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Great Expectations

CHARLES DICKENS

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Charles Dickens

Introduction and Notes by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Great Expectations, Dickens's thirteenth novel, was first published in the pages of his weekly magazine *All the Year Round* between December 1860 and August 1861. Although it was begun in some haste, with little time for the careful forward planning that had marked its predecessors, it is nevertheless one of the best organised and most well constructed of all novels, with scarcely a wasted gesture, character or event. As one gets to know the book, it seems as if there is no fat at all on it, no detail that does not resonate with the whole. Each episode, from the appearance of the mysterious convict in the first chapter to the ambiguities of the final scene, is important in its own right, adds to the richly symbolic structure of the book and plays its part in the shapely and decisive plot. When he wrote *Great Expectations*, Dickens had been at the top of the literary tree for the best part of a quarter of a century. He was the author of novels that had shaped the literature of the age and the creator of characters that had become proverbial. But his more recent works –

in particular the 'dark novels' such as *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* which have been so highly praised by modern critics – had been less well received. *Great Expectations*, by contrast, was welcomed as a return to Dickens's earlier comic form. The *Saturday Review*, for example, a journal which for many years had been hostile to his work, said that it 'restores Mr Dickens and his readers to the old level. It is in his best vein ... quite worthy to stand beside *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *David Copperfield*'.[1] The plot, wrote Edwin P. Whipple in the *Atlantic Monthly*, was 'universally admitted to be the best that Dickens has ever invented', while E. S. Dallas in *The Times* described it as among the 'happiest' of Dickens's works with a 'flowing humour ... which disarms criticism'.[2]

These critics point to central virtues of the book – its brilliant comic writing and the sureness of its plotting – but Dickens in a letter to his great friend (later his biographer) John Forster emphasised another aspect. He described the 'pivot on which the story will turn' – the discovery of Pip's dark secret – as a 'grotesque tragi-comic conception'.[3] It is an important phrase, and one that points to an essential quality of the book – its ability to fuse together seemingly opposed qualities, in particular the serious and the comic, in grotesque and disturbing ways. The book is full of such scenes: when Pip (the central character if not necessarily the hero of the story) returns from his first visit to Miss Havisham's, he spins an extraordinary tale to his sister and his brother-in-law Joe, piling invention upon absurd invention. It is a very funny scene, not least in Joe's hope that at least some of Pip's lies might be true, but counterpointing the comedy is both the violence of Pip's sister, who boxes his ears and shakes her fist at him, and the psychological dislocation and distress that the visit has caused in him. The grotesquerie is there too in the little details of the book and the strangely disturbing creatures that inhabit the book, from 'the young man who wanted my heart and liver' in the opening chapter to the black beetles in Miss Havisham's room who 'groped about the hearth in a ponderous elderly way, as if they were short-sighted and hard of hearing, and not on terms with one another'.

1 *Saturday Review*, 20 July 1861, xii, p. 69, quoted in Philip Collins, *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1971, p. 427

2 Edwin P. Whipple, *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1861, viii, pp. 380–2, quoted in Philip Collins, op. cit., p. 428. E. S. Dallas, from an unsigned review, *The Times*, 17 October 1861, p. 6, quoted in Philip Collins, op. cit., p. 431

3 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, IX, iii, Chapman and Hall, London 1872–4, p. 567. On the grotesque in Dickens, see Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, Croom Helm, Beckenham 1984.

What contemporary critics, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not see were the ways in which *Great Expectations* refused to repeat the kinds of success that Dickens had already achieved. It is a brave and dangerous book, in which Dickens takes great risks with the material that had endeared him to the world and with some of the most cherished beliefs and ideals of modern society, in particular the belief in progress and the ability of an individual to shape his or her own destiny. We can see this clearly in the opening chapters, which are set at Christmas. Although they are scenes of eating and hospitality, they are not like a typical Dickens Christmas at all. On the contrary: Christmas Eve for Pip is a lonely and terrifying one, in which he visits the grave of his parents and his five dead brothers and is then forced to steal food from his sister and her husband to feed a starving, ragged convict on the marshes. During his Christmas dinner, Pip is consumed with guilt at his 'crime' and terrified of being found out. It is a world away from the celebratory, festive time for reconciliation and forgiveness that Dickens had made his own from his first book, *Sketches by Boz*, onwards. These scenes are the first of many that refuse to fulfil the reader's expectations as remorselessly as Pip's own expectations are unfulfilled, and in which Dickens treats in radically new ways some of the most important themes and ideas which had underpinned his earlier work.

