Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

With an Introduction by John Irving

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CHARLES DICKENS

was born in a little house in Landport, Portsea, England, on February 7, 1812. The second of eight children, he grew up in a family frequently beset by financial insecurity. At the age of eleven, Dickens was taken out of school and sent to work in a London blacking warehouse, where his job was to paste labels on bottles for six shillings a week. His father, John Dickens, was a warmhearted but improvident man. When he was condemned to Marshalsea Prison for unpaid debts, he unwisely agreed that Charles should stay in lodgings and continue working while the rest of the family joined him in the jail. This three-month separation caused Charles much pain; his experiences as a child alone in a huge city—cold, isolated, with barely enough to eat—haunted him for the rest of his life.

When the family fortunes improved, Charles went back to school, after which he became an office boy, a freelance reporter and finally an author. With *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) he achieved immediate fame; in a few years he was easily the most popular and respected writer of his time. It has been estimated that one out of every ten persons in Victorian England was a Dickens reader. *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1) were huge successes. *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) was less so, but Dickens followed it with his unforgettable *A Christmas Carol* (1843). *Bleak House* (1852–3), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) reveal his deepening concern for the injustices of British society. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860–1), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5) complete his major works.

Dickens's marriage to Catherine Hogarth produced ten children but ended in separation in 1858. In that year he began a series of exhausting public readings; his health gradually declined. After putting in a full day's work at his home at Gads Hill, Kent, on June 8, 1870, Dickens suffered a stroke, and he died on the following day.

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The King of the Novel: An Introduction to *Great Expectations*

by John Irving

1. Why I Like Charles Dickens; Why Some People Don't

Great Expectations is the first novel I read that made me wish I had written it; it is the novel that made me want to be a novelist—specifically, to move a reader as I was moved then. I believe that *Great Expectations* has the most wonderful and most perfectly worked-out plot for a novel in the English language; at the same time, it never deviates from its intention to move you to laughter and to tears. But there is more than one thing about this novel that some people don't like—and there is one thing in particular that they don't like about Dickens in general. Here is the thing highest on the list that they don't like: the intention of a novel by Charles Dickens is to move you emotionally, not intellectually; and it is by emotional means that Dickens intends to influence you socially. Dickens is not an analyst; his writing is not analytical—although it can be didactic. His genius is descriptive; he can describe a thing so vividly—and so influentially—that no one can look at that thing in the same way again.

You cannot encounter the prisons in Dickens's novels and ever again feel completely self-righteous about prisoners being where they belong; you cannot encounter a lawyer of Mr. Jaggers's terrifying ambiguity and ever again put yourself willingly in a lawyer's hands—Jaggers, although only a minor character in *Great Expectations*, may be our literature's greatest indictment of living by abstract rules. Dickens has even provided me with a lasting vision of a critic; he is Bentley Drummle, "the next heir but one to a baronetcy," and "so sulky a fellow that he even took up a book as if its writer had done him an injury."

Although his personal experiences with social evil had been brief and youthful, they never ceased to haunt Dickens—the

humiliation of his father in the debtors' prison at Marshalsea; his own three months labor (at age eleven) in a blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs, pasting labels on bottles; and because of his father's money problems, the family's several moves—especially, when Charles was nine, to meaner accommodations in Chatham; and shortly thereafter, away from the Chatham of his childhood. "I thought that life was sloppier than I expected to find it," he wrote. Yet his imagination was never impoverished; in *David Copperfield*, he wrote (remembering his life as a reader in his attic room at St. Mary's Place, Chatham), "I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature)." He had *been* Don Quixote, too—and all the even less likely heroes of the Victorian fairy tales of his time. As Harry Stone has written: "It is hard to know which came first, Dickens's interest in fairy tales or his conditioning by them." Dickens's fine biographer, Edgar Johnson, describes the sources of the author's imagination similarly, claiming further that Dickens had devised "a new literary form, a kind of fairy tale that is at once humorous, heroic, and realistic."

The Chatham of Dickens's childhood is sharply recalled in *Great Expectations*—in the churchyard graves he could see from his attic room, and in the black convict hulk, "like a wicked Noah's ark," which he saw looming offshore on the boating trips he took up the Medway to the Thames; that is where he saw his first convicts, too. So much of the landscape of *Great Expectations* is Chatham's landscape, the foggy marshes, the river mist; and his real-life model for the Blue Boar was there in nearby Rochester, and Uncle Pumblechook's house was there—and Satis House, where Miss Havisham lives. On walks with his father, from Gravesend to Rochester, they would pause in Kent and view the mansion atop a two-mile slope called Gad's Hill; his father told him that if he was very hardworking, he might get to live there one day. Given his family's Chatham circumstances, this must have been hard for young Charles to believe, but he did get to live there one day—for the last twelve years of his life; he wrote *Great Expectations* there, and he died there. For readers who find Dickens's imagination farfetched, they should look at his life.

