

### Plot and Expectations

1. *Great Expectations* an example of how narrative plot works in the novel
  - a. The word "plot" has multiple meanings in English, including:
    - i. A hole in the ground in which one is buried
    - ii. A strategy for accomplishing something.
    - iii. A series of points that describes the shape of a curve.
    - iv. The line of a story - "what happens."
    - v. All of these ideas are encoded in the opening scene of the novel, suggesting that Dickens plans to play with the idea of plot in this novel.
  - b. Aristotle described the plot of a tragedy:
    - i. duration - unities of time (one day) and place (one location)
    - ii. shape - must have a beginning (rising action/exposition and complication), middle (climax/moment of discovery), and end (falling action/denouement/conclusion).
    - iii. magnitude - the story must have significance, importance.
  - c. "What happens" always has an archetypal shape.
    - i. "What happens" is always what is deviant; readers view "normal" or "happy" lives as eventless. (Peter Brooks: "the true plot will be the most deviant.")
    - ii. Plot is the equivalent of Freud's two drives, eros and thanatos, warring against each other: the desire for life ("what is going to happen") warring against the quiescence of death ("nothing more can happen").
  - d. *Great Expectations* contains two conflicting deviant plots - to which he purposely adds a second level of deviation.
    - i. The deviant plots being invoked here are two: (1) the child's desire to discover its origins (Oedipus) and (2) the child's attempt to rise above an abusive and/or humiliating domestic situation ("Cinderella," Dick Whittington).
    - ii. These two plots have conflicting shapes: tragic (Oedipus - one's parents are one's nightmare) and comic (Cinderella/Whittington - triumph over abusive circumstances, ultimate prosperity).
    - iii. Thus *Great Expectations* has a complex, often conflicting shape, with the tragic and comic warring against each other - comedy within tragedy, a mediated compromise.
    - iv. The two plots cancel each other's action out, as Pip gradually discovers that because of his origins and thus finds that his hoped-for advancement cannot take place.
    - v. Dickens's twist on the traditional plots makes the plots doubly deviant: the expected plot never takes the shape we expect; we cannot see Pip as a tragic Oedipal figure, or as a triumphant Cinderella. At the end of the novel, we're as confused about his identity as he was at the beginning of it.

### Plot & Relationships

2. *Great Expectations*, like most highly plotted works, encourages us to examine connections between people, events, and things.
  - a. The plots of *Great Expectations* force us to recognize connections

- i. between people
  - ii. between places (locations)
  - iii. between events
  - iv. everyone is related to everyone else; everything is related to everything else
  
- 3. Yet, at the same time, *Great Expectations* forces us to see the improbability of connection between people. While there are a few relationships that seem health (like Joe and Biddy at the end), most are harmful - death-oriented.
  - a. Dickens's worldview influenced by the 1858-1860 breakup of his own marriage to Katherine and his secret relationship with the 18-year-old actress Ellen Ternan.
  
  - b. Traditionally the "plot" of parent/child and marital relationships is a comic one: love flourishes between people held naturally to "love" one another and is a force that resists death. But in the deviant plots of *Great Expectations*, none of these relationships happens normally; hence the novel teems with plots.
    - i. Marriages and courtships are brutal and brutalizing, emblemized by abuse and sadism. Parents are rarely around to raise the children of these unions.
      - (1) Joe and Mrs. Joe
      - (2) The Pockets
      - (3) Miss Havisham and Compeyson
      - (4) Jaggers and Molly/Magwitch and Molly
      - (5) Estella and Pip/Estella and Drummle
  
    - ii. Parent/child relationships are either sadistic or nonexistent.
      - (1) Parents brutalize and take advantage of their children (Miss H; Mrs. Joe; Mrs. Pocket; Gruffandgrim (Clara's father); Magwitch and Molly with Estella; etc.)
      - (2) Or parents are absent or useless; a surrogate is raising the child.
  
    - iii. Family love exists primarily in inverted or surrogate relationships where either
      - (1) the child is parenting the adult (Jane/Mrs. Pocket; Wemmick/Aged P; to some degree, Joe Gargery)
      - (2) a non-relative surrogate is raising a child (Joe or Magwitch raising Pip; Wemmick and Herbert assisting Pip)
  
  - c. Nonsexual friendships are the only reliable ones
    - i. Pip's relationships with Herbert Pocket, John Wemmick, Magwitch; Estella in the original ending - "we shall continue friends apart"
    - ii. Though even in these relationships, the gifts that the principals give one another must be kept secret from others - hence the secret names, notes, and plots that are hatched by the characters.
    - iii. If one has a happy emotional life, like Wemmick's home life, it must be kept secret from the rest of one's world - "Walworth sentiments and Little Britain sentiments."

