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Approaching literature: Reading Great Expectations

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Introduction

In this coursewefocus upon a specific novel, and consider some of the different ways in which it can be read. We do this by identifying its genre, or the kind of writing it belongs to.

The novel as a kind of writing continuously involved in offering representations of the everyday, of the past and present world, is inevitably bound up with the different ways in which we have come to think about ourselves in relation to that world. Insofar as novels typically have a specific *location* in time and place, they are characteristically involved in the major upheavals of their societies, directly or indirectly: we are viewing the novel as a genre capable of registering in satisfyingly complex ways what we think we know about how the world we live in has come about. This goes beyond what used to be the dominant way of thinking about novels in this country —that they were basically moral, English and liberal, although of course many of the greatest novels can usefully be thought of in that way.

If a novel like Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–1) may be thought of as a 'classic' example of the genre, then we would expect to find that the nature of its realism is more than simply a matter of the presentation of the moral growth of a single character. Depending upon how we choose to read it, it may also be about many other things, more or less apparent. In what follows, I want to suggest a range of approaches to this novel, each of which builds on its predecessor. To begin with, I consider how contemporary readers and critics viewed the novel — what sort of expectations they had — as a way of thinking about *our* expectations, and to question assumptions based upon the familiar, almost mythical, Dickens that we all think we know. Next, approaching the text as an 'autobiographical' type of novel, I look at how it takes us beyond the actuality of first person narrative — with which we so easily identify as readers — towards the realm of the gothic or 'grotesque'. This enables me to proceed to a 'hallucinatory reading', derived from critics who explain the novel in terms of the fantasies of desire and revenge expressed through hidden psychic patterns linking the different characters. Finally, further questioning the idea that we should read Dickens's novel as realist in any simple sense, I take up the possibility that we should think of it as playing a part in the broader history of Britain, including its colonial history. It has been held that the mainstream realist novel did much to 'normalise' imperialist attitudes. I do not think things are quite so straightforward: apart from anything else, this presumes a very limited idea of the genre. Nevertheless, it takes us beyond the familiar, towards a reading that raises yet more possibilities for what we may find in the novel. My aim is to increase your sense of the genre's potential, not just to advocate any one reading, or place *Great Expectations* within a particular category.

Great Expectations has been published in many editions over time. In order to reference sections of the novel, we have chosen to use the 1994 edition (Oxford University Press, ed. M. Cardwell with an introduction by K. Flint). You may be reading a different version of the book, so the references will not be the same. However, they will give you an idea as to where to find the sections mentioned.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- read and understand the classic novel *Great Expectations*, based on the genre of the book
- study literature at a higher level.

1 Openings and ogres

1.1 The novel's opening

One important way of approaching the novel as a genre is to think about what expectations this kind of text would have aroused in its first readers. This is a way of reminding us of the gap between then and now, of the fact that readers of the original novel had certain assumptions, which would have been different from our own. It is a way of remembering the changing cultural-historical context, which will help us to make sense of a text, but also of reading with more awareness of what the process of reading involves. In order to help us to think about how our reading may be influenced by our conventions and assumptions, I would like briefly to consider a modern novel, which raises these issues quite sharply.

Activity 1

Here is the opening paragraph of a novel published nearly a century-after *Great Expectations*. **How does it capture the reader's interest? What literary tradition or sub-genre is being referred to and why? What features, if any, does it have in common with the opening pages of *Great Expectations?***

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two haemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're nice and all – I'm not saying that – but they're also touchy as hell. Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around Christmas before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy. I mean that's all I told D.B. about, and he's my *brother* and all. He's in Hollywood. That isn't too far from this crumby place, and he comes over and visits me practically every week-end. He's going to drive me home when I go home next month maybe. He just got a Jaguar. One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks. He's got a lot of dough now. He didn't *use* to. He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home …

This is the opening paragraph of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger, and, like *Great Expectations*, it aims to capture our interest by immediately plunging us into the experience of an individual character, who tells us his story. As in Dickens's novel, that character is a young boy somewhat at odds with the world around him, in a way both funny and pathetic. The narrator in the modern novel explicitly recalls Dickens's

David Copperfield (1849–50), but mentions the hero of that book only to deny that he is going to write the 'kind of crap' Dickens wrote and going on to assert that he will *not* tell us his 'whole goddam autobiography or anything' either.

