
"GREAT EXPECTATIONS": AN INTRODUCTION

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Many consider *Great Expectations* to be Dickens' masterpiece. It is superbly funny, psychologically very penetrating, thematically perfect and morally sound. The novel may be regarded as an indictment of Victorian society at large for its complacency, adherence to false values and its obsession with material wealth.

The theme is therefore serious enough and the setting throughout rather sombre. What really mitigates the atmosphere of bleakness that pervades the novel is Dickens' successful use of humour which many critics regard as the distinctive feature of his work. The author employs humour in various ways. For instance, it constitutes an essential element in his characterization. It is this aspect of Dickens' work which, in G.K. Chesterton's words, enables him to stand peerless "in the art of conveying what a man looks like at first sight". Mrs Joe, Pip's sister and guardian who is constantly 'on the Rampage' and controls the rest of the family 'by hand', is described by her brother as follows:

"My sister, Mrs Joe, with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap."

Mr Pumblechook, the hilarious impostor, is considered by Gissing to be a "source of inextinguishable laughter". Orlick and his fellow robbers sought to silence him by stuffing "his mouth full of flowering annuals to prevent his crying out". At times, the effect is purely visual. Trabb's boy will linger in the reader's memory as some kind of popular village character, parodying the gentlemanly airs of his social betters. Wemmick will be remembered not so much for his obsession with 'portable property' as for the habit of allowing his arm to steal around Miss Skiffins' waist, only to be gently and decorously unwound again.

Dickens also draws on humour to enliven his description of various scenes. One may point as an example to Wemmick's over-elaborate dwelling. He has ludicrously converted a tiny cottage into what has turned out to be a parody of the Gothic castle. The dialogue is equally humorous throughout. Examples would include Pip's highly imaginative account of his first visit to Satis House, all of which is pure fabrication; the convict's threats in the opening chapter which recall the swaggering, ranting bullies of the Pantomime and the sarcastic statements included in Miss Havisham's will, whereby Miss Sarah obtained

twenty-five pounds a year to buy pills, being bilious, while Miss Camilla got five pounds to buy rushlights "to put her in the spirits" when she woke up at night.

Without such humour, Dickens' work would have been denied much of its vitality. Its function in the novel is that of providing comic relief, a welcome break from the depressing scenes of poverty and crime. Moreover, its strong presence in the opening chapters helps render Dickens' account of Pip's childhood psychologically very penetrating. One may refer to Pip's account of what he considered as the 'rough' treatment meted out to him by the convict:

"The man, after looking at me for a moment, 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."

Pip's account is humorous and here we are provided with a clear example of the Child's tendency to transfer movement on to the surroundings. In this respect, the account is somewhat reminiscent of the following lines from Book One of Wordsworth's *Prelude*: "Yet still the solitary cliffs / wheeled by me — even as if the earth had rolled / with visible motion her diurnal round."

Dickens' insight into the psychology of children is best revealed in the second and third chapters. Pip is a sensitive child and acutely guilt-conscious. As Angus Calder maintains, Guilt rather than Innocence is the moral element of the child. Pip steals the pie from Mrs Joe and is constantly haunted by the spectre of himself as a thief. This is brilliantly brought out in the passage where he imagines the cows, emerging from the fog, to greet him with the words: "Holloa, young thief!" What adds to the significance of these words is the fact that Pip is about to help an escaped convict. His guilt feelings reach their climax in the scene leading on to Mrs. Joe's discovery of the missing pie and the soldiers' inadvertent arrival at the Gargerys':

"My sister went out to get it. I heard her steps proceed to the pantry. I saw Mr Pumblechook balance his knife. I saw re-awakening appetite in the Roman nostrils of Mr Wopsle. I heard Mr Hubble remark that 'a bit of savoury pork pie would lay atop of anything you could mention, and do no harm,' and I heard Joe say, 'You shall have some, Pip.' I have never been absolutely certain whether I uttered a shrill yell of terror, merely in spirit, or in the bodily hearing of the company. I felt that I could bear no more, and that I must run away."

