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Literature That Saves: Matilda as a Reader of *Great Expectations* in *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones

ABSTRACT

The article reflects on the therapeutic and ethical potential of literature, the theme which is often marginalized and overlooked by literary critics, in the novel *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones. Matilda, the main character of the analyzed novel, finds salvation in the times of war and oppression thanks to Charles Dickens's masterpiece, *Great Expectations*, and the only white man on the island—her teacher, Mr. Watts. Matilda's strong identification with Dickensian Pip (their similarities and differences) and imagination make her escape to another world, become a self-conscious person and reunite with her father. The paper also discusses relationships between Matilda, Mr. Watts (her spiritual guide and creator of her story, who presents the girl with expectations for a better future) and her mother, Dolores. I attempt to show the emotional development of the characters, their interactions, changes, sense of identity (significant for both Jones and Dickens), and, having analyzed their actions, I compare them to protagonists created by Charles Dickens (Pip, Miss Havisham, Estella). Needless to say, drawing the reader's attention to British culture and traditions, Lloyd Jones avoids focusing on the negative aspects of the postcolonial views, pointing out that "the white man" can be an example of a Dickensian gentleman.

Keywords: Mister Pip, postcolonial, Mr. Watts, *Great Expectations*, Matilda.

Lloyd Jones, who received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2007, is one of New Zealand's outstanding contemporary writers. His novel *Mister Pip* is considered one of the most striking works written in New Zealand. In "The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature" Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie describe the writer's distinctive style:

Lloyd Jones is a fiction writer drawn to a sympathetic portrayal of ordinary middle-class life, a suburban realist who simultaneously challenges realism, subverts fictional norms, defies categories and writes narratives which are challenging, original and in some cases controversial.

From the critical perspective, Lloyd Jones successfully portrays the New Zealand community in which he was brought up, combining its realistic portrait "with elements of the bizarre, the absurd and the fantastic" (O'Reilly).

According to some reviewers, by placing Dickens's *Great Expectations* in the exotic reality, Lloyd Jones has entered a noteworthy debate with postcolonial rewriting. Olivia Laing concludes: "Jones has created a microcosm of post-colonial literature, hybridising the narratives of black and white races to create a new and resonant fable." Another reviewer, Lindy Burleigh, states that "Lloyd Jones gives the tired post-colonial themes of self-reinvention and the reinterpretation of classic texts a fresh, ingenious twist but his real achievement is in bringing life and depth to his characters." In her essay Sue Kossew explains that *Mister Pip* is not only a re-writing of *Great Expectations*, but "a celebration of the transnational potential of Dickens's novel . . . , its power to move its readers, and its enduring legacy of hope" (281). Monica Latham's essay, "The Battle for the Spare Room and the Triumph of Hybridity in Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*," examines, in addition, the subject of a hybrid literary work based on a canonical novel. Jones, following the Dickensian style, also creates a social story, "combining old material with new inventive writing" (Latham 88).

Mister Pip is set on the island of Bougainville whose inhabitants are in the grip of the atrocious civil war that affected some parts of Papua New Guinea in the early 1990s. The island's prosperous copper mine is a trigger of the conflict with a separatist group who decide to claim control of the mine, declaring war on the mainland Papuan troops. As a result, teenage boys are forced to join the guerrilla soldiers who are hiding in the mountains. The island is constantly haunted by the government troops in search of the rebel soldiers. Terrified Bougainville inhabitants have to face the brutality of the war when their houses and all their properties are burnt down, and people are killed, their bodies chopped into pieces and thrown to pigs to be eaten.

