

2001

Great Expectations

Elisabeth Rose Gruner

University of Richmond, egruner@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gruner, Elisabeth Rose. "Great Expectations." In *World Literature and Its Times*, edited by Joyce Moss, 151-60. Detroit: Gale Publishing Group, 2001.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Great Expectations

Charles Dickens



Great Expectations was the penultimate novel completed by the most popular novelist of Victorian England, Charles Dickens. Born in Kent, England, in 1812 to a family of modest means but great pretensions, Dickens's early life was marked by both humiliation and ambition. Dickens never forgot the period of financial crisis during his childhood, when following his father's bankruptcy, he was taken out of school and forced to work in a shoe-polish warehouse. While the episode was relatively brief, it marked Dickens's later life in many ways: in the development of his own ambitions, in his sympathy for the poor and especially children, and in his outrage at social injustice and bureaucratic heartlessness. *Great Expectations*, written when Dickens was at the height of his popularity and success, demonstrates all these concerns. His thirteenth novel, it was not overtly autobiographical, as his earlier *David Copperfield* (1850) had been, but in writing it Dickens employed a first-person narrative that elicits mixed sympathy and judgment for the protagonist Pip, an orphan raised by an abusive elder sister and her saintly husband, a blacksmith. Pip's story invokes an assortment of real-life issues of Victorian England, ranging from its relationship to its colonies, to its imperfect educational system, to its overarching concern with social mobility and status.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

Economic anxiety and social mobility. Dickens set the substance of *Great Expectations* at

THE LITERARY WORK

A novel set in England in the first half of the nineteenth century; published in 1860-61.

SYNOPSIS

The orphan Pip, a blacksmith's apprentice, harbors aspirations to gentility that are inspired by his love for the disdainful Estella and that are mysteriously supported by an anonymous benefactor.

roughly the time of his own childhood; the action of the novel begins in 1812, the year Dickens was born, when Pip is seven. This was a time of great economic anxiety in England; the American Revolution, Napoleonic wars, and the War of 1812 had caused a drain on the national economy, and industrial developments were putting agricultural as well as other manual laborers out of work. The development of the threshing machine in farming (patented 1788; in widespread use by 1830) and mechanized looms in cloth-making (patented 1786; in widespread use 1815-1840) were two significant changes in labor practice; both inventions increased production, which led to greater economic security for their owners and managers, but also reduced the need for unskilled laborers, which created unemployment at the lower ends of the economic scale. Manual labor, always a marker of lower social status, was giving way to industrialized forms of doing business, and the new industrial elite was



Charles Dickens

reshaping the English class system. Alongside the old class system, which was based on land and status, a new economy arose, based on industry, information, and capitalist investment. While these changes generated anxiety, especially among the landed aristocracy, they at the same time augmented opportunity and excited hopes among the lower orders. If hard work could earn money, perhaps it could also earn higher social standing.

Education, always a marker of class standing, was beginning to be a means to social mobility as well. In an era before compulsory or standardized education (attendance at elementary school would not be made mandatory until 1880), a "gentleman's" education in classics, mathematics, and literature conveyed a social standing that more technical or skill-based education did not. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was no national educational system in England. Wealthy children were usually educated at home, and middle-class children attended private schools. The options for poor and working-class children were limited to unregulated, unprofessional schools like "dame schools," often run by poorly trained women who supervised children in cottage industries (such as plaiting straw or lacemaking) while they performed a perfunctory instruction in reading. In the novel Biddy improves on her dame-school

education and uses it as a means of self-support and social improvement.

Poor or laboring-class children, and even some middle-class youths, might also serve an apprenticeship as their education into a trade. In the apprentice system, a child or youth was legally "bound" for seven years to a master who would, in return for a premium paid at the beginning of the contract and free labor throughout its term, teach him the trade. After seven years an apprentice could become a "journeyman," free to hire himself out for daily wages. Blacksmithing, shoemaking, and millinery—as well as law and surgery—were taught through the apprenticeship system, which varied widely in efficacy and professionalism.

As the century progressed, a variety of educational organizations were formed to provide free or inexpensive education for the poorer classes; both religious and secular educations were provided through these philanthropic organizations. Basic literacy and arithmetic skills could and did increase one's economic viability in the new economy, as they opened up white-collar professions such as clerk, accountant, or trader.

