

Great Expectations: Resolving the Plot(s) Against Pip

1. GE as a Bildungsroman (novel of education) designed around Cinderella story

- a. GE embodies typical childhood fantasy: of sudden transformation into a realm in which yearnings are magically fulfilled without effort, because of the intrinsic and mysterious virtue of the fantasizer.
 - i. It is an appropriate fantasy for Pip because he is orphaned, has been "brought up by hand," with a strong sense of being unwanted.
 - ii. He feels himself to be different: he reacts more intelligently and with greater sensitivity, than others around him.
 - iii. The "normal course" of life, of apprenticeship, mastery of the trade of blacksmithing, marriage, children, and death, doesn't seem enough for Pip.
 - iv. Persecution has left him with a fluid identity; he doesn't know whether he really is "wicked" and a suckling pig, or whether he's a good boy; he doesn't know what normal is.
 - v. He is "fatherless" and thus vulnerable to taking adult men as father-substitutes - and to identifying with them perhaps more than he should: Joe, Jaggers, Magwitch.

2. Two powerful fantastic characters typical of fairy tales enter his life and change his view of himself: the witch, Miss Havisham, and the bogeyman, Magwitch.

- a. Magwitch represents the bogeyman, the stranger, the inevitable threat of the outside adult world every parent tries to protect a child from - but cannot always do so.
 - i. He "erupts" into the first chapter, representing everything a weak and passive child fears in the adult world: the capacity for wickedness, the brutality of the animal need to survive (shown in the way Magwitch eats), implicit violence, and the possibility of being outcast and utterly alone.
 - ii. Pip already suspects himself of having these characteristics; contact with Magwitch intensifies his sense of identification and fear. (Later this is affirmed by Pumblechook, who relates with great relish "Let this be a lesson to you" the story of George Barnwell, the wicked apprentice who kills his master.)
 - iii. Magwitch represents the possibility of what Pip may become - the guilty, evil, lower-class villain who had no right even to be born.

- b. Miss Havisham ("have-a-sham" and "having shame") is a witchlike figure with a dual meaning: horrible decay and shining promise (as in "fairy godmother.")
 - i. She has sacrificed her life to memorialize dead hopes and betrayal; the wedding dress, shoes, feast all represent possibility and fertility; her preservation of them represents its loss. She is the monster side of the female.
 - ii. Pip realizes early, when he plays "beggar your neighbor" with Estella, that Miss H has trained her to destroy men, but he is so smitten with Estella that he ignores the problem.
 - iii. Miss Havisham also represents the promise of adulthood, because she is rich and because she has adopted Estella (as Pip wishes to be adopted), whose very name encodes the "Cinderella" fantasy Pip has been wishing for himself.
 - iv. Pip does not speak truthfully of Magwitch or of Miss Havisham to anyone because they remind him intently of his own inadequacy: Magwitch of his criminal side, Miss Havisham and Estella of his working-class background.

3. Mythic significance of the fairy-wishing story

- a. It is the old story of male desire to rise in the world: of Vulcan desiring Venus; of boys who want to compete and win (consume) beautiful and status-rich women who make objects of themselves; of wanting to be something more, of your parents to be something more, than you and they actually are.
- b. But the fairy world is interrupted by the moral universe of give-and-take. Miss Havisham and Magwitch vanish (to emerge again later) when Pip's expectations "come through" and he readies to go to London.

4. The Fathers

- a. The characters are divided into two groups, headed by two opposite surrogate fathers: Joe Gargery and Jaggers.
 - i. Both names begin with "J," interchangeable with "I" in the ancient Roman alphabet. Dickens uses these two characters to embody two different attitude towards the moral universe - a universe Pip must negotiate as he anticipates his expectations.
 - ii. Both men's power lies more in potential than in use: Joe, in his physical strength, never used, and Jaggers, in his knowledge of the shameful secrets of others, which he holds over them and uses to keep them in bondage.
- b. Joe
 - i. Lives by feeling. The true "harmonious blacksmith" of the text.
 - ii. He looks at every situation as a whole and relates himself to it as his heart tells him to do. He doesn't judge people by their appearances (his reaction to Magwitch; his response to Mrs. Joe; his acceptance of Pumblechook).

