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Dickens: The Law and Love

It is not clear the extent to which Charles Dickens deliberately used Christian themes and motifs within his writing, although that many are present is certain. Yet, as this overview of some of his key works and the themes they contain shows, Dickens' fiction was not only influenced by real events in his world but through it he consistently displayed genuine compassion for those downtrodden by the society in which he lived. As such, the extent to which Dickens believed in the power of literature to challenge and to change can be seen.

Redemptive love

Throughout his novels, Charles Dickens shows us his concern for society and his compassion for the poor. His understanding of Christian principles is most clearly illustrated through his numerous descriptions of complex relationships which disclose the redemptive power of human love. Through his relationship with Angela Coutts Burdett he offered help for the Ragged Schools, supported the founding of Urania Cottage, a home for fallen women, and also became involved in various housing schemes. His interest in those who suffered in society was not just a subject for fiction.

Dickens's genius as a novelist may be seen through the smallest of details. His close observation often reaches beyond description and in doing so translates into symbol. The relationship between reality and symbolism in Dickens's fiction connects character, intention and plot. Take for example the opening of *Great Expectations,* where we meet Magwitch who 'is a fearful man,' emerging from primeval slime as some sort of monster:

A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles and, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin. 1

Great Expectations was published in 1860-1861 just two years after Charles Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, the time when the debate about Darwinian evolution had taken London by storm and questions about origins were fiercely debated. The man who appeared from the marsh had an iron on his leg, no hat, broken shoes and a rag tied round his head. He took hold of Pip:

Turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself – for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet – when the church came to itself, I say I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously. 2

The repetition of 'the church coming to itself' captures Pip's perspective. During the time that Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* the accepted Christian doctrines about creation had been turned on their head. The idea of the church coming to itself in Pip's encounter with Magwitch was, at the same time, a moment that would turn Pip's life upside down and change his orphan status into that of a gentleman. The 1860s in Victorian society was a

period when fortunes were being made and lost and it was possible for people to enter the middle classes by means of wealth. The argument for evolution and progress was concurrent. For Magwitch the transition from a feral life to one of self-sacrifice is the means by which Pip becomes a gentleman. When Pip brings the file and wittles to Magwitch the following day he reflects:

I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction, of somebody's coming to take the pie away. 3

Magwitch is described throughout as the lowest form of life and he is in constant danger of his life being taken away. Pip's action in feeding him and sustaining him gives him his life back. He later returns this kindness to Pip by enabling him to become a gentleman. The revelation to Pip that Magwitch is his benefactor could not be more shocking and in the telling, Magwitch compares himself to a dog:

"Yes, Pip, dear boy, I've made a gentleman on you! It's me wot has done it! I swore that time, sure as ever I earned a guinea, that guinea should go to you. I swore arterwards, sure as ever I spec'lated and got rich, you should get rich. I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work. What odds, dear boy? Do I tell it, fur you to feel a obligation? Not a bit. I tell it, fur you to know as that there hunted dunghill dog wot you kep life in, got his head so high that he could make a gentleman – and, Pip, you're him!"

The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast.

"Look'ee here, Pip. I'm your second father. You're my son – more to me nor any son." 4

The convict benefactor declares Pip's adoption and in doing so confirms his patrimony. The sense of any importance being attached to class stratifications in Victorian society is gently but deliberately undermined. Pip had always imagined that his benefactress was Miss Havisham and so he could not grasp the idea that his position as a gentleman was the result of generosity from a convict who described himself as a 'dunghill dog.' Pip's discovery of the real source of his riches came as a severe shock; one which then made him refuse further payments. The knowledge of the origin of his expectations reinforced the Darwinian motif that lurks in the narrative.

When Pip first encounters Miss Havisham it is insects that carry forward the Darwinian theme. Pip notices a black fungus and 'speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies running home to it.' He hears mice 'rattling behind the panels' and black beetles 'groped about the hearth in a ponderous elderly way.' Later Pip returns to the 'dog' theme as he watches Magwitch eat:

Some of his teeth had failed him since I saw him eat on the marshes, and as he turned his food in his mouth, and turned his head sideways to bring his strongest fangs to bear upon it, he looked terribly like a hungry old dog. 5

The significance of social evolution in mid Victorian society had also been reinforced by the publication in 1859 of Samuel Smiles' *Self Help* but in *Great Expectations* Dickens plays with the order of things in the animal world using the symbolism to illustrate social evolution and in doing so asks questions about the nature and origins of social change.

