

27. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*

IN 2011 *Guardian* readers voted *Great Expectations* their favourite Dickens novel with 25% of the vote (*Bleak House* had 17% and *David Copperfield* 9%). There can be no doubt that it is one of his greatest masterpieces and in terms of character and narrative it has had an enduring fascination.

Great Expectations was begun in the autumn of 1860 and appeared weekly in the periodical *All the Year Round* until the summer of 1861, after which it was published in three volumes with immediate commercial success. It was the penultimate of Dickens's completed 14 novels, the last of which was *Our Mutual Friend*, published in 1865. A fifteenth novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was unfinished at his death from a stroke in 1870 at the age of 58.

Writers who have praised *Great Expectations* at length include Andrew Lang, George Gissing, Algernon Charles Swinburne, G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, Stephen Leacock, George Orwell, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson and Edward Said. It is an impressive list comprising some of the greatest critics in the English language over the last 150 years.

All of them acknowledged what Said called 'a very great novel'. Swinburne wrote of the story that "there can be none superior, if there be any equal to it, in the whole range of English fiction", and its defects "are as nearly imperceptible as spots on the sun or shadows in a sunlit sea". Chesterton said that it "has a quality of serene irony and even sadness, which is quite alone among his other works". Shaw called it Dickens's 'most compactly perfect book' and 'all-of-one-piece and consistently truthful as none of the other books are'.

Orwell, whose essay appeared in his *Inside the Whale* collection in 1940, saw Dickens as a subversive writer whose every page displays a 'consciousness that society is wrong somewhere at the root'. According to Orwell, however, his criticism of society was 'almost exclusively moral'.



The story is familiar. To recount the first of the three volumes, one Christmas Eve in the late afternoon, a young orphan boy called Pip encounters an escaped convict in the village churchyard while visiting his family's grave. The convict, Abel Magwitch, orders him to bring food and a file the next day, or else his heart and liver will be torn out, roasted and ate. Pip returns home to his domineering sister, more than twenty years his senior and married to a good-natured blacksmith Joe Gargery.

The boy rises early the next day and steals brandy and food including a pork pie from the pantry, and a file from the forge. As he crosses the marshes, he surprises another man dressed like the first who takes a swipe at him and then runs off into the mist. Soon he meets Magwitch, who gobbles up the food and washes it down with the brandy. Pip then leaves him, filing away at his fetter and vowing to hunt down the other man. Later that day Joe takes Pip with soldiers to hunt down the convicts, who are discovered fighting in a ditch. Re-arrested, Magwitch himself confesses to the thefts, so saving Pip from any punishment. The two men are returned to the prison ships from which they escaped.

About a year later, Mrs Joe and Uncle Pumblechook return from town with the exciting news that Miss Havisham, a wealthy local spinster, has expressed a wish for a boy to go and play with her adopted daughter Estella. Pip is scrubbed up and dressed in his best clothes before setting off with Pumblechook. They

arrive at Satis House to find a gloomy, rundown mansion with a neglected garden and a disused brewery in the grounds.

Miss Havisham sits corpse-like in a candlelit room where all the clocks have stopped at twenty to nine. She is wearing a withered wedding dress, has bridal flowers in her hair and wears only one shoe, the other being on the table near her hand. Pip plays cards with Estella who mocks him as a

common labouring boy with coarse hands and thick boots. Like her star-like name, she appears distant and unobtainable.

On the second visit to Miss Havisham on her birthday, Pip is shown into a dark dining room which contains a long table on which there is a mouldy cake overhung with cobwebs and spiders. Miss Havisham tells him that she will be laid out on the table in her bride's dress when she dies. The cake was her wedding cake and on her birthday many years ago she was to be married.

Pip visits Miss Havisham and Estella several times and all the while his attraction to Estella grows, despite her teasing and nastiness. As he passes into his teenage years he becomes an apprentice blacksmith. One day he arrives to find that Estella has gone away to become a lady. Having used the girl to taunt Pip as the instrument of her revenge on all males, Miss Havisham is gratified by his disappointment.