These vivid early scenes of eating – the convict Magwitch 'handing mincemeat down his throat . . . more like a man who was putting it away somewhere in a violent hurry, than a man who was eating it' and Pip's comically miserable Christmas meal – are two of many in the book which dramatise and embody important aspects of the social relationships and moral qualities of its characters.[4] It is rare, for example, that food is given or received in an easy or selfless way in this book. More often it is used for snobbish or selfish reasons as a means of humiliating or hurting someone in a weaker position: Estella (with whom Pip is in love) feeds him 'as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace'; the dinners of the Finches of the Grove (a dining club to which Pip belongs) are the occasions for drunken quarrelling; Joe, when he visits Pip in his London lodgings, is unhappy and ill-at-ease among Pip's new-found gentility. At times the novel's use of food to enact moral differences or explore social relationships can carry a more symbolic purpose, of which the most spectacular is Miss Havisham's

4 See Barbara Hardy, 'Food and Ceremony in *Great Expectations*', in *The Moral Art of Dickens*, Athlone, London 1992, pp. 130–40, and Ian Watt, 'Oral Dickens', in *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3, 1974, pp. 165–81

long-decayed wedding breakfast, a symbol of her social isolation and of all that she has lost or forsaken. The use of food can also be very funny, as in Pip's unfortunate Christmas dinner ('A man needn't go far to find a subject, if he's ready with his salt-box.' Mr Pumblechook added . . . 'Look at Pork alone. There's a subject! If you want a subject, look at Pork!' p. 22) or the tender and comic scene where Herbert Pocket teaches the newly-enriched Pip some of the basics of etiquette: '. . . excuse my mentioning that society as a body does not expect one to be so strictly conscientious in emptying one's glass, as to turn it bottom upwards with the rim on one's nose' p. 145.

This is only one of the ways in which Dickens builds up the complex metaphoric and symbolic structures and texture of the book. Probably everyone notices the importance that the book gives to effects of light and dark. In the forge, on the marshes, in Miss Havisham's and in London, we find rich and complex effects of light and shadow, from the time when Estella (whose name, of course, means 'star') takes the candle away from Pip and leaves him alone outside Miss Havisham's door. As so often in the book, this moment is both a realistic detail and one capable of conjuring up the richer, metaphysical stage on which the action plays out. The cold and distant light that is represented by Estella is clearly contrasted to the warmth and glow of the fire at Joe's forge, but fire, which seems to follow Pip throughout the book, also appears in more sinister forms. Just as Dickens creates narrative complexity through 'grotesque, tragi-comic' effects, so he exploits the ability of symbols to be multivalent and ambiguous, as the very different fires that Pip encounters in his climactic scenes with Orlick and Miss Havisham show all too clearly.

But *Great Expectations* is much more than a symbolically rich novel. It is also a beautifully plotted one.[5] This might seem a strange thing to say, as, compared to many of Dickens's other novels, it has a fairly simple story, with few of the ingenious plot-twists that he is so adept at creating. Although the work has a complicated 'backstory' of crime and illegitimacy, *Great Expectations* gains the force of its plot from a brilliant concentration of effect, building to powerful and surprising climaxes. Aristotle, thinking of Sophocles' treatment of the Oedipus story, saw moments of reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) as central to its power. Like *Oedipus Rex*, *Great Expectations* has some stunning moments of revelation and recognition, which recast and

5 For a brilliant discussion of the plotting of *Great Expectations*, see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, Harvard University Press, 1984, pp. 113–42.

refigure Pip's life in profound ways. After his first meeting with Miss Havisham, for example, where he first meets Estella, Pip says in one of his most important reflections in the book, 'Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.' From now on, his life will never be the same again and the key words of his sentence – chain, iron, gold, bound – echo through the novel, on both literal and metaphorical levels, as the many different chains of Pip's life are forged and linked together.

Great Expectations is also a romance. Pip falls in love, or is made to fall in love, with Estella and this passion runs throughout his life. Their love-affair, if it can be called that, is part of the novel's concern with the force of desire in human life. The desires the book is concerned with – to be rich, to be loved, to be admired, to be happy – seem at first commonplace and normal enough, yet they have devastating effects on the lives of the characters, entangling them in pleasures that seem inseparable from pain. When Pip finally realises the futility of his passion for Estella, he returns to marry the faithful and true Biddy who seems to have been waiting the whole novel for Pip to see the error of his ways and return to claim her. This is a device that Dickens uses in both *Little Dorrit* and *David Copperfield*, to which *Great Expectations* has a very close relation. In those novels, Amy and Agnes wait calmly and patiently over many years for Arthur and David to realise their respective mistakes. Dickens, in one of his more surprising, almost shocking, scenes refuses this consolation to Pip and the reader, and creates a very different and more 'open' ending to the book. Miss Havisham too suffers for her desires, with a passion that can never be fulfilled and that binds her to an endless and impossible mourning in the book, both for her lover (who jilted her at the altar) and for herself, immured in a house that is like a tomb. She is the victim of a terrible trauma, which she condemns herself to repeat day after day, night after night, alone and friendless. As with many characters in the book, desire takes her not forward but backwards, in a futile attempt to restore what has been lost for ever. Pip, Estella, Magwitch, Miss Havisham, all the central characters of the story, find their destinies governed by events and deeds long past, out of their knowledge, and pitiless in their consequences. The closing line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* – 'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past' – could be the conclusion of this book too.[6]