Great Expectations is at a much deeper level an exploration of the changes that take place in human character. It has been described as a *bildungsroman,* but it is a particular kind of education that Pip experiences. It is both moral and psychological. It is achieved through the first person narrative and the way in which the story advances as Pip reveals his ambition to be a gentleman. His snobbishness, his ill-treatment and disregard of Joe and Biddy on whom he depends comes to the fore. Humphrey House described the novel as 'A snob's progress,' 6 but there is a more telling aspect to this which Pip's growing self-awareness discloses.

In Chapter 14 Pip describes his ambivalence about the forge. The style is confessional and imitates the cadences of the Book of Common Prayer:

It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home. There may be black ingratitude in the thing, and the punishment may be retributive and well-deserved; but, that it is a miserable thing, I can testify. 7

There is the discernible style of both a collect and a creed in what follows from this confession before Pip continues with a form of versicle and response:

It was not because I was faithful, but because Joe was faithful, that I never ran away and went for a soldier or a sailor. It was not because I had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, but because Joe had a strong sense of the virtue of industry that I worked with tolerable zeal against the grain. It is not possible to know how far the influence of any amiable honest hearted duty doing man flies out into the world; but it is very possible to know how it has touched oneself in going by, and I know right well that any good that intermixed itself with my apprenticeship came from plain contented Joe, and not of restlessly aspiring discontented me. 8

The 'Confession' is one that feeds Pip's guilt and unease throughout the novel and it is there constantly in relation to Joe's continual care of Pip. Joe, without speaking, educates Pip and redeems him. Pip cannot release himself from the pull of his care. He walks through the village as "the light mists were solemnly rising, as if to show me a new world." He recalls how little and innocent he was at the forge and with that recollection "with a strong heave and sob I broke into tears." When he reaches the first finger post he lays his hand on it and says: "Good-bye, oh my dear, dear friend!" As he journeyed he thought that he should go back and "have another evening at home, and a better parting." 9 Pip agonises further about his need to acknowledge his debt to Joe:

We changed again, and yet again, and it was not too late and it was not too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world they spread before me. 10

This conclusion to the first stage of Pip's expectations is marked by Pip looking back on the forge with its fiery warmth and Joe whom he had described as 'a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness.' Pip's departure recalls the end of *Paradise Lost*:

The world was all before them where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way. 11

Pip no longer sees the forge as ‘the glowing road to manhood and independence.’ However, his break with Joe and Biddy and his home continues to be tinged with remorse and guilt. His progress from this point is one of reinvention, but through the experience of leaving, he is again made aware of Joe’s care for him. It is Biddy who writes the formal letter of introduction for Joe’s visit. The first person narrative provides a sharp insight into Pip’s reserve towards Joe now that he is a gentleman.

I knew it was Joe, by his clumsy manner of coming upstairs – his state boots being always too big for him – and by the time it took him to read the names on the other floors in the course of his assent. When at last he stopped outside our door I could hear his finger tracing over the painted letters of my name, and afterwards distinctly heard him breathing in at the keyhole. 12

Each detail of his ascent gives a painful account of the way that Pip had now come to regard Joe from his new elevated social position. His response is calculating and distant. It bears no comparison to the earlier remorse he felt in leaving the forge and thinking he should return to make a better job of leave taking. After Joe’s visit, Pip makes plans to return to his old home. He tells himself that he must put up at the Blue Boar as his bed would not be ready and Miss Havisham was exacting. Then he pauses to reflect upon this self deceit:

All other swindlers on earth are nothing to the self-swindlers, and with such pretences did I cheat myself. Surely a curious thing. 13

This momentary self reflection shows it is not a curious thing but a form of confession of Pip’s carelessness towards Joe.

Some of the most significant moments in *Great Expectations* are achieved through a lightness of touch. Pip who once loved Biddy explains to her that if he did not “want to be a gentleman” he could have settled down with her and he might have been good enough for her. Her response to this information is disarming in its honesty “Yes; I am not over particular.” Towards the end of the novel Pip is reminded of Joe’s care in protecting him and reflects on his generosity as well as Biddy’s perspicacity:

The delicacy with which Joe dismissed this theme, and the sweet tact and kindness with which Biddy – who with her woman’s wit had found me out so soon – had prepared him for it, made a deep impression on my mind. But whether Joe knew how poor I was, and how my great expectations had all dissolved, like our own marsh mists before the sun, I could not understand. 14

This summary is the final stage of Pip’s coming to himself. Earlier there is his own recognition of this when Pip goes to see Miss Havisham to explain the loss of his fortune. Miss Havisham offers to help:

"Can I only serve you, Pip, by serving your friend? Regarding that as done, is there nothing I can do for you yourself?"