#### 4. The Orphan as Emblem of Lack of Connection

"He's a likely young parcel of bones that. What is it you call him?" . . . "What in the blue blazes is he?" asked the stranger. Which appeared to me to be an inquiry of unnecessary length (Chapter 10).

- a. 19thC novels, like children's fairy tales, are full of orphaned protagonists. Their lack of parents (a "deviant" plot as family stories are concerned) is - surprisingly - more positive than negative.
  - b. Our first impulse is pity - we see orphanhood as negative.
    - i. Lack of parents may mean lack of resources and love as well as exposure to danger
  - c. But lack of parents can be positive - a kind of freedom:
    - i. exposure to adventure
    - ii. fluid social class standing - orphans define their own identity
    - iii. no pressure from parental expectations
    - iv. freedom to define the self against foster-parents, who typically represent the worst aspects of socialization
    - v. orphans may "choose" and define their own family
  - d. Thus a "deviant" plot may not be as negative as semantics and our prejudices about "happy ending" storylines encourage us to assume.
    - i. the orphan plot tells us something about individuals and the family, and about how people become adults;
    - ii. the orphan plot implicitly criticizes tight-knit families as "plotless."
5. Pip's orphan status confuses him - calls into question our ideas about how children should be treated.
- a. In the graveyard, Pip searches for a definition of "family" that he will never be able to "read" properly, even once he manages to uncode symbolic discourses like language.
    - i. How can we describe parents who managed to raise both Mrs. Joe and Pip? How can Mrs. Joe and Pip be related? What was this family like?
    - ii. At home at the forge, Pip gets no better idea who his family is: Joe? Mrs. Joe? Pumblechook? Wopsle? Because they alternate between sadism and kindness, he remains permanently confused.
    - iii. Pip has the traditional ideology that "family" means "unconditional love," or giving without thought of return. As a child, he also fantasizes that he is a savior and should be celebrated, like the baby Jesus whose birth the family celebrates at Christmas.
    - iv. He sometimes receives this - as from Joe - but he views Joe as "another species of child," not as a parent who has the power to protect him. Pip is more vulnerable to adults who treat him as a pestilence or as a source of food (the opposite of unconditional adoration) as when his sister complains about having to raise him "by hand" or Pumblechook refers to him as a "porker."
- 6. Pip, failing to recognize any true parents in his own household, then becomes vulnerable to two adults: the convict and Miss Havisham, and his relationship with these adults seems to produce magical results.**
- a. Magwitch asks from Pip what a child should ask from an adult: food and tools to become free - provisions. Later Magwitch will provide for Pip, and take the name "Provis," but at the beginning of the novel the child-adult relationships are reversed.
    - i. Pip's early sense of guilt arises from the guilt he feels at stealing food for the convict, and from his identification with the lost and needy one weeping in the graveyard, searching for his freedom.
    - ii. Joe's compassionate evaluation of the convict echoes his compassionate treatment of Pip, completing the circle.
  - b. Miss Havisham asks Pip to behave like a child - only children "play" - but under extraordinary circumstances.
    - i. She represents the impossibility, even destructiveness, of marriage and children.

- (1) Satis House not enough after all: stopped clocks, dead celebration, no lights, no food, nothing.
  - (2) THE defunct brewery.
  - (3) The parasitic relatives.
  - (4) Estella, her "ward," seems to have been begotten magically and is a tool rather than a person.
- ii. Her demands of Pip are magical and nonsensical, compelling him to accept a frightening situation as normal (something he's used to, unfortunately; he cannot "play" at his own house, either). She says:
- c. Later Pip's connections to these two adults appear to culminate in magical, unexplained benefits.
  - i. The convict at the Blue Boar gives him two pound-notes, stirring his drink with the file stolen from the forge; this leads Pip to believe he is being "paid off" for his deeds.
  - ii. Miss H pays for his apprenticeship, and then his "expectations" appear; Pip assumes, in the absence of any more convincing explanation, that Miss Havisham is the funder of his expectations. Miss H does nothing to discourage the notion that she is the author of his expectations and that she intends Estella to marry him.
  - iii. The file is found to have been the weapon used to subdue Mrs. Joe, an action that eases life for Pip and Joe and that each may subconsciously have wished to perform.

**For further reading:**

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. Intro. Francis Fergusson. New York: Hill & Wang, 1961.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: Vintage, 1984, 113-142.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.