students would have the capacity to upload video and text, associated with locations in the text. Students would also be able to see and respond to the video and comments that had been uploaded by students at other schools. Each teacher would be responsible for curating the materials that her class uploaded, and would

therefore act as a check on teens' natural tendencies to subvert class discussion in potentially offensive ways. Additionally, teachers could choose to participate in service-learning projects with university classes, where university students who were studying the same text responded to or engaged with the high school students who were sharing their content or comments.

Essentially, teachers would be responsible for the privacy and security of their students in the context of this website – as is so often the case anyway.

Conclusion

In conclusion, GE has much to tell us, perhaps in spite of its position as a classic. The challenge is that for the people who are most likely to read GE – high school students and undergraduate literature students – the book may seem an impenetrable thicket of class struggle, snobbery, and archaic vocabulary and sentence structure. By taking full advantage of tools available to us through the Internet and existing technology, we can help readers hack a path through that thicket (Maynard 239). It is tempting to insist that students struggle through the print edition, for after all, that is how previous generations read the text. However, most students would just as soon not read the text at all, especially if they have to flip to the end of the chapter, or the end of the text, every time there is a note. As Joe Bucolo jokes about the challenges of teaching GE, “upperclassmen laughed about never actually reading the novel as freshmen; ... not a yearbook was published without mentioning *Great Ex* and *Cliffs Notes* in the same sentence” (“Stay Tuned for Our Next Episode” 33). Rather than fighting a losing battle with students over whether they will or will not read the text, how much better to develop a more compelling presentation – one

that actually helps students to engage with the text and think about the ideas Dickens was trying to communicate.

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