"Nothing. I thank you for the question. I thank you even more for the tone of the question. But, there is nothing." 15

Christopher Ricks makes comment: 'That comma after "But" must be the least careless comma in Dickens – the decent mystery of leaving the rest unsaid.' 16 It is through that moment of recognition that Pip 'comes to himself and takes responsibility for his future.

There is also remarkable economy of plot through the role of Jaggers the lawyer and gatekeeper as he holds together the central relationships in the novel: Magwitch, his daughter Estella and Miss Havisham as Estella's guardian. Pip's progress is held in this web. The novel in its conclusion gathers up the threads. Resolution is achieved not through Pip's assumed gentlemanly status but through Pip's ability to reach out and love Magwitch.

There is a sweet irony in the way that Magwitch, with some degree of pride states: "I have seen my boy, and he can be a gentleman without me." In Magwitch's final hour Pip explains that Estella is his daughter and how he has come to love her. Magwitch "raised my hand to his lips" and then he died. In that moment Pip reflects on the words: 'O Lord be merciful to me a sinner.' The conclusion of the novel sees Pip united finally with Estella:

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her. 17

Pip's moral education had proved to him that in the end 'there is no variation or shadow due to change' in love. 18

Wisdom and folly

In 1861, the year of the publication of *Great Expectations* there were some other significant works published: John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism,* John Ruskin's *Unto this Last* and George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. In writing *Silas Marner* George Eliot was rereading *Pilgrim's Progress* while reading the *Origin of Species,* The theme of and purpose of both these works may be seen as a further illustration of representations of Darwin's ideas on development and progress.

Great Expectations is often compared to *Hard Times* for the close interweaving of both plot and character. Ruskin said of *Hard Times* in *Unto This Last:*

But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions. They will find much that is partial, and, because partial apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which

Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all the trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told. 19

At one level *Hard Times* is an exposition of the contrast between Benthamite utilitarianism and the worlds of the imagination. The contrast is expressed symbolically between the world of the square schoolroom where the teaching is mechanical, and the circus ring. The stark contrast is highlighted in the first chapter entitled 'The one thing needful,' reflecting the story of Mary and Martha 20 the irony is obvious as Mr Gradgrind explains the importance of factual education which is delivered in the 'plain, bare monotonous vault of a schoolroom.' His two children Tom and Louisa are to become well educated through the method of learning facts, since: 'nothing else will be of any service to them.' Sissy Jupe introduces herself and explains that her father 'belongs to the horse riding' but Mr Gradgrind is emphatic that he does not want her to talk about the circus ring in the schoolroom. The 'facts' in the square schoolroom have no relation to the life of the circus. The difference is expressed emblematically in the novel between the square and the circle. When Tom and Louisa, fascinated by the circus ring, try to glimpse some of the action they are discovered by their father:

"In the name of wonder, idleness and folly!" said Mr Gradgrind, leading each away by the hand; "what do you do here?" 21

Louisa explains quite simply that they wanted to see what the circus was like.

There was an air of jaded sullenness in them both, and particularly in the girl: yet, struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheer for use, but with uncertain, eager, doubtful flashes which had something painful in them, analogies to the changes on a blind face groping its way. 22

Dickens uses the imagery of light and fire throughout the novel to amplify his theme and show how love, intelligence and imagination can be illustrated through images associated with fire. It is by looking into the fire that Louisa glimpses other possibilities different from those prescribed by her father. When she utters the words "I wonder," she is immediately corrected by her father: "Louisa, never wonder" in a chapter that bears the title 'Never Wonder.'

Tom went and leaned on the back of her chair, to contemplate the fire which so engrossed her, from her point of view, and see what he could make of it.

"Except that it is a fire," said Tom, "it looks to me as stupid and blank as everything else looks. What do you see in it? Not a circus?"

"I don't see anything in it, Tom, particularly. But since I have been looking at it, I have been wondering about you and me, grown up." 23

Louisa's prescience was a significant reflection. Her own future was about to be determined by her father in arranging a marriage with Mr Bounderby, a man thirty years her senior. Louisa agrees to this arrangement in part to support Tom who has been employed by

Bounderby, the banker. The bond between Tom and Louisa is strengthened but the cost is one of her own happiness. James Harthouse, a young politician, attempts to seduce Louisa but Louisa realising the danger goes back to her father. Her distress changes Gradgrind; he reflects:

"I am not too proud to believe it, Louisa. How could I be arrogant, and you before me! Can it be so? Is it so, my dear?" He looked upon her once more, lying cast away there; and without another word went out of the room. 24

The moment of revelation is painful to both; Dickens offers the comment: 'All closely imprisoned forces rend and destroy.' However for Gradgrind this is not the end of his education in matters of the heart and human sympathy. Tom robs Bounderby and puts the blame on Stephen Blackpool a humble well meaning worker.