But economic improvement did not always translate into social mobility. England at the beginning of the nineteenth century was still a very hierarchical, socially stratified society. Social status depended on blood and birth, land and leisure. While money could not buy blood or birth, or lineage, (except through a socially advantageous marriage), fresh sources of wealth such as factory-owning and overseas trade meant that land and leisure could now occasionally be purchased by a new social strata, the middle-class professional. A gentleman's status was derived primarily from his leisure: a gentleman lived off investments (or land) and hired servants. While most of the newly rich were not themselves considered "gentlemen," having derived their wealth through hard work, their children might possibly aspire to that status, with an education to polish off the rough edges and servants to maintain their households. Pip's education with Mr. Pocket is concerned with giving him the appearance of gentility, while his legacy provides him leisure. Ironically, in *Great Expectations*, when Pip is given both the financial means and the education to become a gentleman, a role he has aspired to only for Estella's sake, he is given them by an escaped convict who also turns out to be her father. Social status, the novel suggests, is both ephemeral and implicated in the very crimes it condemns.

Crime and punishment. *Great Expectations* begins and ends with the pursuit and apprehension of an escaped convict, and crime and punishment figure largely in the plot of the novel. The criminal justice system was changing in England at the turn of the nineteenth century; in 1800, there were over 200 crimes for which capital punishment could be imposed, while by 1841 only eight remained (Philips, p. 156). Dickens had treated the failures of the criminal justice system directly in his early novel *Oliver Twist* (1838), in which his young thieves are threatened with the death penalty for stealing silk handkerchiefs. His outrage at the injustice of the death penalty for relatively minor crimes against property was widely shared, and contributed to the changing climate of criminal justice in the early part of the nineteenth century.

• "Transportation," or forced resettlement in one of England's colonies (first America and, after American independence, Australia) offered an alternative to capital punishment, which was felt to be far more humane, and indeed some former prisoners prospered in the colonies. Convicts working under government supervision were allowed some hours a day to work for themselves; others, however, labored under "private assignment" to non-government employers, who might maintain them in virtual slavery. Their terms and conditions varied widely, as did the entire administration of criminal justice before the various reforms of the nineteenth century.

By 1830 about 58,000 convicts had come to Australia; this marked the high point of transportation, after which the practice began a gradual decline because anti-slavery feeling came to influence the convict system as well. Private assignment of transported criminals was abolished in 1840, the sentence of transportation was abolished in 1858, and the practice of transportation in lieu of execution gradually decreased after that time. Like Magwitch in the novel, most transported criminals were career criminals and thieves, though some were political prisoners as well. Transported criminals were barred, under penalty of their original death sentences, from ever returning to England, even after their terms of labor (usually between seven and fourteen years) had expired.

The crimes in *Great Expectations* include both the "white collar" crimes of forgery and fraud, and more violent attacks on persons and property. Of course the class system infected the criminal justice system; the lower-class Magwitch is condemned far more harshly for his part in the

forgery and swindling scheme than his more genteel partner Compeyson. Access to legal representation could make the difference between life and death for the accused prisoner, and in the absence of a public defense system, many accused criminals were unable to defend themselves. Prisoners did not speak in their own defense, nor did they speak directly to the lawyers who would represent them in court. Legal cases were prepared by an attorney or solicitor, such as the novel's Mr. Wemmick, who would then usually turn over the actual arguing of the case to a "barrister," a lawyer licensed to appear in court, such as Mr. Jaggers. The system set up barriers between the lower-class accused and the upper-class legal community that often resulted in the former's being only seen, not heard.

Criminal justice in the early nineteenth century was as swift as it was severe. In London, criminals awaited trial only briefly (although in some rural areas criminal trials were held only once a year), and sentencing and punishment followed rapidly upon conviction. Prisons were for the most part mere holding cells, often operated by private individuals for profit. The concept of the prison as a locus of either reform or punishment was still relatively new in the nineteenth century; convicted criminals were either executed or served hard labor, either on the "Hulks"—prison ships that also provided lodging for prisoners awaiting transportation—or in Australia.

