

OTRAS LITERATURAS

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: CREATIVE MYTHOLOGY IN DICKENS

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ABSTRACT

Dickens both chronicled and criticized the social tumult of the Victorian period in *Great Expectations*. By approaching this work from a mythic perspective, however, the universality of this "typically Victorian" novel is clearly seen, while the art of Dickens' personal rendition of collective realities is underscored.

Victorian society was particularly susceptible to the charms of fairy-tale philosophy. Regardless of the discrepancies between professed beliefs and daily living, the Victorian social code was founded on strict principles of moral rectitude, religious certainty that prosperity was a sign of divine approval, the primacy of "respectability", and the sublimation of instinct and intuition in favor of more tangible phenomena. The social goals of marriage and lucrative success, however unrealistic and superficial, were accompanied by the kind of wishful thinking endemic to day-dreams and fantasy. While not unaware of evil lurking in the background, Victorians lived the illusion of just rewards and happily-ever-after finality. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of Victorian fiction deals with the characters and themes of folktales and fairy tales: ogres, monsters, fairy godmothers, princesses, impossible quests, ugly ducklings and Cinderellas, royalty and divinity in disguise, wicked witches, and spirits in general. In *Great Expectations* Dickens uses the patterns of folktale to present universal experiences of mankind.

These patterns of folklore derive from sources even more ancient. The stereotypes of folklore have their origin in the archetypes of mythology. Jung describes archetypes as creative manifestations of countless typical human experiences, which, when evoked by the artist, transform individual destiny into the destiny of all humanity¹. The universal appeal of myth (which includes both religion and folklore) springs from our inevitable identification with the timeless images they contain. Myth is a creative attempt to deal with the

mysteries of life, and in its broadest application it represents a search for meaning and identity both on individual and collective levels.

The fundamental myth from which the other archetypal motifs arise is the quest for identity and self-fulfillment, the journey of a lifetime. Traditionally the mythic hero sets out on a specific quest, in search of the Holy Grail or the Golden Fleece, for example. His journey is fraught with seemingly insurmountable difficulties-tremendous obstacles, terrible monsters, great temptations, impossible tasks-symbolic of the crises all humans face during their lives. Although he may be aided or hindered by others along his way, he holds sole responsibility for the completion of his quest. Ideally, the hero achieves his goal and returns home to share his accomplishment and reap the benefits. Symbolically, what the hero finds is "the God within himself", an identity, and what he shares upon his return is increased understanding and acceptance of himself and others, a regenerating enlightenment of universal oneness².

The forms and ramifications of the quest myth are as varied as the human population. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens presents it in the form of a *Bildungsroman*, a formation novel. Because the education of the hero necessarily takes place within society, this choice of genre provides a natural framework for the social criticism fundamental to Dickens' writing. The development of industrialism revolutionized all aspects of society, producing monumental social changes which in turn triggered moral and psychological upheaval. Roles, responsibilities, and values once

clearly defined became obscured. The traditional juxtaposition of "good" and "bad" acquired an ambivalence which reflected the social agitation of the period. The journey of the "hero" is thus further complicated by the lack of guidelines and collective guidance. Dickens is one of the first major English authors to penetrate the effects of industrialism on the individual and the society, making his heroes the predecessors to the twentieth century existential heroes. His writing is an illustration of "creative mythology", Campbell's term for the uniquely individual vision which is the ineluctable result of an invalidated collective vision.

In broad terms, the major stages of the *Bildungsroman* parallel the predictable periods of the human life cycle: childhood (innocence), adolescence and young adulthood (acquisition of experience), and maturity (reconciliation). Thus the mythic and thematic content of the novel provide the structural basis as well. *Great Expectations* is divided into three major sections which correspond to the life cycle divisions and whose designation as "stages" is conscious evocation of the symbolic content of the novel. The title of the novel is also imbued with multiple connotations: "great expectations" refer not only to the social ambitions of Pip and his family and friends, but also to the unfulfilled potential of each child as he begins his personal odyssey, both as an individual and as a member of his society.

The crucial underlying theme deals with the quality and variety of expectations of the principal characters of the novel. Joe's expectations, unvoiced but implicit in his actions and attitudes, arise from a loving concern for others, tolerance, and selflessness. Realist that he is, Joe expects nothing more than to be accepted as he is. Jaggers expects faults and failures and shows no leniency toward human weakness or subjection, which constitutes his own major limitation. The expectations of Mrs. Joe and the Marsh group, with the exception of Joe and Bidley, are materialistic and self-serving; they see Pip only as an extension of themselves and as a means of improving their own lives. Miss Havisham and Estella are the most pathetic of the major characters precisely because they have no true expectations; they are too emotionally barren to engender hope and illusions. The surprisingly similar expectations of Pip and Magwitch, measured against Joe's "gentle manliness" and Jaggers' "gentlemanliness", are the essence of both the plot and the significance of the novel.