The reader is allowed to feel the tension suffered by Pip throughout. The child is on the verge of panic, gripped by the fear of being found out and the tension simmers to such an extent that he is compelled to run for his 'life'. His escape is halted by a group of soldiers and, once again, Pip's guilt consciousness is so great that he imagines that one of them "held out a pair of handcuffs to me, saying, 'Here you are, look sharp, come on!' "

Pip never rids himself of the guilt complex. When a young man, he rebukes himself for his behaviour towards Joe and Biddy, although he never alters his condescending attitude. On the way to London, his remorse is so great that he contemplates descending from the coach and walking all the way back to the forge for 'a better parting'. However, he spends too much time deliberating and before he reaches a decision, the coach is already half way along the road to London. Guilt feelings are once again aroused when news reaches him of Orlick's attack on his elder sister and of the discovery of a file lying next to her.

These guilt pangs enable us to feel the actual pulsation of Pip's 'inner life'. It would be interesting to remark that E.M. Forster criticized Dickens' novels precisely on the grounds that most of his characters are two-dimensional and therefore lack an 'inner life'. This, of course, cannot be true of Pip. Nor is it true of Miss Havisham, an eccentric lady whose character admittedly verges on caricature. She inhabits a world of her own, the features of which are symbolized by the images of decadence apparent throughout Satis House. Critics regard such images as the 'black fungus' and the 'speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies' as a reflection of Miss Havisham's sick mind, symbols of her dark and putrefying emotions. Wemmick is another interesting character. His obsession with 'portable property' and his advocacy of selfish attitudes suggest that he is a mere cardboard figure, a typical inhabitant of 'Little Britain', and an integral part of its legal machinery. But there is another side to his character. Outside 'Little Britain' he is less clinical and therefore more humane. In him, as in Jaggers, we discover a split-personality, and this aspect of characterization once again reveals the quality of the novel's psychological penetration. Characters like Jaggers, Miss Havisham and Wemmick are therefore explored in greater depth than a strictly two-dimensional figure would be.

However, Forster's remark is very true of the majority of the characters in *Great Expectations*. They are flat figures exhibiting one dominant trait. This aspect of Dickens' novels should not be regarded as a weakness. For these 'thumb-nail sketches' serve to provide the work with an infinite variety which is a proper reflection of the infinite variety that is life itself. Through Dickens' sleight of hand, these caricatures create an illusion of life's richness. They people the canvas in such a way as to furnish Pip with a colourful background that throws his own character into sharper relief. The figures are memorable and include the patronizing Pumblechook, boisterous Old Bill Barley ('old gruff and grim'), the fawning Georgiana ('an indigestive little woman who called her rigidity her love'), the mimicking Trabb's boy, Jaggers, forever throwing his finger around and washing his hands, the stranger stirring his drink with a file, the tough high-shouldered Mr Hubble and Molly, 'a wild beast tamed'. The list is inexhaustible.

It is often argued that quite a few of these characters, including

Miss Havisham, are not realistic. However, few can deny that characters like Pumblechook and Miss Havisham are memorable. Their success is partly due to the imaginative treatment which Dickens affords them, whereby the reader is forced to allow that 'willing suspension of disbelief' that characterizes most works of art. Like the alchemist, Dickens succeeds in turning base-metal into pure gold. One also ought to remark that most of these characters are presented as Pip recalls them. One would hardly expect him to recall much more than their dominant trait. Moreover, the entire novel centres around Pip's education, a process which involves a transition from a shivering child with limited horizons to a snobbish youngster with the world at his feet, finally leading on to his attainment of intellectual humility. As such, the rest of the characters are subordinated to him, the only developing character in the novel. This, however, does not justify Dickens' failure to conceive Estella's character in the round. One cannot help feeling that she, like Pip, ought to have been a developing character.

Estella is, in fact, presented as a straightforward type, a girl devoid of all tenderness and compassion, made to suppress her feelings. She is as cold and detached as the stars which her name suggests. The name 'Estella' may, therefore, be regarded as typically Jonsonian. The Estella theme is quite unconvincing since it is founded on Miss Havisham's eccentricity and her transition to a sympathetic person is too sudden. It is the result of her odd decision to marry the tough, parasitic and sulky Bentley Drummle. Yet her relationship with Drummle is not explored. We are therefore debarred from witnessing a process which brought about such an important change in character. The Estella theme may therefore be regarded as highly artificial and attests to the presence of a strong element of melodrama in Dickens' work.