The tendency towards exaggeration in the Salinger passage reflects a characteristic of young people's speech, but the form and content of the opening also establish a number of points about the text. First, the modern author is consciously participating in a tradition of first person, autobiographical narrative fiction, which Dickens helped to establish. This form of writing conventionally begins with an account of the narrator-hero's origins, childhood and parentage. Secondly, we are being reminded of that tradition or sub-genre in order to enjoy a consciously rude reaction against it. Thirdly, for all the naïvety of the narrator of the modern text, the author behind him is hardly naïve. Are we not, for instance, meant to feel more critical towards the boy narrator's family than he does? You might also have noticed that the specific allusion to David Copperfield clarifies the child narrator's gender, which is reinforced by the 'pretend-tough' tone. In *Great Expectations*, Philip Pirrip's name signals the gender of its autobiographical narrator, who is not going to tell us much about his parents either, not because they are touchy, but because they are dead. He, too, ignores or omits a lot of the 'David Copperfield kind of crap', although not in a self-aware, modern way.

Comparison of the two openings enables us to notice rather forcibly Dickens's manner of appealing to his readers. His narrative is first person, but, unlike the Salinger text, it involves an adult narrator looking back over a considerable time and so able to exercise adult judgements about himself. For example, he says that it was a 'childish conclusion' of his young self to imagine his dead mother 'freckled and sickly' on the basis of the gravestone inscription *'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above'* (Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 1994 edn, p.3). We may also notice that what the narrator calls childish, in perhaps the negative sense, may be thought of more positively, in terms of a child's unconsciously acute perception of his mother's likely condition, at that time and with all those young and presumably sickly children. (I am not suggesting that any reader would think about all this on a first reading, by the way.)

This distancing effect, pulling us back to the adult narrator's perspective, and then further, to our own reading of that narrator's views, is reinforced by Dickens's way of handling time. Salinger uses the present tense, and his child narrator looks back just less than a year. Dickens uses the past tense, and has his narrator moving swiftly from a succinctly generalised past to 'a memorable raw afternoon towards evening', when the boy Pip realised 'the identity of things', and recalled himself as what the narrator goes on to call a 'small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry' (pp.3–4). The shift to the continuous tense brings the experience of feeling like a fragmented individual at the mercy of the elements right up into the present of its telling.

1.2 Perspective

Perhaps the most striking thing about the opening of *Great Expectations* is the way it combines the rhetorical immediacy of the speaking voice, and the closeness to the reader that invites, with this flexibility between different perspectives in time. Dickens thereby combines the ancient storyteller's art with more recent developments in narrative technique.

By ‘recent’, I have in mind the development of first person written narrative in the nineteenth century. There was a growing interest in the idea of a narrative retrospectively discovering a pattern of development in the young mind from within. (This was usually male, although *Jane Eyre* (1847) is the notable exception.) This type of autobiographical fiction is sometimes given the label *Bildungsroman* or apprenticeship novel (from Johann von Goethe's influential narrative of this type, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–6)). However, a ‘confessional’ element, derived from religious (especially puritan) tradition, was equally important in the formation of the sub-genre.

In this kind of narrative, the moral focus on the individual, which, as we have seen, was central to the formation of realist fiction, became mapped onto stories of the thoughts and adventures of childhood. Most of the earlier authors working within the autobiographical sub-genre chose to tell their story from the perspective of the adult, rather than as if it were spoken by the child or adolescent. The latter could not be expected to express feelings or analyse situations except within a limited range and remain credible, and so could only offer the most indirect or attenuated sense of moral or spiritual values. The characteristic modern version of this type of narration was established by James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). *The Catcher in the Rye* shows the continuity of the modern way of representing the inner workings of the mind, in terms of an inner monologue or ‘stream of consciousness’, which aims at authenticity rather than morality.