Stage One of the novel, corresponds to the initial phase of the life cycle, childhood. Like the traditional mythic hero, Pip is an orphan, bereft of the guidance and security parents provide. His life, while hardly idyllic, is one of rustic simplicity, and his being is amalgamated with his environment. His "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things"³, including his discovery of selfhood, is immediately followed by his encounter with the convict Magwitch and the subsequent terrible necessity of making an independent decision of great consequence between two unacceptable options. Self-preservation prompts him to help Magwitch, but the incident initiates his exchange of innocence for awareness. His consciousness of wrongdoing causes the first rupture in his relationship with Joe, intruding on their "freemasonry as fellowsuffers" (p. 9). His confession that he was "too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong" (p. 37) reveals the beginnings of moral conscience which is reinforced by his admission that having had "no intercourse with the world at that time,... I made the discovery in the line of action for myself" (p. 37). Thus the "untaught genius" of natural innocence painfully commences the process of maturation, unaware that the chance meeting on the marshes would alter his life.

The second significant episode of Stage One of Pip's life is his discovery of the world beyond the marshes. Pip's visits to Satis House, where he is confronted with the beautiful Estella (the temptress and fairy princess), the tortured Miss Havisham (the false fairy godmother), and the withered splendor of the house itself, create immediate turmoil in his sense of values and perspective, until that time unquestioned. Estella instigates in Pip an awareness of the concept of commonness, based on externals such as manners, language, and clothing. So potent is her disdain that within a year of exposure to the new, enlarged world, Pip is thoroughly dissatisfied with his home life and environment. His belief in the forge "as the glowing road to manhood and independence", his home, Bidley, Joe's manners, himself -all now seem to him to be "coarse and common" (p. 99). Admiration for Estella inspires Pip's desire to be a "gentleman" in order to be "worthy" of her. Neither Joe's loving protests that Pip is indeed "oncommon" nor Bidley's astute remarks and gentle support deter him from his chosen

course. But struggle as he will to ignore it, Pip's incipient conscience does bother him; he is conscious of being in a "disturbed and unthankful state", behaving like "a young monster" to Joe and irritated by a vague feeling that he is not doing Bidley justice.

Pip is caught between two worlds and feels at home in neither. The familiar world of the marshes, seen from the perspective of "gentleman's" values, is inadequate and constrictive. Yet Pip feels guilty for rejecting it without sound justification. This guilt, combined with his guilt over helping Magwitch and indirectly contributing to his sister's predicament, adds to the attraction of a larger world. The arrival of Jaggers, with the astounding announcement that Pip is the recipient of a great deal of money to be employed in educating him as a gentleman, is the turning point of the novel. Pip delights in the transformation of his "wildest fancy" into reality, reveling in his "first decided experience of the stupendous power of money" which "morally laid upon his back Trabb's boy" (p. 142). This mixture of money and morality brings to the surface the basic polarity in *Great Expectations*: human values versus social values. Jaggers, who represents society, pronounces Pip "a young fellow of great expectation" (p. 129), implying that money gives him the worth which he lacked as a blacksmith's apprentice. The older, wiser Pip who narrates the story wryly perceives that, "Dissatisfied with my fortune, of course I could not be; but it is possible that I may have been, without quite knowing it, dissatisfied with myself" (p. 135). Thus Pip sets forth with trepidation but anticipation into the new world.

Pip's assumption that Miss Havisham is his benefactress fuels his hopes of indeed fulfilling great expectations, for his new status seems to indicate her choice of Pip for Estella as well. Pip, on the edge of childhood, still lives within a world of fantasy, which his youthful contacts with characters like Magwitch, Estella, and Miss Havisham reinforce; so his assumption that his personal "fairy godmother" is responsible for his "magic transformation" is easily understood. Magwitch, his real benefactor, has risen from imprisonment to wealth, and chooses to repay Pip's early charity to him by giving him a similar opportunity. Experienced in the ways of the world, Magwitch knows money and "proper education" are the keys to social acceptance, but his moral naïveté is as great as Pip's, resulting in his belief that one's social status connotes worthiness.