Great Expectations abounds with passages which may be dismissed as pure melodrama and a case in point would be the showdown between Estella and Miss Havisham in Chapter 38:

" 'So proud, so proud!' moaned Miss Havisham, pushing away her grey hair with both her hands.

'Who taught me to be proud?' returned Estella. 'Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?'

'So hard, so hard!' moaned Miss Havisham with her former action.

'Who taught me to be hard?' returned Estella. 'Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?' "

The rhetoric is highly artificial, in a passage which provides one of the very few instances where Estella gives vent to the frustrated passions lurking beneath her surface of ruthlessness, pride and propriety.

The Estella theme inevitably leads to the consideration of another aspect of Dickens' novel — Plot. It is often argued that Dickens' plots constitute one of the least successful features of his work. For instance, Estella's tragic melodrama does not lead to its logical conclusion. She was born out of tragedy, lived tragically and should therefore have come

to a tragic end. She is also the primary source of Pip's illusions. Therefore, one feels that a regenerate Pip, admittedly a sadder but wiser person, should have had her completely banished from his life. Moreover, their final meeting, which is purely accidental in that Pip visits a derelict Satis House following an absence of sixteen years, is hardly convincing and may be regarded as a concession to public taste. Dickens had been publishing the novel in serial form and acted on the advice of his publisher, Bulwer Lytton, who believed that the happy ending would satisfy the taste of the Victorians better than the more appropriate tragical conclusion which Dickens had originally planned. Dickens can therefore be taken to task for having prostituted his art.

One can point to other shortcomings in Dickens' plot. As with Hardy, it relies too heavily on coincidence. For instance, Estella, the object of Pip's desire and the source of change in his aspirations, happens to be the daughter of that very same convict who is Pip's benefactor. Compeyson, the man who finally betrayed Magwitch and who had originally fought him on the marshes, was the suitor who jilted Miss Havisham. The *deus ex machina* element is employed freely as when a note discovered by Herbert Pocket allows Trabb's boy to turn up unexpectedly at Sluice House and rescue Pip. Coincidences such as that involving the relationship between Estella and Pip allow Dickens to make ample use of irony, a very important element in *Great Expectations* since it is closely related to the novel's theme of false pride. It is ironic that the excessively proud Estella, the evil source responsible for activating the dark spot in Pip's character, was the daughter of none other than a jail-bird and a murderess.

Critics point to a further weakness in Dickens' novels. His excessive use of pathos prompted them to accuse him of sentimentality. Many of his characters sob freely. One may refer as an example to the many convicts who, like Magwitch, received their death sentences at the Old Bailey. Their contrasting feelings and emotional states are evocatively described and such pathos may be excused on the grounds that it enhances the scene's realism. Equally touching is Dickens' description of Mrs Joe's death which somehow parallels another famous description of his, that of Stephen Blackpool's rescue and passing away in *Hard Times*:

"They carried him very gently along the fields, and down the lanes, and over the wide landscape, Rachel always holding the hand in hers. Very few whispers broke the mournful silence. It was soon a mournful procession. The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his redeemer's rest."

Such pathos may be too explicit to satisfy the modern taste which demands subtlety in the conveyance of feelings. However, there is pathos of a graver kind in this novel. The peaceful death of Magwitch, a man more sinned against than sinning, has a subtle dignity which gives the entire scene a tragic air. The hulks, graveyard, Newgate and the overall

bleak setting also suggest sadness, which is the prevailing mood of this novel. This aspect of Dickens' art is no doubt spoilt by the novel's conventional ending.

The distinguishing note of sadness provides a clear indication as to the seriousness of the novel's theme. Throughout this novel, Dickens exposes the inhumanity and complacency of a Victorian middle class wholly given to materialistic values. It is a society which places great importance on money, or 'portable property' as Wemmick calls it, sought through the efforts of the labouring classes of which characters like Biddy and Joe Gargery are representative. In London, Pip and his fellow parasites thrive on money which is not the product of their own endeavours but someone else's. The idea of 'portable property' (social historians prefer the term 'movable property') was very much an illusion which even members of the oppressed classes harboured. Mrs Gargery, for instance, enjoys asserting her dignity in public, carrying sundry articles on her trips to town "much as Cleopatra or any sovereign lady on the Rampage might exhibit her wealth in a pageant or procession". Magwitch, for his part, aspires to the ideal of that very same social class which rendered him an outcast. Instead of contributing to its overthrow, since its interests run contrary to those of his down-trodden class, he imbues its own false values, cherishing the ambition of making 'a gentleman', in the Victorian sense of the word, out of Pip. If there need be proof that society brainwashes its own outcasts, then Magwitch provides it.