They all went in; and Mr Gradgrind sat down, forlorn, on the Clown's performing chair in the middle of the ring. On one of the back benches, remote in the subdued light on the strangeness of the place, sat the villainous whelp, sulky to the last, whom he had the misery to call his son.

In a preposterous coat, like a beadle's, with cuffs and flaps exaggerated to an unspeakable extent; in an immense waistcoat, knee-breeches, buckled shoes, and a mad cocked hat; with nothing fitting him, and everything of coarse material, moth-eaten and full of holes; with seams in his black face, where fear and heat had started through the greasy composition daubed all over it; anything so grimly, detestably, ridiculously shameful as the whelp in his comic livery, Mr Gradgrind never could by any other means have believed in, weighable and measurable fact though it was. And one of his model children had come to this! 25

The entire structure of Mr Gradgrind's educational system is represented through the bitter irony of its failure. Throughout the novel Sissy's gentle hearted wisdom, which fails every educational test, gives a different kind of light and wisdom symbolised in the opening chapter when the sunlight which shone made her 'a deeper and more lustrous colour' while the self-same rays drew out of Bitzer 'what little colour he ever possessed.' It is Sissy who provides for this melancholy novel the briefly expressed happy ending through the light and fire of maternal love:

But, happy Sissy's happy children loving her; all children loving her; she, grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights …

Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold. 26

Imprisonment and freedom

The novels that Charles Dickens wrote in the 1850s onwards have darker more impenetrable themes. In *Bleak House* there is the dense and all pervasive imagery of the fog which gathers

to it the crippling legal case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, enveloping the lives of so many people and the attendant intricate complications of character and plot. The symbolism of the fog reinforces this in much the same way that Dickens achieves unity of purpose in *Great Expectations.*

Bleak House was written before *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit* a year later. Each of these novels develops the theme of imprisonment and freedom in different kinds of ways. *Bleak House* has an almost post-modern feel. The novel is filled with numerous characters and coincidences. There is the sadness of Joe the crossing sweeper who lives and dies in poverty. There is Krook, the 'chancellor' of the rag and bone department who dies of spontaneous combustion, mad Miss Flite who haunts the courts of chancery as well as many others.

Bleak House is unique in Dickens's novels in having two narratives: the omniscient narrator and that of Esther Summerson's account whose reporting is very different. As the plot progresses it is revealed that Esther is the daughter of an alliance between Captain Hawdon and Lady Deadlock. The shift in narrative from one voice to another enables a break in perspective and prefigures some much later experiments in fiction. There is another dimension to the prosaic style of Esther Summerson in that she reflects the role of the biblical Esther who experiences displacement, cares for others and in the end arrives at the right relationship.

On first reading it might seem that the opening of *Little Dorrit* is irrelevant to the novel as a whole. However the opposite argument offers another interpretation. In the first chapter we meet Rigaud and John Baptist in the darkest and most well fortified prison cell in Marseille. The contrast between the cell and the glaring, searing Mediterranean sunshine outside is deliberate. The scene is not referred to again but is emblematic. It highlights the problems of incarceration. A number of different kinds of imprisonments are explained in the novel and take the place of a plot. There is Mrs Clennam's control of both Arthur and also of William Dorrit. It eventually emerges that Arthur is not Mrs Clennam's son after all and that William Dorrit's imprisonment in the Marshalsea for debt is the result of Mrs Clennam's suppression of a codicil in a will that would have benefitted William Dorrit.

The plot of *Little Dorrit* is slight in comparison to other Dickens's novels, this in order to provide for a larger purpose: From the opening scene in Marseille to the final release of Arthur Clennam from the Marshalsea the focus is on the nature of different forms of imprisonment. The main purpose of the narrative, therefore, is to explore the complexity of different kinds of imprisonment: freedom from the prison in Marseille, William Dorrit's debt and imprisonment in the Marshalsea, the overbearing restrictions of Mrs Clennam in relation to Arthur and his eventual imprisonment in the Marshalsea, and the imprisoning consequences to Mr Merdle as the effects of his swindling financial dealings cause him to take his own life.