- iii. Joe holds a poetic, romantic view of the world. He thinks metaphorically and emotionally; generally not "successes" in the material sense, but rich emotional life. Sees himself in connection to others.
 - iv. Others like him: Biddy. Herbert Pocket. Mr. Pocket. Later, Magwitch. Wemmick at Walworth.
 - v. Strength: body, heart.
- c. Jiggers
- i. Lives by the letter: literally, he respects the letter of the law. He breaks each situation down into evidence; does nothing more or less than is required of him. He requires others to "spell things out," as when Pip hesitates about how much money to request.
 - ii. His life is compartmentalized and most of his power comes from implicit threats - what he knows about people that can hurt them. Power of secrets he holds over others.
 - iii. Others in the novel who are like him: Estella. Molly. Miss Havisham. Magwitch. Drummle (to a lesser extent). Denizens of Little Britain, who are afraid to invade his unlocked house.
 - iv. In Jiggers's materialistic and analytical view of the moral universe, the factual world is the only world that can be trusted. Literal. He is a material success. Jiggers does not connect with other people but sees how people can be useful. See his reaction to Wemmick's hidden life at Walworth.
 - v. Strength: language.

5. Comparing Joe and Jiggers in action.

- a. Before the novel's action begins, each of them has come across a mother and baby, and each has responded differently.
 - i. When Joe comes across Mrs. Joe and her infant brother, he adopts them even though the circumstances of his marriage to Mrs. Joe are less than ideal and the child is not his own.
 - ii. Jiggers, in contrast, separates the mother from the child. He puts the child up for adoption to the highest bidder (who turns out to be the nutty Miss Havisham) and the mother becomes his personal servant, whom he keeps in her place by blackmailing her with the threat of revelation.
- b. In their relationships with Pip.
 - i. Joe's relationship to Pip is based on feeling - he allows nothing to cloud it; he remembers shared experiences with phrases like "What larks!," phrases which become metaphors for what has passed between them. This comes out in the scene where Miss Havisham pays for Pip's apprenticeship; Joe, who will not let

anything come between them, talks only to Pip, refusing to make the deal an economic one.

- ii. Jagers, in contrast, bases his relationships on economic necessity and has a pessimistic outlook in the phrases he repeats to Pip. He never tires of telling Pip that in their relationship he is acting only as a businessman. He simply carries out his instructions. He sees life as a dung-heap onto which he sometimes ventures to pick out a jewel, but which contaminates him so badly when he goes near it that he has to constantly wash his hands.

6. Alternatives to the extremes of Joe and Jagers: Wemmick and Magwitch. Both have knowledge of both good and evil ways of life.

- a. Wemmick - In London, the person who bridges the gap between material and poetic views of life is Wemmick, the clerk whose personal and professional lives are so compartmentalized that his face literally changes shape as he commutes between Walworth and Little Britain.
 - i. At Walworth, Wemmick is the gentle, dutiful son of the Aged P and the lover of Miss Skiffins. At Walworth, Wemmick's property (castle, pig, moat, cannon) is feudalized and anything but "portable." Seems to represent an old, nostalgic world in which connection to other people is more important than money.
 - ii. At Jagers's office he is the cut-and-dried, post-box-mouthed clerk who advises Pip to get and keep "portable property." When Pip asks him for advice, he says "Do you want my Little Britain advice or Walworth advice?" At the office, Wemmick represents the new bourgeois man, always thinking of money and advantage, and never willing to allow his emotions to influence his business decisions.
 - iii. Wemmick represents the comic costs and advantages of schizoid adaptation to a world that cannot be reconciled to itself. Pip also crosses from side to side, attracted and repulsed by each, but he views Wemmick as mechanized and somehow odd, though a good friend.
- b. Magwitch
 - i. Magwitch is Pip, potentially, under worse circumstances: note the similarities between the way we confront Pip in Chapter 1 and the way Magwitch describes his own childhood in the opening of Chapter 42:

I've no more notion where I was born, than you have - if so much. I first become aware of myself, down in Essex, a thieving turnips for my living. Summun had run away from me - a man - a tinker - and he'd took the fire with him, and left me wery cold.

