

Psychological Realism in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

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In order to assess the realism of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, it could be interesting to examine this work in the light of Ian Watt's essay 'Realism and the novel form' (*The Realist Novel*, pp. 207-223). Watt has identified several key points pertaining to the realism of the novel. In this essay, I intend to demonstrate that although *Great Expectations* abides by some, though not all, of those points, it is the emphasis put on its deep psychological realism that may account for the lasting success of this novel.

Dickens did not take his plot 'from mythology, history, legend or previous literature' (*The Realist Novel*, p. 217), an important point according to Watt in measuring the extent of a novel's realism. However, certain aspects of the plot may not be considered as realistic examples of 'a close correspondence between life and art' (*The Realist Novel*, p. 223). 'The problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates' (*The Realist Novel*, p. 215) starts at the beginning of the novel when the reader is shown the astonishing memory of the mature narrator, as he remembers his thoughts as a boy of seven 'on a memorable raw afternoon' (p. 3). 'At such a time I found out for certain ... that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea'. This is a very factual observation that Pip makes before he gets attacked by his convict. Pip is twenty-three in chapter XX (p. 285), and returns to Satis House eleven years after his departure for the Middle East, so as a narrator he is at least thirty-four. How could a man claim such accurate memories (twenty-seven years later), when he was a boy of seven, just before a sudden attack totally unrelated to his reflections? This raises the question of the narrator's reliability, which seems important in terms of realism in the case of a first-person autobiographical narrative fiction.

It may be argued that too many coincidences happen as we progressively discover the interconnectedness of the various characters. Indeed, Orlick being on the point of killing Pip when the latter is rescued at the very last minute by his friends (p. 392) does not add to the level of verisimilitude of the plot. A good illustration that in this novel, the targeted level of 'realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.' (*The Realist Novel*, p. 215). Clearly Dickens is more concerned with the psychological characterization of the characters and a detailed description of the settings, as this will enable him to show how Pip – a realistic and not too perfect hero - reacts to various stimuli on his way to adulthood.

Regarding the names of the protagonists, Watt posits that non-particular and unrealistic names may denote particular qualities attributed to characters that are not completely individualized entities (therefore excluding any suggestion of real or contemporary life), whereas complete and realistic names suggest that characters should be regarded as particular individuals. *Great Expectations* contains both categories of names. Pip, the name of the main protagonist is also a seed that needs to shed its old form in order to grow. (Mr. Pumblechook, 'that detested seedsman' (p. 93), taking credit for Pip's evolution as a budding gentleman, seems to confirm Dickens' polysemic intent). A pip is also one of the dots showing the value on dice and dominos. This introduces an element of chance and suits the fact that a pip can grow, to begin with, in any direction depending to surrounding conditions (like a palindrome that can be read in either direction), but will eventually point upwards. Indeed, Pip is very lucky that a rich benefactor intervenes in his life and changes his destiny. The palindromic value is extended to the surname Pirrip, and to a lesser

extent (if it were not for the letter 'h') to Philip. Although his Christian name and surname may sound authentic, the nickname Pip, rich in symbolism, matches the didactic intention of this bildungsroman as Philip Pirrip is in search of his identity and wants to become a gentleman.

Estella is shining and distant like an unreachable stellar body. 'John Wemmick' or 'Joe Gargery' look perfectly realistic as the names of protagonists. However, regarding the latter it seems ironic that his wife should bear both her husband's surname and Christian name as she is only referred to as Mrs. Joe Gargery (or even Mrs. Joe), because she possesses such a domineering personality compared to her submissive husband. The sonorities of the names are also an interesting avenue to explore. 'Havisham' may sound realistic as a name with an ending in -ham, but it also sounds as if Miss Havisham may 'have a shame' problem, being left alone, without compassion and without Compeyson, on her wedding day, underlining the burden of her past. Dickens chooses playful names for some of his characters, and seems to use them beyond the scope of their nominal function in an attempt to convey an extra meaning to the reader.

In using such an unrealistic character as Miss Havisham who remains bedizened all her life in her wedding dress, keeping her bridal cake decaying and covered with cobwebs, Dickens does not necessarily forfeit his claim to realism. She is a caricature, albeit a very strong one, and this may appeal to readers who can draw a parallel to someone they know who remains, to a lesser degree, stuck in the past after an unresolved traumatic event or a bereavement. For them, she will remain a memorable character. This didactic bildungsroman points to the danger of such unhealthy excess. Her arrested development is contrasted to Pip's wish for self-improvement.

Nevertheless, Dickens tries, in a meticulous manner, 'to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience' (*The Realist Novel*, p. 217).

He uses the language that his characters would really use. From Trabb's boy 'Don't know yah' (p. 225) and Joe's 'be it so or be it son't, you must be a common scholar afore you can be a oncommon one' (p. 65) to Jaggers' sophisticated elocution, the spoken language of the dialogues intends to reflect reality.

When Pip is going through some important experience, Dickens allows the narrator to repeat the same expression at short intervals as if intent on breaking the speed of the reader, imposing his own rhythm in order to highlight the depth of Pip's emotion or perception: 'No need to take a file ... no need to take the handkerchief ... no need to hug himself' (p. 288).

Dickens also succeeds in involving readers by picking up daily-life issues that they can easily relate to their own reality. 'My sister had a trenchant way of cutting our bread and butter' (p. 9) initiates a whole paragraph devoted to the topic, containing a wealth of details.

Some characters make their appearance in a very theatrical manner in order to capture the reader's attention, as in the case of Jaggers. Dickens could have him knock on Joe Gargery's door, but he prefers to stage him in a public place in such a way as to show his self-confidence, his purposefulness, while keeping a certain aura of mystery. Jaggers is shown taking his time correcting Wopsle, prior to attending to his business with Pip. At this point, the reader of the original weekly serialized novel will suspect that 'The strange gentleman, with an air of authority not to be disputed, and with a manner expressive of knowing something secret about every one of us' (p. 123) will have a role to play. He and his finger are not to be forgotten.

Dickens' psychological mastery is highlighted when he links two characters like Havisham and Magwitch who are not directly connected, giving them both several features in common so that comparisons can be drawn. The effect is to deepen their psychological characterization in the eyes of the reader. Both are victims of Compeyson, both offer money to Pip several times, both are viewed as a benefactor (supposed or real), both use Pip as an object for their own purpose, Havisham to wreak revenge on the opposite sex, Magwitch to own a gentleman (his revenge on society as an outcast). Their freedom is limited, Havisham is impeded by her past, whereas Magwitch gets rid of his leg iron, both however are parented to Estella (as a foster or biological parent).

In conveying this 'impression of fidelity' to real life, Dickens seems to be in control of the psychological effects that his various techniques may have on his readers. Although it could be argued that the actual 'commercial' ending is less in tune with the psychological realism of the novel than its original ending, Dickens gets his point across by demonstrating that having been born in the lower classes does not preclude a strong-willed soul from rising above its predestined condition (despite a potential snobbish transitory period). The introspective reader of *Great Expectations* may benefit from the didactic value of this bildungsroman, and as a student stated: 'We need to read Dickens' novels because they tell us, in the grandest way possible, why we are what we are.' (Varese).

(Word count 1532)

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