His was an imagination fueled by personal unhappiness and the zeal of a social reformer. Like many successful people, he made good use of disappointments—responding to them with

energy, with near-frenzied activity, rather than needing to recover from them. At fifteen, he left school; at seventeen, he was a law reporter; at nineteen, a parliamentary reporter. At twenty, he was a witness to the unemployment, starvation, and cholera of the winter of 1831–2—and his first literary success, at twenty-one, was made gloomy by the heartbreak of his first love. She was a banker's daughter whose family shunned Dickens; years later, she returned to him in her embarrassing maturity—she was plump and tiresome, then, and he shunned her. But when he first met her, her rejection made him work all the harder; Dickens never moped.

He had what Edgar Johnson calls a "boundless confidence in the power of the will." One of his earliest reviews (by his future father-in-law; imagine that!) was absolutely right about the talents of the young author. "A close observer of character and manners," George Hogarth wrote about the twenty-four-year-old Dickens, "with a strong sense of the ridiculous and a graphic faculty of placing in the most whimsical and amusing lights the follies and absurdities of human nature. He has the power, too, of producing tears as well as laughter. His pictures of the vices and wretchedness which abound in this vast city are sufficient to strike the heart of the most careless and insensitive reader."

Indeed, Dickens's young star so outshone that of Robert Seymour, the *Pickwick Papers*' first illustrator, that Seymour blew his brains out with a muzzle-loader. By 1837 Dickens was already famous for Mr. Pickwick. He was only twenty-five; he even took command of his hapless parents; having twice bailed his father out of debtors' prison, Dickens moved his parents forcibly from London to Exeter—an attempt to prevent his feckless father from running up an unpayable tab in his famous son's name.

Dickens's watchdog behavior regarding the social ills of his time could best be described, politically, as reform liberalism; yet he was not to be pinned down. His stance for the abolition of the death penalty, for example, was based on his belief that the punishment of death did nothing to deter crime—not out of sentiment for any malefactor. For Dickens, "the major evil"—as Johnson describes it—"was the psychological effect of the horrible drama of hanging before a brutalized and gloating mob." He was tireless in his support of reform homes for women, and of countless services and charities for the poor; by the time of *Dombey and Son* (1846–8),

he had a firmly developed ethic regarding the human greed evident in the world of competitive business—and a strongly expressed moral outrage at the indifference shown to the welfare of the downtrodden; he had begun to see, past *Oliver Twist* (1837–9), that vice and cruelty were not randomly bestowed on individuals at birth but were the creations of society. And well before the time of *Bleak House* (1852–3), he had tenacious hold of the knowledge that "it is better to suffer a great wrong than to have recourse to the much greater wrong of the law."

He was thirty when he had his first fling at editing "a great liberal newspaper," dedicated to the "Principles of Progress and Improvement, of Education, Civil and Religious Liberty, and Equal Legislation"; he lasted only seventeen days. With *Household Words*, he did much better; the magazine was as successful as many of his novels, full of what he called "social wonders, good and evil." Among the first to admire the writing of George Eliot, he was also among the first to guess her sex. "I have observed what seem to me to be such womanly touches," he wrote to her, "that the assurance on the title-page is insufficient to satisfy me, even now. If they originated with no woman, I believe that no man ever before had the art of making himself, mentally, so like a woman, since the world began." Of course, she was charmed—and she confessed to him.

He was so industrious that (despite his generosity) even the work of his own friends failed to impress him. "There is a horrid respectability about the most of the best of them," he wrote, "—a little, finite, systematic routine in them, strangely expressive to me of the state of England herself." Yet he was ever the champion of the *un*-championed—as in Mr. Sleary's heartfelt and lisped plea for the circus artists in *Hard Times*. "Don't be croth with uth poor vagabondth. People must be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet can they be alwayth a working, they ain't made for it. You *mutht* have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing, too, and make the betht of uth; not the worththt!" It is this quality in Dickens that has been blessed by Irving Howe, who writes that "in [his] strongest novels, entertainer and moralist come to seem shadows of one another—finally two voices out of the same mouth."