In his novel Lloyd Jones entwines two mutually exclusive concepts—the oppression of the inhuman, unpredictable system and the solace found in literature, showing, in my view, that literary texts can change the reader’s perception of reality. Using the phrase “singularity of literature,” Derek Attridge points out that in times of crisis, literary texts cannot serve as a source of personal and social changes. Attridge concludes:

My argument is that literature, understood in its difference from other kinds of writing (and other kinds of reading), solves no problems and saves no souls, nevertheless, as will become clear, I do insist that it is effective even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program. (4)

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Regardless of the above quotation, I contend that in the analyzed novel, *Mister Pip*, literature does save an individual (the teenage heroine Matilda) from psychological disintegration. The child’s first-person narration is similar to Dickens’s strategy where a child’s account is “retrospective but resistant to an orderly presentation of setting and circumstances in a logical manner” (Fludernik 121). Matilda can be called a half-orphan since her father works far away in Australia, leaving Matilda alone with her strict, god-fearing and pious mother. The war causes Matilda to witness the most evil-minded and savage sides of human nature. To my mind, the girl desires a soulmate, a companion she can rely on, and who will lead her through a real life she is unaware of. Matilda’s salvation and escape from the world eventually comes in the form of the only white man on the island, Mr. Watts, called “Pop Eye,” often seen to wear a clown’s nose and pull his wife Grace along in a trolley. Despite his lack of experience in educating children, he makes a decision to work as a teacher in a small, single-room school. His absorption in literature makes him determined to introduce Charles Dickens to the children. Mr. Watts believes that the Victorian author can show the reader another world as a way of escape from the reality in which the characters are forced to live. “I will be honest with you. I have no wisdom, none at all. The truest thing I can tell you is that whatever we have between us is all we’ve got. Oh, and of course Mr. Dickens” (Jones 16).

Not knowing the most distinguished author of the Victorian era, the children believe that Mr. Dickens will provide the blockaded island with the generator fuel, anti-malaria medicines and kerosene. Introducing the pupils to Dickens’s masterpiece *Great Expectations*, Mr. Watts gives hope and reassurance (especially to Matilda), which become more indispensable than fuel and medicine. The daily reading aloud of *Great Expectations* to

the children at school makes Matilda entirely captivated by the book, its main protagonist Pip, and fascinated with the world and characters she has never met before. “It was always a relief to return to *Great Expectations*. It contained a world that was whole and made sense, unlike ours” (58).

The most incomprehensible fact for Matilda is that one can find salvation in a book, in unknown Victorian England with rain, frost, marshes and gloom. I concur with Frederica Ugglá who points out that *Mister Pip* is “to a great extent about identification, living through a text and melting into it” (7). The girl identifies herself with Dickens’s character Pip: “Me and Pip had something else in common; I was eleven when my father left, so neither of us really knew our fathers” (Jones 21). What is more, the heroine learns that she can “slip inside the skin of another . . . or travel to another place with marshes, and where, to our ears the bad people spoke like pirates” (20–21). Needless to say, this quotation illustrates the fact that Mr. Watts literally impersonates Dickens’s characters, uses their peculiar manner of speaking, gestures and, as a result, makes the pupils feel the characters’ presence in the classroom. The teacher’s story-telling is much more complex because he mixes the Western traditions and cultures with the fixed norms of the island and, according to Monica Latham, “he gives birth to his hybrid story of survival and makes *Mister Pip* a composite postmodernist and postcolonial novel” (84). Apart from this, Jones’s novel is privileged by numerous acts of the story-telling and orality (in the classroom, around the campfire), “giving weight to the affective power of narrative” (Kossew 282). From the critical perspective, *Mister Pip* consists of “many different texts that are woven together in a complex process of intertextuality” (Ugglá 1).