England and its colonies. England had been a colonial power for over two centuries by the era depicted in *Great Expectations*; the nineteenth century was, however, a time of great expansion and re-evaluation of England's colonial presence. England began to settle Australia in 1788 as a penal colony. Having lost the American colonies in the Revolution, England maintained its presence in Canada and Australia, and began expanding its political and economic presence in Asia and Africa as well. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, England had expanded its holdings in the Indian subcontinent to include Afghanistan and Burma, and had acquired Holland's former colonial holdings in South Africa as well. Both commerce and conviction underlay England's imperial development; what novelist Rudyard Kipling would later call "the white man's burden" to spread Christianity and, more generally, "Englishness" throughout Asia and Africa co-existed, more or less comfortably, with capitalist expansion of trade throughout the world. Among the colonial

reaches of the empire, India and Africa, in particular, provided a combination of missionary and capitalist opportunities for the younger sons of the gentry and for the hard-working sons of modest families, who could become rich and respected through trade or government service. In *Great Expectations*, empire is the source of wealth, even redemption, for convict and respectable citizen alike.

The Novel in Focus

Plot summary. The action of the novel takes place between 1812 and 1829, and is narrated by its main character, Pip (Philip Pirrip) from the vantage point of adulthood, sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s. His story begins on Christmas Eve, when Pip is in his seventh year; an orphan being raised by his sister, known always as Mrs. Joe, and her husband Joe, a blacksmith, Pip is visiting his parents' and brothers' gravesites when he is accosted by a convict. The convict threatens to kill him if he does not bring food the next day; this Pip does, stealing the food out of his sister's pantry. On his way to deliver the food, he encounters another, younger, escaped convict, but eludes him to deliver the food. On Christmas Day, during a family party, soldiers arrive at the blacksmith's house—not to arrest Pip for pilfering the food, as he at first believes, but to enlist the blacksmith's help in mending some handcuffs. Pip and Joe join the soldiers in their search for the escaped convicts. Both are apprehended, and Pip sees "his" convict take responsibility for the stolen food before being taken away in chains.

Months pass. Pip endures his sister's abuses and the difficulties of life in the forge, as well as a growing sense of guilt at his still unacknowledged theft. An eccentric wealthy woman living in the town, Miss Havisham, requests Pip's presence at her manor house (Satis House). There, Pip meets a proud and beautiful girl, Estella, who is Miss Havisham's ward. Miss Havisham lives with her in almost complete isolation and decay, surrounded by the appurtenances of a wedding that never occurred. Miss Havisham asks to have Pip visit often, and amuse her by playing cards with Estella. During one of these visits, Pip meets relatives of Miss Havisham's who resent him for his assumed closeness to her; among them is a boy of his own age who challenges him to fight. Pip does so reluctantly; he beats the boy, and for the first time Estella seems pleased with him. After eight or ten months, Miss Havisham ends the

arrangement when she pays the requisite premium to have Pip apprenticed to Joe. The visits with Estella cease, but Pip continues to call upon Miss Havisham once a year, on his birthday.

During this early time, Pip attends a local school, run by an incompetent old woman and her great niece, Biddy. Pip confesses to Biddy that he wants to become a "gentleman" to impress Estella, though he laments openly not having chosen a more attainable object, like herself. Biddy teaches Pip as much as she can, and lets him know that she is bothered by the attentions of the blacksmith's journeyman, a worker named Orlick. Orlick resents the fact that Pip's relationship with Joe makes him "superior," and after Pip is apprenticed, his resentment only increases. One evening, while both Pip and Joe are out of the house, Mrs. Joe is attacked and left for dead; Pip suspects Orlick, but cannot prove his suspicions. In the aftermath of the attack, Biddy moves to the forge to help care for Mrs. Joe.

Pip feels ashamed of Joe and the forge because of his attachment to the heartless and snobbish Estella. Thus, he is delighted when, after he has served four years of his apprenticeship, Miss Havisham's lawyer, Mr. Jaggers, announces that Pip has come into "great expectations," and that he is to be released from his apprenticeship and educated in London to be a gentleman. The only two conditions attached to his new status are that he will not attempt to identify his benefactor and that he will retain the name Pip. While Pip assumes that Miss Havisham is his benefactor, Mr. Jaggers will not confirm his suspicions.

Pip moves to London, where he lodges with a distant relative of Miss Havisham's, Herbert Pocket (the young boy who had challenged him to fight at Satis House) and is educated by Herbert's father, Matthew. Herbert tells him Miss Havisham's story: the daughter of a brewer, she was engaged to be married when her fiancé jilted her on the morning of the wedding. The fiancé, now revealed as a forger and swindler, was in league with a half-brother of Miss Havisham's. Her heart broken, Miss Havisham laid waste to her house and stopped all the clocks at the moment she learned of her failed engagement (twenty minutes past nine). Estella, he learns, was adopted by Miss Havisham when a child, and has been brought up to wreak Miss Havisham's revenge on the male sex.