Closely linked with 'portable property' is the idea of acquisitive gain which inevitably breeds selfishness. And selfish characters abound throughout *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham is ready to putrefy a young girl's emotions to satisfy her perverse whims. Pip is selfish in pursuit of material gain, to the extent that he almost renounces his close relations who become mere country cousins in his eyes. Part of his moral improvement rests in the selfless attitude shown towards Herbert and Magwitch. The theme of selfishness is best expressed by Wemmick, inside Little Britain:

"Choose your bridge, Mr Pip ... and take a walk upon your bridge, and you know the end of it. Serve a friend with it, and you may know the end of it too — but it's a less pleasant and profitable end."

Selfishness is related to other vices in this novel, particularly exploitation. Dickens must have regarded the vice as a hallmark of Victorian society at large. This was a period when criminals were deported with a view to peopling the new colonies. Children were often victims of exploitation in a society rendered infamous through the establishment of several workshops which thrived on child-labour (cf *Oliver Twist*). Estella is exploited by Miss Havisham to suit the latter's whims. Pip is likewise exploited by this woman who derives immense

pleasure from seeing Estella break his heart. Pumblechook is equally guilty of exploitation. An impostor, he poses as the source of Pip's newly-acquired gentlemanly status.

This status renders Pip a rather proud youngster. False Pride is a very important theme in this novel and both Estella and Pip are guilty in this respect. Ever since Estella deplored his coarse hands, Pip aspired to become a gentleman, feeling dissatisfied with his proletarian background. His work at the forge became an embarrassment. His newly-acquired pride as a gentleman eventually turned sour on him as he discovered that Magwitch was his benefactor. Estella's haughtiness is likewise unfounded, a murderess and a man of violence being her parents. The point Dickens is trying to make is that any society which prides itself on its unearned prosperity has no legitimate cause to do so.

The 'Little Britain' theme sheds light on another unsavoury aspect of Victorian society. It is a society which shows no mercy towards those individuals it rejects and starves to death. Whatever his good intentions, a criminal is regarded as a criminal and is judged accordingly. While he would have accepted Miss Havisham as his benefactress, Pip recoils at the idea of being patronized by a jail-bird. Herbert reveals a similar prejudice when refusing to occupy the chair Magwitch had just vacated. And yet criminals like Magwitch and Molly and all those who sobbingly received their sentence at the Old Bailey were hardly more guilty than the Compeysons, Havishams and Pumblechooks of the Victorian world. Molly was a murderess, literally taking someone else's life. Miss Havisham's crime was hardly less hideous in that she destroyed the soul of a destitute young girl, denying her all those qualities characterizing a human being. If anything, the convicts' guilt is extenuated by their own poverty. Reading through the novel we become aware that, in Victorian society, only the rich can enjoy justice. The poor are nearly always hard done by. But they can always suffer their misfortunes with dignity as Magwitch does when he is formally doomed: "I have received my sentence from the Almighty but I bow to yours."

Dickens' denunciation of Victorian complacency and brutality is naturally motivated by positive principles of conduct, suggested by a regenerate Pip, ready to help Herbert and to devote himself entirely to Magwitch's cause. But perhaps these principles find their perfect embodiment in Joe Gargery, an 'honest-to-goodness' character. He has no notions of artificiality, looking like 'a scarecrow' in his Sunday best and appearing quite at home in his working clothes. He may be looked upon as the personification of moral dignity and humble worth. In Biddy's words, he is "a worthy, worthy man ... who ever did his duty in his way of life, with a strong hand, a quiet tongue, and a gentle heart". He was tolerant towards the shrewish Mrs Joe and the insolent grown-up Pip.

When the recaptured convict admits to having eaten the pie, he replies:

"God knows you're welcome to it — so far as it was ever mine ... We don't know what you have done, but we wouldn't have you starved for it, poor miserable fellow-creatur — would us, Pip?"

Perhaps Fyodor Dostoevsky had Joe Gargery in mind when he acknowledged Dickens as "that great Christian'.