Unlike the book, Andrew Adamson’s film adaptation of the novel explicitly presents the scenes when Matilda moves to Victorian England and stands face to face with her beloved Pip and other characters like Magwitch in the marshes, Joe with his wife, Mr. Jaggers, Herbert, Miss Havisham or Estella. Thanks to the teacher Matilda reconstructs the atmosphere of the novel, Victorian attires and the language used in the 19th century. Moreover, she imagines herself talking to Pip, comforting him and criticizing the boy for his selfish actions. I would like to underline another fact—when Matilda identifies with Pip, somehow she adopts his life: “Pip was my story” (Jones 219). His anxieties, thoughts and even friends and enemies become hers. At the same time she is aware that Pip’s and her changes are parallel. When Pip faces difficulties, apprehensions and cruelties of life, Matilda knows that her life will change for worse. It must be emphasized that, through Pip’s new expectations and life, Matilda begins plunging deeper into other people’s minds, for instance, pondering

over her father's life in remote Australia. It is clearly seen when Pip has to "leave behind everything he'd known" (46)—the place where he was raised and the forge where he was taught a value of labour. At this moment, the novel problematizes Matilda's strong longing for her father. On one hand, Matilda criticizes Pip, on the other hand, feeling abandoned, she definitely transfers all her anger to her father who deserted her emotionally and literally. Being a good observer, Matilda knows that the failure of her parents' marriage is caused by the father who, similarly to Pip, left his descent and family behind:

Away from class I found myself wondering about the life my dad was leading, and what he had become. I wondered if he was a gentleman, and whether he had forgotten all that had gone into making him. I wondered if he remembered me, and if he ever thought about my mum. I wondered if the thought of us kept him awake at night like the thought of him did her. (47)

It has to be stressed that Jones also indicates issues which distinguish Matilda from Pip. The aforementioned quotation alerts the reader to another important undertone. Although Matilda has to face an unknown reality because of the war, she still misses her father and appreciates the significance of her background and home. When Pip steps into the new world of a big city, he changes his identity and starts erasing from his memory the much-loved people who used to give him comfort and support. The boy intentionally separates from Joe and Biddy in order to pursue social advancement and adjust to his new circumstances:

I was troubled by what I had detected to be a shift in Pip's personality now that he was in London. I didn't like his London friends. I didn't take to his housemate Herbert Pocket, and I couldn't understand why Pip had, and it worried me that he was leaving me behind. Nor could I understand why he had changed his name to Handel. (60–61)

Needless to say, unlike Pip, Matilda does not forget about the past and intends to go back to the island—her real home. "I would try where Pip had failed. I would try to return home" (219).

Matilda's strong identification with Pip can be also explained by the fact that their lives and experiences are parallel. Being an orphan brought up by his strict sister, Pip is supposed to experience the world he is not familiar with, going through numerous transformations in his behaviour and personality. Affected by the devastating civil war and by the lack of

a father, Matilda's life changes into a nightmare. Apart from facing the new and brutal reality on the island, Matilda learns about the other world from Dickens's novel, developing her imagination and changing into a mature and self-conscious person. There are other clearly similar moments in both Matilda's and Pip's lives when they nearly escape death, lose hope and the will to fight. They are certain to experience the darkest sides of life like oppression, death of loved ones, illness, crime and a sense of guilt. However, after the death of Matilda's mother and Mr. Watts, the girl survives thanks to the memory of Pip, which gives her strength to escape from the island and reunite with her father in Australia. So powerful is the book's influence that even after undergoing so many brutal events, Matilda does not associate Dickens with negative experiences. It is just the opposite since, after leaving the life of aggression and humiliation, she is still profoundly preoccupied with the Dickensian world. She is determined to broaden her knowledge about Dickens, reading the author's books and visiting his museum in London. She succeeds in becoming a scholar and expert on Dickens, still believing that literature offers salvation and escape in the worst moments of human life. Geraldine Bedell concludes:

As *Great Expectations* opens out its meaning to Matilda, so *Mister Pip* broadens into a consideration of post-colonial culture, a meditation on what is kept and what rejected, what remembered and forgotten, and the extent to which individuals can choose . . . how to be in the world.