Befriended by Jaggers's clerk, Mr. Wemmick, Pip also learns more about Mr. Jaggers's criminal practice. Wemmick is a businesslike man who maintains a tiny "castle," complete with



In a scene from the 1946 film version of *Great Expectations*, Anthony Wager, as Magwitch, grabs Pip when he encounters him in the graveyard.

drawbridge, turrets, and cannon, in Walworth, a suburb of London, where Pip visits him and meets his father, known as the "Aged Parent." At Walworth, Wemmick becomes a friend and confidant to Pip, but he adopts an air of businesslike unapproachability in the office, maintaining a strict separation of private and public life. Another curious character enters the picture, Mr. Jaggers's housekeeper, a former client whom Mr. Jaggers claims to have "tamed" (Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 195). The housekeeper, it is said, had murdered a younger woman whom she perceived as a rival; Jaggers has engineered her acquittal and with it her continuing service to him.

Estella moves to Richmond, another suburb of London, and Pip sees her frequently. Suspecting that Miss Havisham intends Estella for him, he does not speak to her of his attachment, but suffers when she seems to flirt with other men.

Pip and Herbert fall greatly into debt, not being educated for any profession, yet having great expectations of themselves. Mrs. Joe dies, and Pip makes a rare return to the forge to attend her funeral. Since coming into his "expectations" he has distanced himself from Joe and the forge even further than when he was visiting Miss Havisham. When Pip turns 21, he is given an

annual income but does not learn any further details about his benefactor. He resolves, however, to use part of his income to endow a position for Herbert at a shipping and trading company, Clarriker's, without Herbert's knowledge, and Herbert begins to succeed in the business, learning all about England's trade with its Asian colonies.

Estella becomes engaged to a former student of Matthew Pocket's, a well-to-do man named Bentley Drummle (nicknamed the "Spider" by Mr. Jaggers for his sneaky, brutal appearance). Drummle is brutal and cruel, and Pip remonstrates with Estella about her choice, but she claims that, since she has been brought up without a heart, she cannot bestow it on anyone. Even Miss Havisham is shocked at her cruelty, but Estella reminds her that she is Miss Havisham's creation and cannot be expected to act otherwise.

Pip is 23 when he learns the true identity of his benefactor: it is not Miss Havisham, but the convict he had fed on the marshes that long-ago Christmas Eve, a man named Abel Magwitch. Magwitch had been transported to Australia for his crimes (as yet unnamed) and in returning to England, he risks the death penalty. He has prospered as a sheep-farmer in Australia, and devoted all his income (via Jaggers, who had been his

attorney) to Pip's education and transformation into a "gentleman." Ashamed of his benefactor, Pip endeavors to hide him, and soon learns that the other convict, a man named Compeyson, is aware of Magwitch's return. Through Herbert Pocket, Pip also discovers that Compeyson is the man who jilted Miss Havisham. Details in Magwitch's story convince Pip that Estella is his

expectations to confound her own relatives (by letting them believe he, not they, might inherit her substantial wealth) but has otherwise had nothing to do with his legacy. Pip forgives Miss Havisham and as he is leaving, a fire breaks out and he saves her from the conflagration, at some cost to himself. Injured, he returns to London. Miss Havisham survives the fire but dies soon thereafter.

Pip resolves to leave England with Magwitch, whom he has learned to love and respect. He sequesters him in a boarding house near the Thames River and plans to depart with him on a freighter to Europe as soon as Wemmick suggests that it is safe. Just before the planned departure, Pip receives a mysterious message inviting him to a limekiln near the old forge; he complies, and is met by Joe's former journeyman Orlick who, now mysteriously in league with Compeyson, has resolved to kill Pip. Mystified by Orlick's malevolence, Pip learns that the journeyman's resentment motivated the attack on Mrs. Joe as well as this final attack. Saved by Herbert Pocket, who has followed him, Pip returns to London and tries to carry out the escape plan, but Orlick has warned Compeyson, and their boat is met before Magwitch can escape. Magwitch and Compeyson struggle, and Compeyson is drowned. Magwitch is condemned to death, his wealth a forfeit to the crown. But before he can be executed, Magwitch dies of injuries sustained in the struggle with Compeyson. As he lies dying, Pip reveals to Magwitch that he knows and loves Magwitch's daughter.