Dickens's gift is how spontaneously he can render a situation both sympathetic and hilarious—and charged with his

fierce indignation, with what Johnson calls his "furious exposure of social evils." Yet Dickens's greatest risk-taking, as a writer, has little to do with his social morality. What he is most unafraid of is sentimentality—of anger, of passion, of emotionally and psychologically revealing himself; he is not self-protective; he is never careful. In the present, postmodernist praise of the *craft* of writing—of the subtle, of the exquisite—we may have refined the very heart out of the novel. Dickens would have had more fun with today's literary elitists and minimalists than he had with Mr. Pumblechook and Mrs. Jellyby. He was the king of the novel in that century which produced the models of the form.

Dickens wrote great comedy—high and low—and he wrote great melodrama. At the conclusion of the first stage of Pip's expectations, Dickens writes: "Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts." But we *are* ashamed of our tears. We live at a time when critical taste tells us that to be softhearted is akin to doltishness; we're so influenced by the junk on television that even in reacting against it, we overreact—we conclude that *any* attempt to move an audience to laughter or to tears is shameless, is either sitcom or soap opera or both.

Edgar Johnson is correct in observing that "though much has been said about Victorian restraint, emotionally it is we who are restrained, not they. Large bodies of modern readers, especially those called 'sophisticated,' distrust any uncurbed yielding to emotion. Above all when the emotion is noble, heroic, or tender, they wince in skeptical suspicion or distaste. A heartfelt expression of sentiment seems to them exaggerated, hypocritical, or embarrassing." And Johnson offers a reason for this. "There are explanations, of course, for our peculiar fear of sentiment as sentimental. With the enormous growth of popular fiction, vulgar imitators have cheapened the methods they learned from great writers and coarsened their delineation of emotion. Dickens's very powers marked him out as a model for such emulation."

To the modern reader, too often when a writer risks being sentimental, the writer is already guilty. But as a writer it is cowardly to so fear sentimentality that one avoids it altogether. It is typical—and forgivable—among student writers to avoid being mush-minded by simply refusing to write about people, or by refusing to subject characters to emotional ex-

tremes. A short story about a four-course meal from the point of view of a fork will never be sentimental; it may never matter very much to us, either. Dickens took sentimental risks with abandon. "His weapons were those of caricature and burlesque," Johnson writes, "of melodrama and unrestrained sentiment."

And here's another wonderful thing about him: his writing is never vain—I mean that he never sought to be original. He never pretended to be an explorer, discovering neglected evils. Nor was he so vain as to imagine that his love or his use of the language was particularly special; he could write very prettily when he wanted to, but he never had so little to say that he thought the object of writing was pretty language; he did not care about being original in that way, either. The broadest novelists never cared for that kind of original language—Dickens, Hardy, Tolstoy, Hawthorne, Melville . . . their so-called style is every style; they use all styles. To such novelists, originality with language is mere fashion; it will pass. The larger, plainer things—the things they are preoccupied with, their obsessions—these will last: the story, the characters, the laughter and the tears.

Yet writers who are considered masters of style have also marveled at Dickens's technical brilliance, while recognizing it as instinctual—as nothing anyone ever learned, or could be taught. G. K. Chesterton's *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* is both an appreciative and precise view of Dickens's techniques; Chesterton also offers a marvelous defense of Dickens's characters. "Though his characters often were caricatures, they were not such caricatures as was supposed by those who had never met such characters," Chesterton writes. "And the critics had never met the characters; because the critics did not live the common life of the English people; and Dickens did. England was a much more amusing and horrible place than it appeared to the sort of man who wrote reviews."

It is worth noting that both Johnson and Chesterton stress Dickens's fondness for the *common;* Dickens's critics stress his eccentricity. "There can be no question of the importance of Dickens as a human event in history," Chesterton writes, ". . . a naked flame of mere genius, breaking out in a man without culture, without tradition, without help from historic religions and philosophies or from the great foreign schools; and revealing a light that never was on sea or land, if only the long fantastic shadows that it threw from common things."

Vladimir Nabokov has pointed out that Dickens didn't write every sentence as if his reputation depended on it. "When Dickens has some information to impart to his reader through conversation or meditation, the imagery is generally not conspicuous," Nabokov writes. Dickens knew how to keep a reader reading; he trusted his powers of narrative momentum as much as he trusted his descriptive powers—as much as he trusted his ability to make his readers feel emotionally connected to his characters. Very simply, narrative momentum and emotional interest in the characters are what make a novel more compellingly readable on page 300 than it is on page 30. "The bursts of vivid imagery are spaced" is how Nabokov puts it.