Throughout his novel Lloyd Jones consistently draws the reader's attention to *Great Expectations* and British culture that affect the character's relations and identities, thereby not focusing on the negative aspects of the postcolonial condition. The author positively presents Dickens's phenomenon and reminds the reader of the significance of literature in human lives, regardless of its origin. Not only is it palpable in the course of Mr. Watts's reading of the novel, but its presence and influence are also strongly felt through the heroes' actions and thoughts. The impact of the Dickensian theme regarding changes in the characters' actions is apparent in the three protagonists of Jones's narrative: Matilda, Mr. Watts and Matilda's mother, Dolores.

The endless apprehension and the sense of some inevitable doom make Matilda feel hopeless and lost. It is Mr. Watts who gives the girl "another world to spend the night in [or] escape to another place" (Jones 20). In this way, Mr. Watts, previously associated with pulling his wife in a trolley with a clown's nose on, becomes a spiritual guide in Matilda's eyes. He gives her solid foundations to survive. He has given her "another piece of

the world. [She] found [she] could go back to it as often as [she] liked” (21). Apart from Pip, Mr. Tom Watts, who “was more of a mystery because he’d come out of a world we didn’t really know” (21), is the other person Matilda forms an emotionally strong relationship with. Throughout Lloyd Jones’s novel *Matilda* discovers the new aspects of her teacher’s complex personality.

Matilda perceives Mr. Watts as the last white person on the island whose “sight represented a bit of uncertainty in our world, which in every other way knew only sameness” (2). The girl’s fascination with her teacher begins when she hears his voice and the way he reads Dickens’s greatest masterpiece. Matilda notices that Mr. Watts is extremely respectful towards literature by consistently referring to the author as “Mr. Dickens” and wearing a white suit at school, while reading *Great Expectations*. Despite being curious about Pip’s life, Matilda also desires to go deeper into her teacher’s mind:

He had given us Pip, and I had come to know this Pip as if he were real and I could feel his breath on my cheek. I had learned to enter the soul of another. Now I tried to do the same with Mr. Watts. (52)

Mr. Watts becomes as important to Matilda as Pip is. The girl is aware of the fact that Mr. Watts is Charles Dickens, the narrator of the story, the one who is able to put it together and transport people to another place. According to Monica Latham, Mr. Watts has helped Matilda find her own voice, making her write “her life story in the spirit of the Victorian writer” (88). This quotation also refers to the concept of intertextuality because “most of the stories within *Mister Pip* are told by someone and then written down by the narrator Matilda many years later” (Uggla 4). Thanks to the teacher, the children at school can “feel the shape of each word” (Jones 18). For Matilda, Mr. Watts is a mentor in her life, who is able to explain the incomprehensible and complex aspects of human nature. Matilda’s being angry with Pip about his misbehaviour and a ruthless attitude towards his dearest is skilfully tamed by Mr. Watts, thus revealing his broad knowledge of the external world and a tolerance of humanity with all its weaknesses:

“It is hard to be a perfect human being, Matilda,” he said. “Pip is only human. He has been given the opportunity to turn himself into whomever he chooses. He is free to choose. He is even free to make bad choices.” (61)

Matilda discovers more unpredictable and enigmatic traits of the teacher’s character when the redskin soldiers come to the island. Mr. Watts

creates his own story, mixing facts of his life with Pip's. "... the bones of his story remain with me, what I've come to think of as his Pacific version of *Great Expectations*" (149). Similarly to Dickens, who created Pip and gave him a chance to change his life, Matilda's teacher also fills the girl's head with expectations of escaping from the world of cruelty to a better place: "He was inviting me to leave behind the only world I knew" (150). What is more, Mr. Watts becomes a writer /creator because, to some extent, he writes Matilda's life story and future through her imagination. If it had not been for Mr. Watts and Charles Dickens's text, she would not have had enough strength to survive and start a new life.