Pip falls ill, and is nursed back to health by Joe, who also pays his debts. When he is fully recovered, Pip returns to the forge, intending to discard his expectations and propose to Biddy. However, she and Joe have just been married, and Pip wisely says nothing of his plan. Chastened, he joins Herbert Pocket at Clarriker's and rises from clerkship to partnership; he lives in Cairo in charge of the Eastern Branch of the business.

Eleven years pass. Pip returns to England, where he sees that Joe and Biddy have a child named for him. Visiting Satis House for a final time, he meets Estella there. Bentley Drummle, who mistreated her, has died in a fall from a horse. Estella and Pip are reconciled in the ashes of Satis House, and as the novel ends they leave the house together, hand in hand.

Gender and violence. *Great Expectations* depicts male-female relationships as violent and destructive in all but a few rare cases. Mrs. Joe beats both her husband and Pip; Joe is himself a vic-

VICTORIAN PHILANTHROPY

The Victorian period was a great age of philanthropy. The rise of evangelical Christianity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries awakened the consciences of many, and indeed it is impossible to contemplate Victorian society without being aware of the great social injustices which divided it. While in earlier times private charity or church-based charity had been common, the large-scale social change of the Victorian period rendered such solutions impotent, and many philanthropic organizations sprang up to fill the void. Organizations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (founded 1824), the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (founded 1884), the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Church of England (1811), the British and Foreign Schools Society (1808), and many others, were motivated to a great extent by the energetic women who found in philanthropy a socially acceptable outlet for their skills and talents. Dickens was ambivalent about such efforts. In *Bleak House* he satirizes the philanthropic women who tirelessly raise money for evangelizing Africa but ignore their own children, in characters like Mrs. Jellyby. Yet he was himself involved in a small-scale effort, spearheaded by his friend Angela Burdett-Couts, to train former prostitutes in useful skills and help them to emigrate. Dickens seems to have preferred such private generosity as Magwitch's and Pip's, which was based on personal connection rather than self-aggrandizement or a desire for structural reform.

daughter and that Jaggers's "tamed" housekeeper is her mother. Jaggers is the surprising link between all these disparate characters; his legal profession connects him across class boundaries to virtually everyone in the novel.

After learning the truth about his benefactor, Pip returns to Satis House to confront Miss Havisham. She admits that she has used him and his

tim and witness of domestic violence. As he informs Pip, Joe's father, also a blacksmith, "were given to drink, and when he were overtook with drink, he hammered away at my mother, most onmerciful. It were a'most the only hammering he did, indeed, 'xcepting at myself" (*Great Expectations*, p. 61). Miss Havisham inflicts her own violence on herself at the failure of her intended marriage, and Estella is, we learn after the fact, "used with great cruelty" by her husband, Bentley Drummle (*Great Expectations*, p. 437). Although Wemmick and Herbert Pocket both marry, presumably happily, in the course of the novel, as do Biddy and Joe, their peaceful relationships are anomalous in this novel. Orlick evidently beats and leaves Mrs. Joe for dead, and Estella's mother has killed a woman out of sexual jealousy. Pip himself seems to understand his relationship with Estella in violent terms; he claims, for example, that he has "suffered every kind and degree of torture that Estella could cause [him]" (*Great Expectations*, p. 280).

The novel's emphasis on the violence seemingly inherent in sexual relations comes at a time when issues of gender were hotly debated. Although England was ruled by a queen, women in general had few if any legal rights at the beginning of Victoria's reign; throughout the century, what came to be called "The Woman Question" grew ever more urgent, as women (and some men) pressed for female emancipation in marriage, in property rights, in child custody, and in social and professional relations. In 1839 the Infant Custody Act was passed, allowing women to petition for custody of their infant children in the rare case of divorce or separation; this was the first instance in English legal history of legislation specifically concerning women's rights. The act was followed by decades of debate about, and the eventual passage of, the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) and the Married Woman's Property Acts (1870, 1882), the first of which legislated more liberal divorce laws and the second of which allowed women to retain some control of their property in marriage. A corollary to the Matrimonial Causes Act was a right gained by magistrates in 1878 to grant separation to wives if their husbands were convicted of aggravated assault. Although women would not be granted the vote in England until 1928, the foundation of a woman's movement was laid in the nineteenth century even in politics: John Stuart Mill introduced the first bill for woman suffrage in 1867, during his brief career "as a member of Parliament.

