

An Introduction To

GREAT

EXPECT

ATIONS

An Introduction to Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*

By

Stephanie Forward

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The life of Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870)

Scholars generally agree that Charles Dickens wrote two novels with clear autobiographical elements: *David Copperfield* was the earlier of the two, dating from 1849-50; *Great Expectations* was penned in 1860-1. Dickens was born in Portsmouth, and spent his early years in Chatham, Kent. His parents, John and Elizabeth, are ‘preserved’ for us in the characters Mr and Mrs Micawber in *David Copperfield*.

John Dickens was a navy clerk, but his fecklessness led to financial problems and a three month term in the notorious Marshalsea Debtors’ Prison. Charles, at the age of twelve, had to work in a boot-blackening factory. Such early hardship roused in him a deep concern about society’s ills. In his books he often addressed issues that disturbed him, and many of his characters are marginalized and oppressed. Fortunately an inheritance enabled John to be released and, subsequently, Charles attended the Wellington House Academy.

He became an office-boy for attorneys in 1827, quickly progressing to court reporting in Doctors’ Commons (a society of

lawyers akin to the Inns of Court). Here Dickens gained valuable experience as a parliamentary journalist and also experimented with sketches. Each of his novels was published in serial instalments before appearing in three volumes. *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) brought success as well as some welcome financial security. In 1836 Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, and the couple had ten children. However, in his forties he became deeply attracted to a young actress named Ellen (Nelly) Ternan, and separated from his wife in 1858.

Dickens's other novels were: *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *Bleak House* (1852-3), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870, unfinished).

As a child Dickens had enjoyed acting. At the age of just six he wrote, performed in and directed a play entitled *Misnar, Sultan of India: a Tragedy*. Later his work-colleagues appreciated his entertaining impersonations. In view of his keen interest in drama, it is not surprising that he was able to conjure up vivid, striking

scenes and memorable characters in his novels. When he was twenty-one he actually considered the possibility of a theatrical career, before deciding upon parliamentary reporting. Nevertheless, he devoted a good deal of energy to amateur productions. His close friend and travelling companion Wilkie Collins shared his enthusiasm, and created tragic roles for him. Audiences were captivated by Dickens's virtuoso technique in *The Frozen Deep*: Queen Victoria even declared it to be the greatest performance she had ever seen in a theatre. From 1858 he delivered public readings: initially embarking upon lecture tours in England, but later venturing to the United States on two occasions. His sensational shows were lucrative and also enabled Dickens to engage with his adoring fans, who veered between laughter and tears. Even though he became exhausted, he could not resist the temptation to get up on stage.

Dickens died on 9 June 1870, in Rochester, after suffering a stroke. The obituarist in *The Times* lamented: 'One whom young and old, wherever the English language is spoken, have been accustomed to regard as a personal friend is suddenly taken away from among us. Charles Dickens is no more. The loss of such a man is an event which makes ordinary expressions of regret seem cold and conventional.'

The story

Dickens's success as an author led to the purchase of a house at Gad's Hill, in Chatham, and he wrote *Great Expectations* against a backdrop of places he knew from his childhood. The chronology of the novel covers 1812-1840. The narrator, Philip Pirrip, known as Pip, recalls his upbringing by his severe sister and her genial husband, blacksmith Joe Gargery, in 'the marsh country'. As Dickens had lived near the Kent marshes, he was able to convey the scenes convincingly. The early part of the book is set during a period when prisoners were sometimes kept in ships called 'hulks', moored in rivers. The stunning opening sequence takes place in a graveyard, on 'a memorable raw afternoon towards evening'. Young Pip (aged around six to seven) encounters an escaped convict, Abel Magwitch. Pip procures food and a file for him. Although the convict is recaptured and transported to Australia, he never forgets the boy.

A local recluse, the eccentric Miss Havisham, summons Pip to pay visits to Satis House. She is like 'some ghastly wax-work at the Fair', or 'a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress'. Pip is entranced by her ward, an ice-maiden called Estella, who embarrasses him profoundly by disdainfully denouncing him as coarse and common.

When Pip is old enough, Miss Havisham pays for him to be apprenticed as a blacksmith. Unexpectedly he receives further sponsorship from a mystery benefactor. A lawyer, Jaggers, has intriguing information about Pip's future:

I am instructed to communicate to him...that he will come into a handsome property. Further, that it is the desire of the present possessor of the property, that he be immediately removed from his present sphere of life and from this place, and be brought up a gentleman — in a word, as a young fellow of great expectations (chapter 18).

Moving from the Kent marshes to London, Pip now aspires to the status of a 'gentleman', and 'improves' himself by acquiring certain skills and attitudes; unfortunately, he also becomes snobbish about his roots, failing to appreciate those who love him most – Joe and Biddy.