But didn't he exaggerate everything? his critics ask.

"When people say that Dickens exaggerates," George Santayana writes, "it seems to me that they have no eyes and no ears. They probably have only *notions* of what things and people are; they accept them conventionally, at their diplomatic value." And to those who contend that no one was ever so sentimental, or that there was no one ever *like* Wemmick or Jaggers or Bentley Drummle, Santayana says: "The polite world is lying; there *are* such people; we are such people ourselves in our true moments." Santayana also defends Dickens's stylistic excesses: "This faculty, which renders him a consummate comedian, is just what alienated him from a later generation in which people of taste were aesthetes and virtuous people were higher snobs; they wanted a mincing art, and he gave them copious improvisation, they wanted analysis and development, and he gave them absolute comedy."

No wonder that—both because of and in spite of his popularity—Dickens was frequently misunderstood, and often mocked. In his first visit to America he was relentless in his attack on America's practice of ignoring international copyright; he also detested slavery, and said so, and he found loathsome and crude the American habit of *spitting*—according to Dickens, practically everywhere! For his criticism he was rewarded by our critics, who called him a "flash reporter" and "that famous penny-a-liner"; his mind was described as "coarse, vulgar, impudent, and superficial"; he was called "narrow-minded" and "conceited," and among all visitors, ever, to "this original and remarkable country," he was regarded as "the most flimsy—the most childish—the most trashy—the most contemptible. . . ."

So, of course, Dickens had enemies; they could not touch his splendid instincts, or match his robust life. Before beginning *Great Expectations,* he said, "I must make the most I can out of the book—I think a good name?" Good, indeed, and a title many writers wish were free for them to use, a title many wonderful novels could have had: *The Great Gatsby, To the Lighthouse, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Sun Also Rises, Anna Karenina, Moby Dick*—all great expectations, of course.

2. A Prisoner of Marriage; The "One Happiness I Have Missed in Life . . ."

But what about the plot? his critics ask. Aren't his plots unlikely?

Oh, boy; are they ever "unlikely"! I wonder how many people who call a plot "unlikely" ever realize that they do not like any plot at all. The nature of plot *is* unlikely. And if you've been reading a great many contemporary novels, you're probably unused to encountering much in the way of plot there; should you encounter one now, you'd be sure to find it unlikely. Yet when the British sailed off to their little war with Argentina in 1982, they used the luxury liner, the *Queen Elizabeth II,* as a troop transport. And what became the highest military priority of the Argentinian forces, who were quite overpowered in this war? To sink that luxury liner, the *Queen Elizabeth II,* of course—to salvage, at the very least, what people call a "moral victory." Imagine that! But we accept far more unlikely events in the news than we accept in fiction. Fiction is, and has to be, better made than the news; plots, even the most unlikely ones, are better made than real life, too.

Let us look at Charles Dickens's marriage for a moment; the story of his marriage, were we to encounter it in any novel, would seem highly unlikely to us. When Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, Catherine's younger sister Mary, who was only sixteen, moved in with them; Mary adored her sister's husband, and she was an ever-cheerful presence in their house—perhaps seeming all the more good-natured and even-tempered alongside Catherine's periods of sullen withdrawal. How much easier it is to be a visitor than to be a spouse; and to make matters worse, Mary died at seventeen, thus perfectly enshrining herself in Dickens's memory—and

becoming, in the later years of his marriage to Kate (Catherine was called Kate), an even more impossible idol, against whom poor Kate could never compete. Mary was a vision of perfection as girlish innocence, of course, and she would appear and reappear in Dickens's novels—she is Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, she is Agnes in *David Copperfield*, she is Little Dorrit. Surely her goodness finds its way into Biddy in *Great Expectations*, too, although Biddy's capabilities for criticizing Pip come from stronger stuff than anything Dickens would have had the occasion to encounter in Mary Hogarth.

In his first visit to America, while Dickens made few references to the strains that Kate felt while traveling (her anxieties for the children back in England, especially), he did observe the profound lack of interest in America that was expressed by Kate's maid. Kate herself, he documented—in the course of getting on and off boats and coaches and trains—had fallen 743 times. Although this was surely an exaggeration, Mrs. Dickens did compile an impressive record of clumsiness; Johnson suggests that she suffered from a nervous disorder, for her lack of physical control was remarkable. Dickens once cast her in one of his amateur theatrical company's performances—it was a small part in which Kate spoke a total of only thirty lines; yet she managed to fall through a trapdoor on stage and so severely sprained her ankle that she had to be replaced. It seems an extreme step to take to gain Dickens's attention; but Kate surely suffered their marriage in her own way as acutely as her husband did in his.