The debates about custody, married women's property, and divorce made public the private operations of the Victorian home. They revealed the ugly and often violent realities of gendered power relations that lay behind the public ideology of domesticity. Put baldly, they demonstrated that domestic bliss was frequently an illusion based on the often-violent suppression of one human being's rights, most often the wife.

THE TWO ENDINGS OF *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

Great Expectations was completed in June 1861, with the final episode scheduled for publication in August. During that year, Dickens had been in constant contact with the novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whose novel *A Strange Story* was scheduled to follow the serial publication of *Great Expectations* in the magazine *All the Year Round*. The two novelists had read and critiqued each other's work throughout the year, and when Bulwer-Lytton read the conclusion to *Great Expectations* in proof, he advised Dickens to change it. Dickens had originally written a briefer, more somber conclusion in which Pip and Estella—who had remarried after Bentley Drummle's death—meet only briefly on the street and are parted forever. Bulwer-Lytton objected to the sadness of this ending, and Dickens's revised version, with the meeting between Estella and Pip at Satis House, was published in its place. Dickens continued to edit the final words of the novel; in manuscript and in proof, he wrote, "I saw the shadow of no parting from her but one." However, at the proof stage he dropped the last two words, and the sentence appeared in *All the Year Round* as "I saw the shadow of no parting from her." Finally, in the 1862 one-volume edition, the line appears as, "I saw no shadow of another parting from her" (*Great Expectations*, pp. 440-41). This is the version quoted above, as it is the standard printed version. While the differences between these latter versions may seem minor—especially compared to the major difference wrought between the proof and published versions—they indicate Dickens's continued wrestling with the question of Pip and Estella's future even after the novel was published.

Dickens's depictions of gendered violence likewise operate to reveal the failures of domesticity and its disconnection from romantic love. His violent women, often brutally tamed by even more violent men, are aberrations, women who have seized power and often masculine identity

and are then punished for it. Mrs. Joe is the most striking example of a woman who is masculinized by her dominance in the household, and who is tamed by Orlick, an even more brutal force than herself.

Conversely, both Wemmick and Herbert Pocket find brides for themselves who support their desire for a quiet domesticity; like Biddy, Wemmick's Miss Skiffins and Herbert's Clara are

quiet, efficient, and long-suffering women who willingly enter a secluded domesticity based on mutual concern, companionship, and care, rather than property or status. Pip's fruitless attachment to Estella, and his inability to recognize until too late the love and care that someone like Biddy could offer him, are symptomatic of the failure of his romantic ideals, which had—as so many nineteenth-century novels do—linked love and status, here with disastrous results. It is significant in this regard that Pip's ultimate union with Estella is accomplished only after she has been ill-treated by her first husband, Bentley Drummle; like Mrs. Joe, perhaps, she is brutally “tamed” into domesticity.

Sources and literary context. Dickens was the most popular novelist in England at the time he was writing *Great Expectations*. The realistic novel had become the dominant literary form by then, due in large part to Dickens's and other writers' development of it in the earlier part of the century. The novel's most direct antecedent, though, is not another novel but the Renaissance sonnet cycle by Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*. In that cycle, the helpless lover (Astrophil, or “star-lover,” a stand-in for the author), pines for his beloved, Stella (or “star”). The cycle is written in the traditional Petrarchan mode, in which the beloved becomes the metaphoric light by which the lover steers, but is also the source of all his frustration and anxiety. By taking the names (Philip/Pip; Stella/Estella) and the basic relationship from the sonnet cycle and turning them into a realistic novel, Dickens explores the destructiveness as well as the power of romantic love.

Estella is the one character in the novel for whom biographers and critics have consistently sought a real-life counterpart. Dickens's personal life at the time he was writing *Great Expectations* was itself public knowledge, even public scandal: he had separated from his wife, Catherine (née Hogarth) in 1858, and was living with her sister Georgina and nine of his children while Catherine stayed in London with their eldest son Charley. In a strikingly open admission of the failure of his domestic ideal, Dickens published a statement in his magazine *Household Words* soon after the split, recognizing the separation but claiming that all parties involved were guiltless. Georgina's position in the household was officially that of housekeeper and substitute mother, and Dickens was widely believed to be involved at the time with an actress, Ellen Ternan, who retired in 1859. Dickens's financial responsibilities in 1860, then, were legion: he sup-