It has to be pointed out that during the rebel soldiers' time in the village, Mr. Watts decides to take on Pip's identity and characteristics paying, however, the final price for the decision. "Pip would be a convenient role for Mr. Watts to drop into" (142). As the only white man on the island, like Pip, he feels "as lonely as the last mammoth" (98), and he needs to adapt to the circumstances he is not used to, and he even shares the boy's deepest sorrow and anxieties. This is evident after the burial of his wife Grace, when the children at school compare this solemn situation with Pip and Estella's separation—"his anger was listed on behalf of Pip's suffering, but it came of his own loss" (126). Not only does the comparison show Watt's strong sense of identification with the Dickensian character, but also the teacher's profound absorption in *Great Expectations*. It is worth pointing out that, after leaving the island, Matilda is still determined to discover more about her teacher's previous life. Despite learning about his acting abilities and being angry with him for simplifying Dickens's masterpiece, for Matilda Mr. Watts has always been Mr. Dickens who, like Pip, has become her friend, instilling in her his passion for literature and helping her to survive the hardest times in her life. Paradoxically, in the postcolonial reality "the white man" (representing British culture) turns out to be the example of a moral character, the gentleman formerly described by Charles Dickens:

I only know the man who took us kids by the hand and taught us how to re-imagine the world, and to see the possibility of change, to welcome it into our lives. . . . He was whatever he needed to be, what we asked him to be. . . . We needed a teacher, Mr. Watts became that teacher. We needed a magician to conjure up other worlds, and Mr. Watts had become that magician. When we needed a savior, Mr. Watts had filled that role. When the redskins required a life, Mr. Watts had given himself. (228)

The relationship with Mr. Watts and admiration for Pip described above causes a long-lasting clash between Matilda and her mother Dolores.

The mother is a crucial character in the novel who represents the moral standards of Christianity, calling herself God's witness.

The conflict between the mother and daughter arises when Dolores is apprehensive of the fact that she "would lose her Matilda to Victorian England" (30), to a world of white people. The uneasy feeling of disagreement is strengthened when Matilda confesses to Pip's significant role in her life. The mother starts to put the blame on Mr. Watts and becomes troubled about her daughter's morality. This situation clearly shows Dolores's negative attitude to the former times of colonization of the island and her suspicion of everything that comes from outside. "What made her blood run hot was this white boy Pip and his place in my life. For that she held Mr. Watts personally responsible" (68).

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As a dedicated Christian believer, Dolores is firmly convinced that God, not words written in a novel, is the only source of solace that can change lives for the better—Matilda's attempts to involve her mother in the Dickensian world and its characters always come to nothing—"she didn't want me to go deeper into that other world" (30). Frederika Uggla, drawing on postcolonial theory, explains that Dolores cannot accept *Great Expectations* because the novel was brought from the outer world; however, the Bible was brought by missionaries from the outside, as well (8). Dolores's concept of morality is based on the Bible, which is why she is not able to understand the act of theft committed by Pip. Furthermore, Dolores notices that Pip has become more significant to Matilda than her relatives and the other people living on the island. Dolores becomes more and more hostile towards Mr. Watts and does her best to humiliate him and show her aversion towards his beliefs and methods of teaching. Her disapproval of the teacher is noticeable throughout the book, reminiscent of Estella's disdain and hostile attitude towards Pip. ". . . she returned to her favourite pastime of constant put-downs of Mr. Watts, or Pop Eye as she was back to calling him. *Pop Eye*. She put all her contempt into that name" (114).