Both Pip and Magwitch reveal considerable short-sightedness in their aspirations, seeing only material advantages while ignoring consequences.

Stage Two of *Great Expectations* elucidates Pip's formal education as a gentleman, which corresponds to the acquisition of experience of the traditional mythic hero. Exposure to temptation and expansion of worldly knowledge are necessary steps towards self-definition, for the concept of self is shaped by external as well as internal discovery. The first section of the novel contemplates what Pip is not, while the second phase deals more directly with what Pip is or is in the process of becoming. Besides providing the necessary contrast to the child Pip and his environment, the London setting provides Dickens with the opportunity to criticize both the social and moral shortcomings of Victorian society.

Pip's introduction to London is a great disappointment, or as he prefers to describe it, an "imperfect realization" of his expectations. His refusal to accept the reality of London is concomitant to his blind devotion to Estella, whom he loves "against reason, against promise,... against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be" (p. 217). He readily acknowledges that she is the cause of his "ill-regulated aspirations" to money and gentility, of his self-deception, of his "gay fiction" of enjoying his London life. Nevertheless, unwilling to give up his fantasies, regardless of Estella's blunt declaration that she is heartless, he still seeks to "do all the shining deeds of the young knight of romance, and marry the princess" (p. 217). To please her, he acquires the dress, speech, and manners of a gentleman, and in the process also absorbs the profligate habits of one "not designed for any profession" other than that of associating with other "young men in prosperous circumstances" (p. 183).

Pip never entirely surrenders to self-indulgence; rather, he never completely succeeds in ignoring his qualms of conscience. He admits that, once accustomed to his expectations, "[their influence on my own character I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very well my that it was not all good" (p. 254). He feels acutely uncomfortable with Joe and rationalizes his behavior towards him; yet at the core of his discomfort lies the knowledge that Joe "ever did his duty in his way of life, with a strong hand, a quiet tongue, and a gentle heart" (p. 265),

in contrast to Pip's own prevarication. Joe is wiser and more sincere. As he tries to explain it to Pip, "...I want to be right... I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th' meshes. You won't find half so much fault in me if you think of me in my forge..." (p. 209). The point is not that Joe "knows his place", but that he knows and accepts himself as he is. Pip, on the other hand, lives "in a state of chronic uneasiness" and feels his influence is "not beneficial to anybody..." (p. 254). Pip's dissatisfaction with himself goes beyond the natural doubts of a young adult in the process of maturation. Dickens implies that acquired social values impose upon natural goodness, creating a breach which is virtually impossible to reconcile. The only apparent exception to this within the novel is Herbert Pocket, while the most outrageous illustration is Wemmick, whose private and public lives are scrupulously divorced.

Pip's ambivalence becomes acutely problematic with the unwelcome disclosure that the convict Magwitch is his patron. When Magwitch goes to Pip's rooms upon arriving in London to express his gratitude for Pip's past "noble" act, Pip is repulsed and barely able to be civil, insisting that their "circumstances" have changed and renewed association is undesirable. He does not want to be reminded of his childish criminality or his past ties. Magwitch, acting upon the binds of a more profound affinity, reveals his secret:

I've made a gentleman on you! It's me wot has done it!... I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard that you should be above work... Do I tell it fur you to feel a obligation?

Not a bit. I tell it fur you to know as that there hunted dunghill dog wot you kep life in his head so high that he could make a gentleman -and, Pip, you're him! (p. 298)

Magwitch declares himself to be Pip's "second father" because of his dedication and self-sacrifice. As he revels in his vicarious triumph over circumstance, Pip can only respond with "abhorrence", "dread", and "repugnance". The implications of Magwitch's speech are overwhelmingly apparent to Pip: not only has he profited materially from the convict, he also shares his guilt. Pip is therefore forced into the ordeal of enduring the agent responsible for the very fastidiousness which evokes such repulsion.

The climax of the novel develops from two agonizing moral burdens which Pip can no longer avoid. The first is his duty towards Magwitch, "the wretched man, [who] after lading [Pip] with

his wretched gold and silver chains for years, has risked his life to come to [him]" (p. 301). In spite of the convict's assertion to the contrary and against his own will, Pip feels obliged to accept responsibility for him. But "the sharpest and deepest pain of all" is his desolate realization that he has deserted Joe for the convict and all he represents. This is the greatest trial in Pip's life journey. Faced with the consequences of his behavior, his fantasy finally collapses and he is forced to recognize his failings. The stripping away of delusions and subsequent confrontation with reality is a fundamental requisite for the mythic hero as well as for the individual if he is to successfully complete his quest. Pip's conscious choice of society's version of gentlemanly values has alienated him from a deeper strata of self and distorted his vision of the world. His sudden insight into his own character abruptly terminates the second phase of his great expectations.