6 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1950, p. 188

The world of Satis House, where Miss Havisham lives, is one of many significant spaces of the book, which are often as grotesque and ambivalent as the characters who inhabit them. Even London, which Dickens so often relishes and celebrates in his fiction, is, according to Pip, 'ugly, crooked, narrow, and dirty', a place where Newgate Prison and Jaggers's law office (in the significantly-named Little Britain) lie next to Smithfield meat market 'all asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam'. Although Miss Havisham's house is exactly where one might expect a semi-deranged woman to live – dark, miserable, decaying – it also seems like a place out of a fairy-tale or a Gothic novel, somewhere that comes from our deepest dreams and fancies. Pip believes for a long time that Miss Havisham is his fairy godmother, and that his own role in the story is to 'restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a-going and the cold hearths a-blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin – in short, do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess'. He is wrong, of course, and for much of the book is entrapped not in a fairy-tale, but within a much stranger and more uncanny story. Miss Havisham seems to him like 'some ghastly waxwork at the Fair', someone who looks human but who may not be, who seems to exist on the very margins of the human, like a vampire or a ghoul. Even the boundary between the living and the dead is not a reliable one. Pip sees 'the hands of the dead people stretching up cautiously out of their graves' to catch Magwitch as he flees in the first chapter, and wandering around the brewery at Miss Havisham's, he glimpses 'a figure hanging there by the neck . . . and . . . the face was Miss Havisham's, with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call to me'. Like a Gothic novel, this is a haunting and haunted book, where the dead call out to the living and stretch out their hands to bring them down.

Dickens is often thought to be a sentimental writer, but there is nothing sentimental about his treatment of human relationships or the relations of adults and children in this book. Much of the book is concerned with understanding how children manage to live on beyond the pain and psychological damage inflicted by those who should care for them. Pip is beaten by his sister, but more cruel is the psychological damage that Miss Havisham inflicts on him. When Estella says of Pip, 'Why, he is a common labouring-boy!' she replies, chillingly, 'Well? You can break his heart.' She makes Pip play for her with the cold command, 'I sometimes have sick fancies . . . and I have a sick fancy that I want to see some play . . . play, play, play!' The relations between adults are often nakedly aggressive battles of wills, with both sides

determined to dominate: Miss Havisham is, like so many other people in this book, a victim who is also a bully. Magwitch, another victim and oppressor, tells Pip that if he disobeys him 'your heart and your liver shall be tore out, roasted and ate' and even the mild Herbert Pocket, the 'pale young gentleman', challenges Pip to a fight the minute they meet. Much of this violence is directed at, or stems from, women: Pip's sister, who is always hitting Pip and Joe, is brutally attacked herself; Jaggers speculates that Estella's future husband may 'turn to, and beat her' after the marriage; when Pip, late in the novel, tries to put out the fire that is engulfing Miss Havisham, they find themselves 'on the ground struggling like desperate enemies'.

Violence, or the threat of it, is ever-present in the book, but particularly in the scenes that explore the law and crime. Throughout his life, Dickens had a peculiarly intimate relationship with the law and the legal apparatus. When he was a boy of twelve or so, his father was imprisoned for debt and he was taken away from school to work in a rat-infested blacking warehouse. It was a secret which he kept from everyone (with the exception of his friend John Forster and perhaps also his wife Kate), but it gave him a most vivid and personal sense of the power of the law to destroy or transform human lives for the worse. In the majority of his novels, the law is portrayed as foolish at best, malicious and deadly at worst. Lawyers in Dickens's work, such as the obnoxious Dodson and Fogg in *Pickwick Papers*, or the blackmailing Tulkinghorn and deathly Vholes in *Bleak House*, are rarely treated with much sympathy, but it is, typically, more complex and surprising here. Jaggers and his clerk Wemmick may be Dickens's most subtle exploration of lives lived under the shadow of the law. Whereas Jaggers gains much of his power from never letting his guard slip, never leaving his job behind, Wemmick divides his life in two, gradually losing his 'work' character as he gets nearer to his suburban castle at Walworth. Jaggers, by contrast, is incapable of having a conversation or discussion without making it also a cross-examination. The aggression that lies behind his technique of firing questions at people without giving away any of his own views drives Joe to an uncharacteristic outburst of anger ('which I meantersay . . . that if you come into my place bull-baiting and badgering me, come out! Which I meantersay if as sech if you're a man, come on! Which I meantersay that what I say, I meantersay and stand or fall by!'), but the habit of cross-examination seems to be infectious in the book: Magwitch, Mrs Joe, Jaggers and the odious Pumblechook all cross-examine Pip at one time or another and he in turn cross-examines Miss Havisham, Magwitch, Estella and Orlick. It is as if the