Then, in the fourth year of his apprenticeship, a London lawyer named Jaggers arrives to inform him that a secret benefactor has bequeathed him a large fortune and he should be released from his apprenticeship to be brought up in London as a gentleman – "in a word, as a young fellow of great expectations". Pip moves immediately from his humble background to the world of wealth and privilege. And that is only the beginning of his troubles, for this is a work of disillusionment and moral education. His childhood simply doesn't go away but haunts him throughout his adult life.

Great Expectations has many lighter moments, and is perhaps best described as a tragicomedy, but overall it is a sad story. The original ending, as Shaw and others have suggested, is therefore more in keeping with the sombre nature of the work. Pip recalls that he and Joe's son met Estella briefly in Piccadilly. Pip supposes that she thought he was married and the boy was his son. She kissed the child and that was that. But Dickens showed the proofs to his friend and fellow novelist Bulwer Lytton, who argued that he should change this unhappy ending.

Dickens, feeling that he could not disappoint his readers, complied with the request and hinted at the possibility of a future relationship by having the two meet in the grounds of the former Satis House before leaving hand in hand, with Pip saying: "I saw the shadow of no parting from her". This was surely a mistake because it damages the moral significance of the whole novel which is an attack on such romantic illusions.

Great Expectations is often described as a bildungsroman – a German term which describes a novel about the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. But here the coming-of-age takes longer than usual in that a good but weak boy is seduced by romance and wealth into abandoning his decent instincts to grow up as a snob, obsessed with a callous woman who marries a bully, before finally seeing sense and redeeming himself. Since Pip himself tells the story, it is a self-critical account of the narrator's decline and regeneration: if you like, the story of a snob's progress. Dickens gives us a moral fable about self-delusion and self-realisation, a romance with an in-built criticism of romance.

Pip builds his life on a set of false assumptions. A kind, decent lad, he is later led astray by the trappings of society – by glamour, wealth and privilege. But he learns that, far from ensuring happiness, they only bring misery and suffering to himself and others. Without love, kindness and generosity of spirit, life is reduced to cobwebs and a mouldy cake.

To what extent is Dickens condemning the social system? As we have suggested, Orwell felt that his



criticism is essentially moral. In every attack Dickens makes upon society "he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure", he wrote. For Orwell, he is always saying that it is useless to change institutions without a change of heart.

Perhaps we are setting up false dichotomies. Morality and politics are not separate entities but interrelated concepts. Why, for example, does Pip feel disgust when he discovers that his benefactor is actually a convict and not a rich woman?

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Is it not because he has been seduced by the capitalist system into looking down at the working class as also a criminal class? The irony, of course, is that most rich capitalists depended for their wealth almost entirely on the sweat of men like Magwitch. This is a fact that Pip initially fails to see but it eventually dawns on him towards the end.

Throughout his works, Dickens shows great sympathy for the poor and disadvantaged and is extremely critical of Victorian class divisions and hypocrisies. He condemns the cruelty of the workhouses in *Oliver Twist* and the Yorkshire schools in *Nicholas Nickleby*. He attacks the selfishness of middle class businessmen including Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, Montague Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son* and Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times*.

In his final finished novel *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens presents a bleak vision of a capitalist society in decay in which the story revolves

around who will acquire the wealth of dust heaps. And in *Great Expectations* itself, Miss Havisham is a bitter rich recluse surrounded by dust and decay who uses her ward to break Pip's heart.

Yet there are also nasty working class characters and decent wealthy ones. Perhaps, therefore, it would be best to describe Dickens as a left-liberal rather than a socialist. He certainly championed the right of the poor and working class to be recognised as human beings instead of objects of exploitation. Another thing is certain: he appealed to the idea that we share a common humanity beyond social division. He did so in order to fight what was fast becoming the lack of common interests in capitalist society in his time.

The ultimate theme of *Great Expectations*, as in all the novels of Dickens, is that society and individuals fail when they turn their back on decent, compassionate, humane values. That is a quintessential Humanist message and makes it a great Humanist novel.