In the third stage of Pip's great adventure the symbolic nature of his experiences is reinforced by three decisive scenes of ritual cleansing or purification which precede spiritual renewal. Cognizant that his dream of marrying Estella was based on nothing more substantial than his erroneous assumptions and fabrications, he returns to Satis House to finalize his relations with its inhabitants. He takes his leave of Estella with an impassioned declaration that she has been "the embodiment of every graceful fancy" (p. 338) and will forever remain a part of him for the good she has done him. Estella remains unmoved, but Miss Havisham, suffering the effects of her own handiwork with Estella, is belatedly repentant. Pip readily forgives her, aware that "in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences" (p. 370) in much the same way Pip alienated himself from Joe and Biddy. Just before he leaves, Miss Havisham's garments catch fire, but when Pip endeavors to save her from the flames, she struggles frantically. This is the first of ritual scenes. The fire, traditionally an element of purification as well as destruction, destroys the remnants of their past, leaving Miss Havisham seriously maimed. Pip emerges from the battle wounded, but free to proceed with his Herculean task.

Having accepted responsibility for Magwitch, Pip now concentrates on contriving to effect the convict's escape from England. One by one, he has taken what steps he could to expiate his "blind

and thankless" life. With great satisfaction, he makes arrangements to secure Herbert's business capital. He also decides it would be "heartless fraud" to continue using the convict's money because of his own ambivalent feelings toward him, although he keeps his decision to himself. Putting aside his personal worries about present debts and future plans, Pip takes the convict up the river in an attempt to rendezvous with a foreign steamer, but they are intercepted. The boats collide, and the occupants are thrown overboard. Again Pip goes through a cleansing rite, this time a symbolic baptism, for although Magwitch is greatly injured and the escape aborted, Pip emerges from the experience spiritually renewed. As they travel back to London, where Magwitch will be held for trial, Pip unbegrudgingly acknowledges his debt to the convict:

...when I took my place by Magwitch's side, I felt that that was my place henceforth while he lived. For now 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... I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe (p. 415).

Pip is shedding his learned behavior, revealing and refining his innate empathy. As he learns to recognize and accept both the positive and negative aspects of himself and those with whom he comes into contact, he progressively approaches the knowledge and self-definition which constitute maturity, as his willingness to sacrifice his own pleasure to increase that of others demonstrates. Pip has learned that by contributing to the fulfillment of others' needs he is also benefiting himself.

The final episode of ritual cleansing in Pip's odyssey from childhood to maturity is the fever-induced delirium he suffers after Magwitch's death. Joe's selfless vigil during his illness purges Pip of the last of his pride and egoism and gives him the courage to ask Joe's forgiveness. Ironically Pip, who upon arriving in London declared he would have paid to keep Joe from visiting if it had been possible, now searches him out for the solace of "the wealth of his great nature" so abundantly and generously bestowed (p. 434). Pip has finally acquired the vision to "see" the primacy of internal

values. As he approaches Joe and Biddy, it is with "a sense of leaving arrogance and untruthfulness further and further behind" (p. 443), and an enlightened appreciation of their simple human worth.

Pip has survived the challenges of his quest - the illusions, the temptations, the obstacles- and it has indeed been a difficult journey:

...such a change had come to pass that I felt like one who was toiling home barefoot from distant travel, and whose wanderings had lasted many years (p. 444).

The final reunion with Estella, eleven years later, suggests the possibility of an appropriate fairy-tale ending. More significantly, however, it strengthens the message of the novel: Pip, having overcome his personal, circumstantial, and social limitations, has finally matured into an individual of truly great expectations.

Great Expectation is much more than a Victorian fairy tale. In this novel Dickens has employed the modern ambiance of a society in transition to express the timeless reality of the human condition. In Dickensian mythopoeia, Pip's odyssey creatively illustrates man's eternal quest for identity and significance in his life.

NOTES

1. Carl Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry", in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), pp. 320-21.
2. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 20.
3. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 1. All further references to this work appear in the text.
4. Paul Pickrel, "Great Expectations", in *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 166.
5. Barbara Hardy, "The Change of Heart in Dickens's Novels", in *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 51.
6. Geoffrey Thurley, *The Dickens Myth: Its Genesis and Structure* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 300.

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