characters of the novel feel themselves to be constantly on trial, and this leads to a pervasive feeling of guilt in Pip from the first page of the novel onwards. Guilt of course has at least two meanings – it is both a psychological state, a matter of private thoughts and feelings ('I feel guilty'), and a public judgment, enforced through the law ('We find the prisoner guilty'). Dickens plays on the two senses of the idea throughout the book. When the soldiers arrive at the forge in search of the escaped convict, Pip believes (and Dickens makes us believe, if only for a moment) that they are, absurdly, in search of Pip. When his sister is found mysteriously assaulted, he believes himself again to be mysteriously guilty, and even when he is apprenticed, a perfectly everyday event, he is treated 'exactly as if I had that moment picked a pocket or fired a rick'.

Biddy tells Pip at one point that 'a gentleman should not be unjust neither' and questions of judgment and the law are at the centre of *Great Expectations*, as is the recognition of the simultaneous necessity and difficulty of being just to others. What would a just judgment be on Estella, Magwitch, Miss Havisham or, indeed, Pip himself? Our judgments on Pip are made particularly complicated by the fact that he is not only the most important character in the novel, but also its narrator. In novels like *Bleak House* or *A Tale of Two Cities* (the immediate precursor of *Great Expectations*) much of the force of the novels comes from the power and individuality of the narrator who often seems the most important character in the book. *Great Expectations* is not really like this, nor does it resemble Dickens's other major novel with a first-person narrator, *David Copperfield*. Whereas we gain a strong sense of the David Copperfield who is telling the story as well as the younger self who is experiencing it, Pip is a subdued, almost melancholy, presence in his own tale – a master-narrator to be sure but one whose force comes not from self-assertion but self-effacement. He does not seek to dominate the events of the book, or to make us think better of him than he deserves; on the contrary, he allows its readers to see his selfishness, vanity and mistakes in all clarity. Nineteenth-century novels typically work by playing on our mixed feelings about their characters – our urge to sympathise with them on the one hand, and to judge or condemn them on the other. It is part of the brilliance of this particular novel that Dickens can mobilise such strongly competing feelings about the central characters of the book. Pip in particular behaves so shabbily at times that he tests our sympathy to its limits, and yet our sense that he is trapped in a complex web of other people's desires and needs prevents us from making any simple judgment or condemnation of him.

The law saturates *Great Expectations* and dominates Pip's life, but so too does the force of class difference. We can see this most clearly at Miss Haversham's, where Estella's contempt for him makes him determined to be a gentleman. Yet it is striking how little happiness Pip's good fortune and gentility brings, how little pleasure comes with money and status. Pip's new home in London, for example, is 'the dingiest collection of shabby buildings ever squeezed together in a rank corner as a club for Tom-cats . . . a melancholy little square that looked to me like a flat burying-ground.' His life, instead of moving onwards and upwards, seems in the centre of the book simply to stand still and his wealth simply results in more debt and more unhappiness. But it is not just in Pip's life that class matters. As we move through the novel we encounter several other characters whose lives have been tainted by class difference and the injustices that it produces, particularly in the remarkable forty-second chapter, where Pip and Dickens hand over the narration of their stories to Magwitch, and we see Pip's life and that of the respectable people of the book from the perspective of someone who has been 'in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail' all his life. This is one of the most important reversals of perspective in the novel, akin to the moment in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* when the monster is at last allowed to tell his own story. Indeed Dickens explicitly draws attention to this parallel when Pip says, '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.' Here, Pip is made to seem both like Frankenstein and his monster, both creator and created, both hunter and hunted, and so too is Magwitch.