DICKENS AS PUBLISHER



Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, which began appearing in 1836, marked the beginning of a revolution in publishing. Dickens had first come to public attention with *Sketches by Boz* earlier that same year; these were a series of illustrations accompanied by Dickens's text, originally meant simply to illuminate the image, but used by Dickens to develop longer and more complex characters and incidents. Dickens turned the sketch, a popular eighteenth-century form, into something larger, a novel, in his *Pickwick Papers*, with the text now dominating in the illustrations. Both the *Sketches* and *Pickwick Papers* were published in monthly “numbers,” paper-bound booklets containing a single episode. Often working only hours ahead of a printer's deadline, Dickens continued to publish his subsequent novels serially. Readers eagerly anticipated the next installment of their favorite novel, passing the current issue from reader to reader while they awaited further development of their hero's life.

Already popular beyond imagination, Dickens took control of the publishing process for his novels in the 1850s. As editor of the magazines *Household Words* and later *All the Year Round*, Dickens serialized his own and other authors' novels. *Great Expectations* was originally designed for monthly publication, but Dickens decided to issue it in weekly parts in *All the Year Round* when sales for another novel by Charles Lever proved disappointing. Sales of the magazine increased dramatically when Dickens's novel replaced Lever's, thus suggesting—along with the number of other venues in which the novel appeared—its immediate popularity. The novel appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in the United States while it was running in *All the Year Round* in England; Harper's subsequently published it in a two-volume book form, while Dickens's English publishers, Chapman & Hall, issued it in a three-volume version for libraries, and at least four other editions appeared in England and the United States in the next three years.

ported his wife and one child in one home, himself, his sister-in-law, and nine children in another, his mother, her daughter-in-law, and five children in yet a third, and Ellen Ternan and, at times, her mother and two sisters in a fourth. If Ternan was not the cold and contemptuous Estella, she may have served that function in Dickens's imagination, as she was certainly a financial and emotional drain on him (Carlisle, "Introduction," p. 15).

Another potential model for Estella is Maria Beadnell, Dickens's first serious love, whom he courted in the early 1830s. Seductive, witty, and both older and better educated than he was, Maria seems never to have taken Dickens's suit seriously, and she wounded him desperately by calling him a "boy" at his coming-of-age party; Estella is similarly contemptuous of Pip (Kaplan, p. 53). Whether Estella's original is Maria Beadnell, Ellen Ternan, or Sir Philip Sidney's "Stella," however, she remains the motivating force of the novel and entirely Dickens's own creation as well.

Finally, *Great Expectations* is a realistic novel. Realism, the dominant literary form of the middle nineteenth century, is a set of literary conventions that equate the "real" with material life in society; works that take for their subject the daily lives of relatively ordinary people, in a believable setting, are thus classed as "realistic." While events in the novel may strain credulity at times, Dickens's emphasis on the economic and social struggles of a single character, and the relationships he makes and breaks during those struggles, mark it as realistic in a solidly Victorian sense. Dickens emphasizes the conditions of Pip's life and Pip's own concerns with social status and hierarchy throughout the novel. Realism took many forms in the Victorian period, from the broad social satire of William Makepeace Thackeray (see *Vanity Fair*, in *WLAIT 3: British and Irish Literature and Its Times*) to the working-class fictions of Elizabeth Gaskell (in, for example, *Mary Barton*). Dickens's *Great Expectations* shares significant elements with works at both ends of the spectrum.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written

England and India. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, England's presence in India was controlled by a single private enterprise, the British East India company. In 1857, however, the Sepoy Rebellion (also known as the Indian

Mutiny) demonstrated to the English at home that all was not well in their distant colony. The thrust of the rebellion by Indian soldiers (known as sepoys) who served the East India Company lasted from May to December 1857, and marked the beginning of widespread Indian resistance to British rule. The British reaction was to transfer control of India from the East India Company directly to the English government. Victory for the British was hard-won, with traces of armed resistance erupting until the spring of 1859. Mean-