As novelists themselves have long recognised, the choice of what ‘point of view’ to adopt is one of the most important decisions they have to make. Theorists have gone on to isolate many different aspects of this decision, perhaps the most important being the distinction between ‘who speaks’ and ‘who sees’. In the opening of *Great Expectations*, the speaker is the adult Pip, but the child Pip is the one who sees. This gap is vital for the exploration of memory as well as morality in the novel, and as it proceeds the adult narrator's voice and comments play an increasingly important part in the way the narrative is mediated.

The dual role or perspective is established from the first words, if only by implication:

> My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.
>
> (p.3)

This is the voice, not of the boy himself, but of the man, who can refer with light-hearted irony to the inadequacies of the ‘infant tongue’. In an act of self-identification explained by the next paragraph, the child gives himself a name associating him with his dead father, even as it registers his isolation from his unknown family. (Father-figures are especially important in what follows, as we shall see.) The second paragraph of the novel reinforces the suggestion of the creative power of the boy ‘fancies’ or imagination, at the same time as it offers a critical perspective upon that power: reading the grave inscriptions leads to unreasonable or childish images, which nonetheless sway us with their sympathetic or comic force.

The defining moment of Pip's life which follows is rendered with a touching melancholy, ‘a memorable raw afternoon towards evening’ (p.3), when childish fantasy is dissolved by the reality of the overgrown churchyard, his dead family and its gloomy environment. His sense of isolation and fear is suddenly dramatised by the appearance of the gruff stranger who threatens to murder and even eat him. The eruption of direct speech (‘Hold your noise!’), as a man ‘started up from among the graves’, takes us directly into the frightening

present again: ‘A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg’ (p.4). Did you notice how this paragraph presents the man as the boy first sees him, with the minimum of narrative interference, by omitting the verbs from the first two sentences?

Activity 2

The first shocking appearance of the convict (well caught in David Lean's memorable film version of the novel, see Figure 1) brings into play another set of associations, which are critically important for our sense of the kind of novel we are dealing with here. **How are we to respond to the convict's first appearance? By what means does the narrator mediate the ‘reality’ of this character to us?**

Figure 1 Still from the Cineguild film production of *Great Expectations* 1946, directed by David Lean, with Anthony Wager as Pip, Finlay Currie as Abel Magwitch. Photograph by courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive.

The convict's opening words (‘Hold your noise! … Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!’, p.4) have just the exaggerated unreality we would expect of a stage or fairy-tale monster. Yet I think we accept his ‘reality’ because of the way Dickens presents the character: by making him not only something threatening as seen by the shivering child, but also something comic, as he becomes when mediated to us by the

narrating adult. The humorous, ironic effect emerges, for instance, when the convict himself momentarily takes fright as Pip indicates that his mother is ‘There, sir!’ in the graveyard (p.5). The effect is confirmed when the convict tells Pip that if he does not do as he is told, there is a young man who will ‘get’ him even when he thinks he is safe in bed (‘in comparison with which young man I am a Angel’, p.6). Pip is terrified, but we are not – nor, clearly, are we meant to be. The distance between who sees and who speaks in this situation is explicitly indicated by the narrator's words when he describes the impression made upon young Pip as the convict leaves: ‘he looked in my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in’ (p.7).

With superbly grotesque precision – ‘cautiously’ seems particularly apt – Dickens suggests the fearful closeness of living and dead to the young Pip. At the same time, the boy's fancy anticipates something of importance for the novel as a whole, which may well work upon us unconsciously in a first reading. This is the power of the dead, the forgotten or unseen, unexpectedly to influence our lives. The manner of narration invites sympathy and understanding for the child Pip, but by reminding us of the adult narrator it offers a more detached perspective as well, making possible the ironic humour that plays about the entire narrative. The initial conception of the convict suggests gothic melodrama, but it is melodrama incorporated within a subtle artistic medium to produce complex effects within the reader.