When Dickens's twenty-three-year-old marriage to Kate was floundering, who would be living with them but another of Kate's younger sisters? Dickens found Georgina "the most admirable and affectionate of girls"; and such was her loyalty to him that after Dickens and Kate separated, Georgina remained with Dickens. She might have been in love with him, and quite more to him than a help with the children (Kate bore Dickens ten children), but there is nothing to suggest that their relationship was sexual—although, at the time, they were subject to gossip about that.

At the time of his separation from Kate, Dickens was probably in love with an eighteen-year-old actress in his amateur theatrical company—her name was Ellen Ternan. When Kate discovered a bracelet that Dickens had intended as a present for Ellen (he was in the habit of giving little gifts

to his favorite performers), Kate accused him of having already consummated a relationship with Ellen—a relationship that, in all likelihood, was not consummated until some years after Dickens and Kate had separated. (Dickens's relationship with Ellen Ternan must have been nearly as guilt ridden and unhappy as his marriage.) At the time of the separation, Kate's mother spread the rumor that Dickens had already taken Ellen Ternan as his mistress. Dickens published a statement under the headline "PERSONAL" on the front page of his own, very popular magazine (*Household Words*) that such "misrepresentations" of his character were "most grossly false." Dickens's self-righteousness in his own defense invited controversy; every detail of his marriage and separation was published in the New York *Tribune* and in all the English newspapers. Imagine that!

It was 1858. Within three years, Dickens would change the name of *Household Words* to *All the Year Round* and continue his exhausting habit of serializing his novels for his magazine; he would begin the great numbers of fervent public readings that would undermine his health (he would give more than four hundred readings before his death in 1870); and he would complete both *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. "I am incapable of rest," he told his best and oldest friend, John Forster. "I am quite confident I should rust, break, and die, if I spared myself. Much better to die, doing."

As for love: he would lament that a true love was the "one happiness I have missed in life, and the one friend and companion I never made." More than a little of that melancholic conviction would haunt Pip's quest of Estella's love (and profoundly influence Dickens's first version of the ending of *Great Expectations*). And the slowness and the coldness with which the teenaged Ellen Ternan responded to the famous author in his late forties would cause Dickens to know more than a little of what Pip's longing for Estella was.

His marriage to Kate had, in his view, been a prison; but in taking leave of it, he had encountered a most public scandal and humiliation, and a reluctant mistress—the relationship with Ellen Ternan would never be joyously celebrated. The lovelessness of his marriage would linger with him—just as the dust of the debtors' prison would pursue Mr. Dorrit, just as the cold mists of the marshes would follow young Pip to

London, just as the "taint" of Newgate would hang over Pip when he so hopefully meets Estella's coach.

Pip is another of Dickens's orphans, but he is never so pure as Oliver Twist and never as nice as David Copperfield. He is not only a young man with unrealistic expectations; he is a young brat who adopts the superior manners of a gentleman (an unearned position) while detesting his lowly origins and feeling ashamed in the company of men of a higher social class than his. Pip is a snob. "It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home," he admits; yet as he sets out to London to enjoy his unknown benefactor's provisions, Pip heaps "a gallon of condescension upon everybody in the village."

It must have been a time of self-doubt for Dickens—at least, he suffered some reevaluation of his self-esteem. He had kept his work days in the blacking warehouse a secret from his own children. Although his origins were not so lowly as young Pip's, Dickens must have thought them low enough. He would never forget how deeply his spirits sank when he was pasting labels on the bottles at Hungerford Stairs.

And was he feeling guilty, too, and considering some of his own ventures to have only the airs of a gentleman (without real substance) about them? Surely the partrician goals to which young Pip aspires are held in some contempt in *Great Expectations;* the mysterious and elaborate provisions that enable Pip to "live smooth," to "be above work," turn out to be no favor to Pip. No one should "be above work." At the end—as there is often at the end, with Dickens—there is a softening of the heart; the work ethic, that bastion of the middle class, is graciously given some respect. "We were not in a grand way of business," Pip says of his job, "but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well." This is an example of what Chesterton means: that "Dickens did not write what the people wanted. Dickens wanted what the people wanted." This is an important distinction, especially when regarding Dickens's popularity; the man did not write *for* an audience so much as he expressed an audience's hunger—he made astonishingly vivid what an audience feared, what it dreamed of, what it wanted.

