

Historical Background of *Great Expectations*

THE CORN LAWS

Between 1815 – 1846, Parliament had enacted a series of laws strictly regulating the import of foreign corn (a general name used for all grains) until domestic (British) corn reached a particular price.

The laws exceedingly favored the wealthy landowners who were profiting from the artificially high cost of corn produced on their land (and from the subsequent increase in the value of their land). However, the laws were disastrous for the poor, especially the urban poor, who found themselves barely able to afford bread and other grain products. By ripple effect, as the poor and working classes found the greater proportion of their wages going to food, they had less money for other goods. Manufacturing suffered, and factory owners found themselves laying off workers. These newly unemployed workers were less able to buy food, or other goods, and the British economy spiraled toward depression until 1846 when the Corn Laws were finally repealed.

SOCIAL CLASS AND THE GENTLEMAN

The nineteenth century in England was a time of rapid, often confusing, and occasionally violent social change. While wealth had traditionally been measured by land ownership, the eighteenth century had begun a trend toward a cash-based economy, and the industrial revolution created a middle class that was in many ways more economically powerful than their landowning superiors.

As the economic power of the middle class grew, so too did its demand for political power. With the increase in political influence then came the demand for social acceptance. The concept of the gentleman had to evolve and became, by mid-century, a confusing ideal for the Victorians themselves.

On the one hand, a gentleman was a gentleman by right of birth. Still, the highly moral Victorians were quick to point out that birth alone could not make a gentleman. There had to be something in the man's character that contributed to his status.

Wealthy industrialists claimed the right to be called gentlemen by virtue of their economic and new political power. Clergy of the Church of England, military officers, and members of Parliament were regarded as gentlemen by virtue of their occupations. Ironically, while those who practiced certain occupations were eligible for gentleman status, others, like engineers, were not. Note how Pip and Herbert talk about Miss Havisham's father having been a brewer and a gentleman, while a baker would never be a gentleman.

There was also such a strong moral component to the ideal of the gentleman that the Victorians themselves found it difficult to define. When Pip is adopted by his benefactor and sent to London to become a gentleman, it is appropriately ambiguous what it is he is to become. If we compare Pip with Herbert Pocket, Matthew Pocket, Bentley Drummle, and finally with Joe Gargery we begin to suspect where Dickens's sympathies lay.

THE HULKS AND TRANSPORTATION OF CONVICTS

The Hulks were large ships without masts, which had been used in battle but had been retired and fitted out for the housing of male convicts awaiting transportation to the colonies. These floating prisons were moored near a dockyard or arsenal in order to utilize the labor of the convicts. Most Hulks were moored on the Thames at Woolwvch or at Portsmouth. The practice began in the 1770's and continued until 1856, four years before the writing of *Great Expectations*. Conditions on these floating jails were allegedly wretched, with disease and death rampant.

Despite numerous outcries to reform the system and build new prisons, the British government instead continued to search for new places to send her convicts. This transportation was a common way of dealing with England's worst offenders. Convicts were routinely transported to the British colonies in America (until the Revolutionary War) and then to Australia and Tasmania. The sentence was occasionally for a specified period of time, seven years for example, but increasingly the sentence would be for life.

The conditions for the transported convicts were similar to those for slaves being shipped to America. Many died during the four to six-month journey, and many more were ill or dying when they arrived in the colony. Those who survived were set to work as servants or laborers for the settlers. Some transported convicts were able to work hard, save money, and become settlers themselves or return to England. Those who failed to be reformed, however, were sent to penal colonies where they were chained, whipped, and set to hard labor for the rest of their lives.

Eventually, however, transportation of convicts became expensive, and the legal settlers complained about having to receive the criminals. The British government then began to look at other ways of dealing with convicts, and a new period of penal reform and prison construction began.

PIP AND SOCIAL STRUGGLE

As was the case with many novels written during the second half of the nineteenth century, *Great Expectations* presents a panoramic view of social life. Dickens provides his readers with characters from the full social spectrum: Joe, Mrs. Joe, Orlick, and Bidley from the working class; Pumblechook, the Pockets, Jaggers, Wemmick, Wopsle from the middle class; and Havisham, Estella, Drummle, and Startop from the upper class—with a few of the Pockets having upper-class pretensions as well. Dickens also affords his readers a view of the criminal classes through Magwitch, Molly, and Compeyson.

The action of the novel allows Pip to move through all of these spheres, beginning in the working class, brought up in the forge and apprenticed to a blacksmith; rising to the upper class of independent fortune; and settling to a relatively happy and fulfilled life in the middle class where he works "pretty hard for a sufficient living."

LITERATURE AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The industrial revolution created a whole new class of wealthy and powerful individuals—factory owners and their investors. Thus wives who a generation before would have spent their days toiling to prepare meals and keep a clean house, now found themselves well able to afford domestic help and in need of things to fill their leisure hours. At the same time, advancements in technology increased the speed and decreased the cost at which reading materials could be printed. Improvements in the rail system made transport of printed materials easier.

The stage was set for the flourishing of a new literary form: the novel, ideally suited to people who had time to read, who lacked classical University educations, and who longed for entertainment.

With writers like Dickens, the Brontës, and Mrs. Gaskell to perfect the infant genre, the novel truly came into its own during the nineteenth century.