DICKENS AND COMEDY

A brief summary cannot convey the tone or quality of the comic writing for which Dickens was so justly famous. *Great Expectations*, to some reviewers' minds, marked Dickens's welcome return to his earlier, comic style, after the publication of "darker" masterpieces such as *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*. While the emphasis on crime and punishment, violence and degradation may not seem funny to contemporary readers, Dickens's genius lay in his ability to move freely between tragedy, melodrama, and comedy, sometimes even in one scene. In *Great Expectations* much of the comedy derives from the persistent social climbing of a variety of characters, from Mrs. Joe's "Uncle Pumblechook" to the church clerk, Mr. Wopsle, to Miss Havisham's obsequious and fawning relatives. Mr. Wopsle's abandonment of the church for the stage is the occasion of a famously comic scene in which Herbert and Pip attend an extremely unskilled production of *Hamlet*, which features a ghost who has a cough and a Hamlet who is badly overplayed by the foolish Wopsle. Pip himself does not escape the satirist's eye; his desperate attempts at gentility are often foiled by his own excesses, as when he hires a servant (whom he refers to as the "Avenger") and then has nothing for him to do.

while, the popular press in England published accounts of the rebellion that captured the English imagination, which led to India and things Indian becoming extremely popular. From perceptions of it as a rather distant colony, India became central to England's conception of itself; popular imperialism took hold and was consolidated when England's Queen Victoria crowned herself Empress of India in 1877. In *Great Expectations* the fictional firm Clarriker profits from the India trade, and the shift in the novel from Australia as a place of punishment to India as a

source of wealth parallels the larger shift in England's imperial ambitions during the period.

Criminal justice. Although there were over 200 capital offenses on the books in the beginning of the nineteenth century, by the time Dickens was writing *Great Expectations* the death penalty was rarely invoked. Also by 1860, the hulks had been demolished and the sentence of transportation had been abolished. The middle nineteenth century saw the increasing professionalization of criminal justice, with the development of a professional police force, sentencing reforms, and the introduction of parole. Our sympathy for the convict Magwitch is thus consonant with the tenor of the times; an increasing emphasis on repentance and reform had replaced the earlier, more punitive system of criminal justice.

Reception. Early reviews of *Great Expectations* were somewhat mixed. While the critic in *Saturday Review* found it "new, original, powerful, and very entertaining," the novelist Margaret Oliphant, writing in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, claimed that it "occupie[d] itself with incidents all but impossible, and in themselves strange, dangerous, and exciting . . ." (Oliphant in Rosenberg, pp. 617, 625). Writers such as George Gissing, G. B. Shaw, and George Orwell all praised *Great Expectations* for its realistic depiction of childhood, its use of the first-person narrator, and—as Shaw said—its "consistent truthful[ness]" (Shaw in Rosenberg, pp. 627, 633, 641). Edward Whipple, reviewing the novel in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861, particularly praised Dickens's achievement in the character of Magwitch, and voiced the opinion which still stands today:

The character [of Magwitch] is not only powerful in itself, but it furnishes pregnant and original hints to all philosophical investigators into the phenomenon of crime. In this wonderful creation Dickens follows the maxim of the great master of characterization and seeks "the soul of goodness in things evil." . . .

Altogether we take great joy in recording our opinion that *Great Expectations* is a masterpiece. (Whipple in Tredell, p. 23)

—Elisabeth Rose Gruner

For More Information

- Carlisle, Janice. "Introduction." *Great Expectations*. Boston: Bedford, 1996.
- Cody, David. "British Empire." *The Victorian Web*. 1988. <http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/history/empire/Empire.html> (12 Oct. 2000).
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Ed. Janice Carlisle. Boston: Bedford, 1996.
- Everett, Glenn. "Political and Economic History of Great Britain." *The Victorian Web*. 1987. <http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/history/empire/Empire.html> (12 Oct. 2000).
- Gilmour, Robin. *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1981.
- Kaplan, Fred. *Dickens: A Biography*. New York: William Morrow, 1988.
- Mitchell, Sally, ed. *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland, 1998.
- Patten, Robert L. *Charles Dickens and his Publishers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Philips, David. "'A New Engine of Power and Authority': The Institutionalization of Law-Enforcement in England 1780-1830." *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500*. Ed. V. A. C. Gatrell, et al. London: Europa, 1980.
- Pool, Daniel. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox-Hunting to Whist—the Facts of Daily Life in 19th-Century England*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.
- Rosenberg, Edgar, ed. *Great Expectations: A Norton Critical Edition*, by Charles Dickens. New York: Norton, 1999.
- Tredell, Nicholas, ed. *Charles Dickens: Great Expectations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Walder, Dennis. "Reading *Great Expectations*." *Approaching Literature: The Realist Novel*. Ed. Dennis Walder. London: Routledge in association with The Open University, 1995.