In our time, it is often necessary to defend a writer's popularity; from time to time, in literary fashion, it is considered bad taste to be popular—if a writer is popular, how can he be any good? And it is frequently the role of lesser wits to

demean the accomplishments of writers with more sizable audiences, and reputations, than their own. Oscar Wilde, for example, was a teenager when Dickens died; regarding Dickens's sentiment, Wilde remarked that "it would take a heart of steel not to laugh at the death of Little Nell." It was also Wilde who said that Flaubert's conversation was on a level with the conversation of a pork butcher; but Flaubert was not in the conversation business—which, in time, may prove to be Wilde's most lasting contribution to our literature. Compared to Dickens or Flaubert, Wilde's *writing* is on a level with pork butchery. Chesterton, who was born four years after Dickens's death and who occupied a literary period wherein popularity (for a writer) was suspect, dismissed the *charges* against Dickens's popularity very bluntly. History would have to pay attention to Dickens, Chesterton said—because, quite simply, "the man led a mob."

Dickens was abundant and magnificent with description, with the atmosphere surrounding everything—and with the tactile, with every detail that was terrifying or viscerally *felt*. Those were among his strengths as a writer; and if there were weaknesses, too, they are more easily spotted in his endings than in his beginnings or middles. In the end, like a good Christian, he wants to forgive. Enemies shake hands (or even marry!); every orphan finds a family. Miss Havisham, who is a truly terrible woman, cries out to Pip, whom she has manipulated and deceived, "Who am I, for God's sake, that I should be kind?" Yet when she begs his forgiveness, he forgives her. Magwitch, regardless of how he "lived rough," is permitted to die with a smile on his lips, secure in the knowledge that his lost daughter is alive. Talk about *unlikely*! Pip's horrible sister finally dies, thus allowing the dear Joe to marry a truly good woman. And, in the revised ending, Pip's unrequited love is rectified; he sees "no shadow of another parting" from Estella. This is mechanical matchmaking; it is not realistic; it is overly tidy—as if the neatness of the *form* of the novel requires that all the characters be brought together. This may seem, to our cynical expectations, unduly hopeful.

The hopefulness that makes everyone love *A Christmas Carol* draws fire when Dickens employs it in *Great Expectations;* when Christmas is over, Dickens's hopefulness strikes many as mere wishful thinking. Dickens's original ending to *Great Expectations*, that Pip and his impossible love, Estella,

should stay apart, is thought by most modern critics to be the proper (and certainly the modern) conclusion—from which Dickens eventually shied away; for such a change of heart and mind, he is accused of selling out. After an early manhood of shallow goals, Pip is meant finally to see the falseness of his values—and of Estella—and he emerges a sadder though a wiser fellow. Many readers have expressed the belief that Dickens stretches credulity too far when he leads us to suppose—in his revised ending—that Estella and Pip could be happy ever after; or that anyone can. Of his new ending—where Pip and Estella are reconciled—Dickens himself remarked to a friend: "I have put in a very pretty piece of writing, and I have no doubt that the story will be more acceptable through the alteration." That Estella would make Pip—or anyone—a rotten wife is not the point. "Don't be afraid of my being a blessing to him," she slyly tells Pip, who is bemoaning her choice of a first husband. The point is, Estella and Pip are linked; fatalistically, they belong to each other—happily or unhappily.

Although the suggestion that Dickens revise the original ending came from his friend Bulwer-Lytton, who wished the book to close on a happier note, Edgar Johnson wisely points out that "the changed ending reflected a desperate hope that Dickens could not banish from within his own heart." That hope is not a last-minute alteration, tacked on, but simply the culmination of a hope that abides throughout the novel: that Estella might change. After all, Pip changes (he is the first major character in a Dickens novel who changes realistically, albeit slowly). The book isn't called *Great Expectations* for nothing. It is not, I think, meant to be an entirely bitter title—although I can undermine my own argument by reminding myself that we first hear that Pip is "a young fellow of great expectations" from the ominous and cynical Mr. Jaggers, that veteran hard-liner who will, quite rightfully, warn Pip to "take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There's no better rule." But that was never Dickens's rule. Mr. Gradgrind, from *Hard Times*, believed in nothing and possessed nothing but the facts; yet it is Mr. Sleary's advice that Dickens heeds, to "do the withe thing and the kind thing too." It is both the kind and the "withe" thing that Pip and Estella end up together.

In fact, it is the first ending that is out of character—for Dickens, and for the novel. Pip, upon meeting Estella (after