There are also other forms of imprisonment to observe that are the product of human control. These are seen in a number of the characters including Mrs Merdle and Fanny Dorrit. The novel's progress charts the way in which the circumstances of individuals reveal complex psychologies and the unifying theme is the need for release from prison whether internal, external, self inflicted, imposed by others, or generated by jealousy and meanness. William Dorrit, on his release from the Marshalsea, finds his life, in a different kind of way, as constricting as it might be as if he were still locked up. It is through the exploration of

complex psychological states that *Little Dorrit* gains its unique position as one of Dickens's finest works. The titular *Little Dorrit*, Amy Dorrit the small delicate flower of a person, whose unassuming persistent love for her father and Arthur Clennam, brings, in the end, its reward.

Death and resurrection

The theme and effects of imprisonment are also powerfully expressed in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens thought originally that he would call the novel *Buried Alive*. The descriptions of the inmates of La Force have ghostly appearances as if they had already passed into another world. The story begins with Dr Manette's recall to life by his daughter Lucie. When she sees him she thinks he is a ghost and that his voice comes from underground. Death and resurrection form the structure of the novel. This emphasis prefigures the themes that shape *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens's use of the idea of death and resurrection is also persistent in his various descriptions of revolutionary France. The story, at a certain level, is sustained by a meditation on this theme. As Sydney Carton walks around Paris for the last time he thinks over the words "I am the resurrection and the life." His death is a sacrifice for the life of Darnay; he is the substitution and the overtones are apparent as he reflects:

"I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more." 27

And his reflections culminate in the well known words of sacrifice:

"It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." 28

The theme of death and resurrection is continued in *Our Mutual Friend* and works on a number of different levels. The novel was published in 1854 at a time when there was growing concern for public health in London resulting in eventual legislation in 1875 to implement the building of sewers. At the time of the publication of *Our Mutual Friend* the Thames was a danger and falling into it meant certain death.

The novel centres on John Harmon who returns to England after an enforced exile by his father who intends that John should marry Bella Wilfer. He tells this story to a mate on the ship who takes Harmon to a river and attempts to kill him. The mate is in turn killed and Harmon's papers are found on him so that Harmon is assumed dead. Harmon takes the name of Rokesmith and is therefore able to explore his father's intentions for him as another person. The idea of death and resurrection is thus central to the plot.

The novel opens with the introduction of Gaffer Hexam, Lizzie Hexam and Rogue Riderhood who gain their livelihood by scouring the Thames for dead bodies. Gaffer reminds his daughter Lizzie that the river has provided for her life: 'The fire that warmed you… the very basket you slept in, the tide washed ashore.' It is the river, with its mud, slime and dirt that gives life. Riderhood justifies their scavenger life which to him is not robbery:

"Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? 'Tother world." 29

When Gaffer Hexam dies, Lizzie laments:

"Father, was that you calling me? Father! I thought I heard you call me twice before! … Was it you, thus baptized unto Death, with these flying impurities now flung upon your face? Why not speak, Father?" 30

Conclusion

Critics do not agree about the extent to which Dickens used Christian themes and theology deliberately in his novels. However what is clear is that his sympathy is with those who suffered from poverty and deprivation or who were subject to imprisonment of one kind or another. His own father spent time in the Marshalsea prison for debt. Dickens knew from within the effects of imprisonment in a variety of ways; however his concern reached beyond these confines. He wanted to show, through his fiction, how generous sacrificial love provides release and can redeem and transform personal and social circumstances.

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Endnotes

1 Book 1, Chapter 1. It is usual when writing on Dickens or other nineteenth-century authors to express references to quotations through the number of the book followed by the number of the chapter eg (Book 3, Chapter 4). Since there are so many different versions using page numbers can be misleading.
2 Book 1, Chapter 1
3 Book 1, Chapter 3
4 Book 3, Chapter 99
5 Book 3, Chapter 40
6 House 1942: 156
7 Book 1, Chapter 14
8 Book 1, Chapter 14
9 Book 1, Chapter 19
10 Book 1, Chapter 19
11 *Paradise Lost* Book XII, I.464-467
12 Book 2, Chapter 27
13 Book 2, Chapter 28
14 Book 3, Chapter 57
15 Book 3, Chapter 49
16 Gross & Pearson 1962: 207
17 Book 3, Chapter 59
18 James 1:17 RSV
19 Rushkin 1985: 171
20 Luke 10:38-42
21 Book 1, Chapter 3
22 Book 1, Chapter 3
23 Book 1, Chapter 8
24 Book 3, Chapter 1
25 Book 3, Chapter 7
26 Book 3, Chapter 9
27 Book 3, Chapter 15
28 Book 3, Chapter 15
29 Book 1, Chapter 1
30 Book 1, Chapter 14