Dolores's contempt for Mr. Watts can be explained by her inability to come to terms with the fact that her husband has abandoned her, leading a peaceful and secure life in Australia. Mr. Watts—as a "white man"—has come to embody the issue, since, according to Dolores, white people have stolen her spouse and transformed him into a "white man." The sense of Dolores's isolation and her constant bitterness inspire Matilda to compare her mother to Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations*: "She had more in common with Miss Havisham—Miss Havisham who cannot move on from the day of her greatest disappointment" (49), and who is trapped in the time that has irretrievably passed. It has to be underlined

that Dolores cannot step into Matilda's new world, losing control of her daughter and becoming overprotective. The Estella—Miss Havisham and Dolores—Matilda relationships are parallel. Similarly to the emotionally hurt old woman, Dolores wants to destroy this world that she has not given to Matilda. She prefers to stay in her own world of stopped clocks which symbolize her refusal to move forward and accept the new reality. Needless to say, the more preoccupied with Pip's life Matilda is, the more distant from her mother she becomes. However, Uggla attempts to justify Dolores's behaviour explaining that Matilda is "actually colonized by *Great Expectations* and lost in another culture" (17). Perhaps, in this sense, the woman becomes a rebel and wants to protect what belongs to her. Nonetheless, a paradoxical parallel can be discerned between Dolores and Matilda in their attitude towards literary texts. Both protagonists are profoundly dedicated to their particular books (the Bible and *Great Expectations*) which come from the outside (colonization), showing a different reality and providing a source of comfort and values. Dolores and Matilda remain faithful to their ideas derived from the texts and this is the main cause of their clash. The reader can easily feel a wall of mistrust and misunderstanding growing between Matilda, her mother and Mr. Watts. This despondent situation and intensifying tension between the characters, induce Dolores to make a desperate move. When Matilda finds *Great Expectations* hidden in her house, she feels betrayed and realizes that her mother's intention is to destroy Mr. Watts and Pip—the people who have introduced Matilda to a better world: "It is hard to put into words my feeling of betrayal at that moment" (93). The woman remains silent even at the cost of the destruction of the villagers' possessions and houses. It can be explained that Dolores, as a Christian, cannot admit to a sin of theft, thus her greatest mistake in life. At the same time, the girl cannot betray Dolores and decides to take on the burden of carrying her mother's guilt:

I knew what she had been doing. Her silence was meant to destroy Pip and the standing Mr. Watts, a godless white man who would seek to place in her daughter's head a make-believe person with the same status as her kin. (93)

I would like to stress that Dolores's identity throughout the novel turns out to be a process: from an enemy, she becomes Matilda's ally. She seems to understand that she has not achieved anything by her previous behaviour and, like Mr. Watts, she becomes an example of a moral person (like the Dickensian gentleman), accepting, thereby, Mr. Watts's (Dickens's) and Matilda's values which she firmly rejected before: "Sir. I saw your men chop

up the white man. He was a good man. I am here as God's witness" (175). At this moment, for the first time in the novel, Matilda's mother becomes Mr. Watts's supporter and reminds the reader of his uttered words that "to be human is to be moral and you cannot have a day off when it suits" (180). What is more, by doing that, she knows that she will suffer the same fate as Mr. Watts. Not only does the conflict between Matilda and Dolores come to an end, but the girl also sees her mother as a person to be proud of: "My brave mum had known this when she stepped forward to proclaim herself God's witness to the cold-blooded butchery of her old enemy" (180). It is not clear if Dolores's act of bravery has been caused by the violent circumstances of the war or by her true characteristics, which she has been reluctant to reveal before. All in all, her transformation proves both her boundless devotion to her beliefs and her unconditional love for her daughter.

Lloyd Jones's novel shows that literary texts can profoundly transform the reader's view of the world, even if they are alien to postcolonial cultures which are "inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 95). I agree with the reviewer Barbara Klonowska who, in her essay "Great Expectations a Hundred and Fifty Years Later: Strategies of Appropriation," remarks on the role in literature in *Mister Pip*:

Mister Pip dramatises the saving power of reading, both short-term as an affecting means of reducing fear, and long-term as an explanation and inspiration for life. . . . In a similar manner, *Great Expectations* perform such functions within *Mister Pip*: it is used to soothe, heal and explain, offer consolation and instruction. Like Aboriginal myths, it is not treated as a useless story but as guidance and practice. (231)

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