Why does the term ‘gothic’ seem appropriate? Well, surely, the figure that ‘started up’ into Pip's view with such suddenness ‘from among the graves’, with his frightful glaring and growling, reminds us of that other creature from the dead who, as you may recall, caused a frightened young boy to cry out as he struggled: ‘Let me go … monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces – You are an ogre’? Of course, Frankenstein's creature goes on to kill his victim (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1994 edn, p.117), whereas, for all his ogreish aspect, the convict in *Great Expectations* does not and, as we soon realise, would not. Shelley's creature tells his own story, distanced by being told to another narrator, whereas Dickens's ‘monster’ is seen from his potential victim's point of view. This makes his presentation in terms of what we might read as ‘gothic’ excess in fact rather plausible, since it can also be understood as the product of a young imagination replete with the monsters and ogres of folk and fairy-tale tradition. Moreover, this is a young imagination already sensitised by long infant meditation upon the family gravestones, amid the dreary winter marshes.

1.3 The serialised novel

That Dickens knew of Shelley's creature and may well have had him in mind is indicated by an explicit association very much later, after Pip finally learns the identity of his mysterious benefactor. He thinks of himself in the role of the ‘imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made, [who] was not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me, and recoiling from him with a stronger repulsion, the more he admired me and the fonder he was of me’ (p.335). Curiously, Pip sees himself as in different ways comparable to *both* Frankenstein and the creature, a typically gothic doubling which yet arises plausibly enough in his consciousness.

In other words, the first person narrative provides a realist perspective upon happenings inherently gothic, melodramatic or non-realist in implication. Insofar as we are brought to share the boy Pip's viewpoint, we share his sense of the world as arbitrary and frightening;

insofar as we are brought back from it by the adult narrator's viewpoint, we are invited to adopt a more ‘mature’ position, noting the plausibility of the child's and then the young man's experience.

I have used the word ‘grotesque’ to indicate the effect upon Pip's childish imaginings of the convict's appearance as it is conveyed to us, but also because this is the word Dickens himself thought of when the first inklings of this narrative came to him. The idea for the story began as an idea for a short essay by a semi-fictional adult narrator he had created for his magazine *All The Year Round* in January 1860, to recount recent experiences in town and country, and to delve into memories of his own childhood in Kent and London. As Dickens began to compose the essay, there came to him ‘a very fine, new, and grotesque idea’, he told his friend and biographer John Forster. ‘I begin to doubt’, he continued, ‘whether I had not better cancel the little paper, and reserve the notion for a new book … I can see the whole of a serial revolving on it, in a most singular and comic manner’ (Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 1928 edn, p.733). By early October Dickens's hand was forced by the need to boost the circulation of *All The Year Round*, then falling as the result of a tedious serial by another writer. The new serial was to concern the adventures of ‘a boy-child, like David [Copperfield]’ and, to avoid any unconscious repetition, Dickens reread *David Copperfield* and was ‘affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe’. His approach to the new serial was to be more detached:

> I have made the opening, I hope, in its general effect exceedingly droll. I have put a child and a good-natured foolish man, in relations that seem to me very funny. Of course I have got in the pivot on which the story will turn too – and which indeed, as you remember, was the grotesque tragicomic conception that first encouraged me.
>
> (Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 1928 edn, p.734)

The ‘very funny’ relationship between the child and the ‘good-natured foolish man’ is that between Pip and his sister's husband, Joe Gargery the blacksmith. The ‘grotesque tragi-comic conception’ upon which the whole mystery plot turns is, of course, the connection between Pip and the convict. The terms Dickens uses suggest popular theatrical or romance conventions, according to which distant or long-lost relations turn up when they can cause most surprise. Dickens had already published *Hard Times* as a serial to revive the fortunes of *All The Year Round's* predecessor, *Household Words*, a twopenny weekly begun in 1850 with the aim of casting ‘something of romantic fancy’ over ‘familiar things’ (ibid., p.512). When he hastily decided to put his new idea into *All The Year Round*, which had already seen the heartening effect upon sales of his historical romance, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), he planned a weekly serial of about the same length. It was to be much shorter than his other novels, normally published in twenty monthly parts, but would still be read over a lengthy period of time (Figure 2).