For the Victorians, the modern distinction between the literary novel and the popular best seller had not yet developed. The novels of the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy were read not merely by a literary elite, but widely throughout the expanding middle class and by the working class as well. This wide readership was aided by new methods of presentation and distribution. Early in the century, Dickens pioneered publication in inexpensive separate parcels, and the practice was followed throughout the century. Then, the novel usually appeared in a three-volume edition, a three-decker, that readers borrowed from private lending libraries. Eventually, the three-deckers were made available in less expensive form; cheap editions and railway editions, the equivalent of modern paperbacks, were distributed through national chains of booksellers, and finally in more expensive collected editions.

THE TIMING OF THE BOOK

Dickens carefully inserts details throughout the narrative to suggest that the events described are very much in the past. For example, since the one-pound notes mentioned in Chapter 10 were out of circulation from 1826 until 1915, the story must open prior to 1826. Since the death sentence, which hangs over Magwitch as a transported felon, was eliminated in 1835, and since the very end of the story transpires eleven years after Magwitch's death, Dickens concludes the story no later than 1846.

Paddle-wheeler boats, a type of which mortally wounds Magwitch, were replaced by the screw-propeller in 1839, thereby reinforcing an ending date some time in the mid-1840s. The gibbet specifically noted at the opening reflects the practice, abandoned in 1832, of leaving condemned criminals to rot where they were hanged.

The king mentioned at the beginning of the novel is George III, who died in 1820, when Pip was seven or eight. Chapter 39 opens a week after Pip's 23rd birthday, so he is thirty-four at the end of the book in 1846. Thus, although the book was written in 1860, Dickens has arranged the scope of the novel to coincide with his own childhood and early adulthood.

Literary Features of *Great Expectations*

THE SERIALIZATION OF THE NOVEL

Dickens originally published *Great Expectations* serially in his magazine *All the Year Round*. The first weekly installment of two chapters appeared on December 1, 1860. The 36th and final installment appeared August 3, 1861. This time delay between chapters or episodes influenced the construction of the novel in several ways:

- The parts had to be similar in length and overall proportionate effect.
- Each part needed its own dramatic or compelling effect: a mini-climax, a point of rest, or an element of suspense, to maintain interest in reading the next installment.
- Characters needed to be highly idiosyncratic to make them easily memorable and identifiable. These idiosyncrasies may include speech, action, physical appearance, or name.

To maintain reader interest from one week to the next, Dickens ended each weekly installment with a note of suspense. For example:

- Chapter 2 (the end of the first installment) ends with Pip's stealing the food and the file from Joe's forge and running to the marshes to meet the convict.
 - Chapter 4 (the end of the second installment) ends with the discovery of the stolen pork pie imminent and Pip's running away into the arms of soldiers with their muskets and handcuffs.
- Chapter 7 (the end of the third installment) ends with Pip's leaving the Forge to meet Miss Havisham for the first time. Note also the foreshadowing—Pip's emotional leaving of Joe, ostensibly connected with Miss Havisham and Pumblechook.

CARICATURES, STEREOTYPES, AND CONVENTIONS

While many of Dickens's characters seem exaggerated and outlandish, by comparison, they allow the relatively flat main characters to seem normal. Static characters like Joe—unfailing in his goodness—and Miss Havisham—equally unfailing in her bitterness—emphasize Pip's change from contented lad, to social climber, to regretful adult.

Dickens adapted several of the devices of the late eighteenth-century's Gothic novel:

- the eerie setting—the church yard in Chapter 1, Satis House;
- the child or young woman in danger—Pip in Chapter 1, Estella as the prisoner of Miss Havisham's upbringing;
- the evil and deformed monster—Magwitch in Chapter 1;
- the reclusive and villainous aristocrat—Miss Havisham; and so on.

Some other popular literary conventions of his time that Dickens employs effectively include:

- the poor orphan buffeted from home to home and parent-figure to parent-figure;
- the reclusive woman in white;
- the mysterious benefactor;
- unrequited love;
- the country as the seat of morality and happiness, the city as the seat of corruption and despair;
- clarity of thought resulting from sickness and madness;

- the noble savage, kindly criminal, lovable louse;
- mists, moonlight, and ruins.

THE FIRST-PERSON PROTAGONIST NARRATOR

Great Expectations is only Dickens's second novel told from the first-person protagonist point of view, the first being *David Copperfield*. Rather than limiting his narrative options, telling the story from this point of view actually allows Dickens to explore multiple views, specifically the immediate experience of the young Pip in the story and the distance of the older narrator Pip who can, and often does, comment on the events he is narrating.

Encountering a first person narrator, however, does require some caution on the part of the reader. The reader is given details of the story only as the narrator experienced them or only as the narrator remembers them. The telling of events, then, may not be fully accurate, especially if the narrator admits to illness, madness, or drug use. Further, the narrator may simply be lying, omitting certain details and exaggerating others. The first person narrator is a *tool*, a conscious choice on the part of the author and it is in the reader's best interest to consider why the author has made this choice, and how it impacts on the story the author is telling.

Finally, the reader needs always to be cautioned not to confuse the narrator with the author. While critics and historians can find a number of similarities between Dickens and Pip, they are not the same person. *Great Expectations* is a work of fiction.