His assumption that Miss Havisham has been his patron turns out to be mistaken, and he is shocked to learn that Magwitch has been funding him. Indeed the convict returns, eager to see Pip. Echoing the recapture of Magwitch early in the novel, a parallel scene takes place when the authorities give chase on the river. Dickens was so keen to convey this accurately that he hired a steamer on 22 May 1861, to take some family members and friends from Blackwall to

Southend.

Pip's attitude to Magwitch changes in the course of the book:

My repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted, wounded, shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (chapter 54)

When Magwitch is sentenced to death, Pip stays loyal to him. Ultimately he becomes a humbler, wiser and kinder person, realizing what it means to be a true 'gentle-man'.

Style and genre

Dickens uses dual narrative perspective: the first person narrator – the mature adult Pip - looks back over his life, reflecting upon his experiences and making perceptive judgements about himself and others. At the same time his recollections of childhood are graphic and intense, drawing in the reader. Young Pip's 'voice' comes through as he describes incidents from his formative years.

The novel can be classed as a *Bildungsroman* – a novel of education and development. However it is important to note that Dickens blends different genres: thus, *Great Expectations* combines realism, melodrama, romance, the Gothic, the grotesque, the fairy-tale and the comic novel. The opening scene, for example, is memorable because of this eclecticism. We can envisage the overgrown churchyard and the gravestones, and the convict is a fearful figure; yet the reader understands that his threats to eat the lad are amusing rather than genuine. The ‘at home’ scenes with the endearing blacksmith were intended to be comical. In *The Life of Charles Dickens*, biographer John Forster noted the author’s explanation about Pip and Joe’s relationship: ‘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.’

Interestingly there are Gothic nuances and links to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). In chapter 40 Pip’s distaste for his benefactor, Magwitch, recalls Victor Frankenstein’s feelings: ‘The imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made, 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.’ Here Dickens appropriates and reworks the *Frankenstein* story, in

that Pip compares himself to both the *creator* and the *creature*.

The serialization of *Great Expectations*

The publication of *The Pickwick Papers* had proved very attractive to readers, and Dickens continued to promote serialization. *Great Expectations* originally came out in short instalments (from December 1860-August 1861) in *All the Year Round*, a weekly magazine edited by Dickens. When it was issued in three volumes, it went through five editions in just one year. In America the novel was serialized in *Harper's Weekly*.

Serialization made literary works more affordable and readily accessible. There were some drawbacks from an author's perspective, because it was usually essential to meet rigid deadlines and to adhere to strict word limits. The separate parts of Victorian novels can be compared to the episodes of modern soap operas. The writer has to achieve a convincing illusion of reality; readers and viewers alike need to care about the characters, and be 'hungry' for what happens next. Many of the characters in *Great Expectations* have distinctive mannerisms – verbal or physical in nature – to keep them fresh in our minds. An example is Mrs Joe's

reputation for bringing Pip up ‘by hand’, brandishing her cane, ‘Tickler’; another is Jaggers washing his hands obsessively.

At times the pressures of serialization could prove stressful. In a letter to John Forster Dickens commented on the last stage of Pip’s expectations, beginning in ch.40 after Magwitch’s return:

it is a pity that the third portion cannot be read all at once, because its purpose would be much more apparent; and the pity is the greater, because the general turn and tone of the working out and winding up, will be away from all such things as they conventionally go. But what must be, must be. As to the planning out from week to week, nobody can imagine what the difficulty is, without trying. But, as in all such cases, when it is overcome the pleasure is proportionate. Two months more will see me through it, I trust. All the iron is in the fire, and I have ‘only’ to beat it out.

The two endings

Great Expectations has two conclusions. The original one sees Pip returning to London, after a successful career, and meeting Estella. She has experienced an unhappy marriage to a cruel boor, followed by widowhood, then remarriage. He perceives that she has been

through a great deal of suffering. Here Dickens deliberately rejects a neat, predictable dénouement in which Pip and Estella find happiness together.

His friend, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, urged him to amend this to a more conventional outcome. He did not want Pip to be left a solitary man. Dickens duly obliged by revising the last part of the novel. He explained his decision to John Forster:

Bulwer, who has been, as I think you know, extraordinarily taken by the book, so strongly urged it upon me, after reading the proofs, and supported his view with such good reasons, that I resolved to make the change...I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could, and I have no doubt the story will be more acceptable through the alteration.

The second version ends with these words:

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.

John Forster felt that the original conclusion was more consistent

with the text. In his 'Introduction to *Great Expectations*', George Bernard Shaw was much more forthright, declaring 'It is too serious a book to be a trivially happy one. Its beginning is unhappy; its middle is unhappy; and the conventional happy ending is an outrage on it.'

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