Through Magwitch, *Great Expectations* is also a novel about empire and colonialism. At the end of *David Copperfield*, Dickens shipped off many of the characters to Australia to begin a new life, simply as a convenient way of disposing of surplus or awkward individuals. In *Great Expectations*, the reverse movement occurs, not out from the imperial core to the colonised periphery but back from Australia to London and the life of the genteel middle-classes, where Magwitch erupts within Pip's life like a volcano. Magwitch is in some ways the most bold and dangerous invention of the novel. He is a not just a convict, but also, as he tells Pip, his 'second father', who seems to appear out of a grave at the beginning of the book. He seems to Pip like a dead pirate 'come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again', but also strangely like an animal and a machine, with a noise in his throat 'as if he had works in him like a clock'. It is this disturbing uncertainty that accounts for the fascination he exercises and the compassion he arouses, not just in Pip, but in many readers and writers too, of which perhaps

the most interesting example is Peter Carey's brilliant rewriting of the *Great Expectations* story in his novel *Jack Maggs*.[7]

In many of his other novels Dickens wants to believe that romantic relationships, particularly marriage, can provide a haven from the conflicts and violence that exist outside the home. Here, he is courageous enough to explore the violence and cruelty within the family. The first marriage we see in the book – that of Joe and Pip's sister – is saturated with aggression and violence, as later is that of Estella and Drummle. The most fearsome of the destructive characters in the book is the mysteriously named Dolge Orlick, whom we first meet at the forge and who at first seems quite marginal to Pip's story, but who, as Pip and we learn too late, is in fact his dark double. He is consumed by the destructive emotions of envy, resentment and malice and for one terrifying moment, gains the power of life and death over Pip. Yet Pip survives Orlick's assault, partly by chance, partly through the good sense and courage of his friends. For *Great Expectations* is, at least in part, a book about surviving, about Pip's and Estella's ability to live on beyond the traumas inflicted upon them. Although the novel has a deeply unillusioned understanding of human motives and behaviour, a bleak knowledge of the hurts that people can inflict on one another, it also has space to create plausible representations of generosity and goodness. Virtue exists in many places in the book: in Biddy and Herbert, in Wemmick (who keeps his ability to do good despite the taint of the Old Bailey and Newgate), even in Miss Havisham and Jaggers. Pip, too, for all his faults, does not betray or exploit the man who has made him what he is, but it is in Joe, above all, that we see virtue thrive. Like Pip and Magwitch, Joe was abused in his childhood (he and his mother were beaten by Joe's drunken father) but he lives on, to adopt Pip as a child and later nurse him back to life, and throughout the book to assert the power of human solidarity and compassion: when he finds that the convict has stolen his food, he simply says, 'God knows you're welcome to it . . . we wouldn't have you starved to death for it, poor miserable fellow-creatur.'

One of the most discussed parts of the novel is its ending. The version that was printed in the first edition, and the majority of subsequent ones, was in fact the product of Dickens's second thoughts. His friend Bulwer Lytton, the novelist, had advised him to revise it and, perhaps surprisingly, Dickens did so. Since the reprinting of the 'original' ending in Forster's *Life of Dickens*, critics have debated the merits of the

7 Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs*, Faber and Faber, London 1998

two versions.[8] The 'first' version is in some ways a more bleak one, in which Pip and Estella briefly meet by chance in a London street and part. Although Estella tells Pip that she is 'greatly changed', it is in sharp contrast to the majority of Dickens's endings, which often have scenes of familial happiness and the creation of a new generation freed from the mistakes and errors of the past. Here, Dickens creates a deliberately low-key conclusion in which there is no hope that Pip and Estella can pick up the threads of their romance or return to the past. The 'revised' version is longer and more complex than the original although it too avoids simple consolation and wish-fulfilment. Pip and Estella meet in the grounds of Satis House and it seems as if they are reconciled: 'I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place . . . '. But the final phrase of the novel is both uncertain in itself, and made more so by the fact that Dickens revised it in a slight but important way. In the first published version, Pip says, 'I saw the shadow of no parting from her.' In later editions, this is subtly changed to, 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her.' There are several ways that we could interpret these lines. Should we emphasise the words 'no parting' and assume, as some adaptations of the book have done, that Pip and Estella will live happily ever after, freed from the burdens and constraints of the past? Or should we emphasise the words 'I saw'? Pip has not been the best of prophets in this novel, and has been consistently wrong about his future prospects. Is the seeming reconciliation with Estella merely his last illusion, another great expectation that will turn to nothing? It is, perhaps, for the reader to decide. However we interpret the conclusion, or which of the several revisions we prefer, it seems appropriate that Pip's story should end in 'shadow' – whether we believe that it is the shadow of parting, or no parting.

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8 For an excellent (and exhaustive) treatment of the various endings, see the Norton edition of the novel, edited by Edgar Rosenberg, Norton, New York 1999, pp. 491–527.

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