"I know'd my name to be Magwitch, chrisen'd Abel. How did I know it? Much as I know'd the birds' names in the hedges to be chaffinch, sparrer, thrush. I might have thought it was all lies together, only as the birds' names come out true, I supposed mine did.

- ii. But Magwitch, like Wemmick, has a double or split life: the evil life of his childhood and youth, and the good life he begins to live “after Pip stood my friend” (ch. 42). The doubleness or turn of his life encourages Pip to see that an evil life can be turned around.

7. GE resolves - and Pip achieves his understanding - by confronting the bad-in-good.

- a. Pip begins the process with three horrible revelations:
 - i. Miss Havisham is not his fairy godmother, and Pip is not the son of a metaphorical dynasty whose motto is “enough.”
 - ii. Estella is not “intended” for Pip, but that he was merely part of her training process in destroying men, something he has suspected all along; moreover, she is not a pure and beautiful spirit, but the daughter of a murderess and a criminal whose origins are even more ignoble than his own.
 - iii. Magwitch the convict has in fact “authored” Pip’s expectations; he is a common criminal who eats like a dog, and he has been rewarded for thievery.
 - iv. Pip learns that psychological energy is never lost or created, but merely recycled: karma prevails in the universe. Pip was secretly glad when Orlick attacked Mrs. Joe, because he saw her as evil; later, when Orlick attacks him, he is forced to see himself in the same role.
- b. The implication of Pip’s discoveries is that life is not, as Jagger thinks, a dung heap from which jewels can be retrieved and polished up, but a dung heap that fertilizes everything in the same way - where a beautiful flower grows literally out of shit. In the words of Yeats’s Crazy Jane, “God has pitched his tent/In the place of excrement.”
- c. Joe has essentially already accepted this moral compromise. Although Joe is not an intellectual, he sees that the moral universe is a complicated place in which people are always changing roles and cannot be taken at face value (as money is tendered and exchanged for its face value in the world of Little Britain). Like King Lear, he has “taken upon himself the mystery of things.”

8. Pip’s recognition is facilitated through Pip’s changing attitudes towards Jagger and Joe, who provide two moral points of reference for him.

- a. Pip represents an impure mixture of the qualities of both of his metaphorical fathers:
 - i. the acquisitiveness and pragmatism of Jagger (represented in his gift to Herbert of money to start a business)
 - ii. and the emotional idealism of Joe (his love for the abusive Estella in spite of her cruelty to him).
- b. But he differs from his guardians in that he is a fantasist, not a realist.

- i. They are ready to accept the consequences of their actions (Joe marries Mrs. Joe; Magwitch remains isolated).
 - ii. Pip wants the benefits but not the detriments of his life. He responds to the difficulties of his situation by selectively cutting himself off from his own past and separating himself from those who care about him, devoting himself to the woman who keeps herself separate from him at all costs. He becomes a snob because he is unable to commit himself to an idea of who he is.
 - iii. Pip conveys his impurity - essentially his fluidity - to us by representing his own baseness without flinching: by describing his bad attitude towards Joe, his humiliations by Jaggers and Trabb's boy, his difficulties with Estella.
 - iv. Thus, autobiography serves as confession for him - a reckoning at middle-age with the problems of his youth, however painful those have been. He reminds himself of his own history so that he will not repeat it; he paints himself so that he will know what he truly looks like.
 - v. By the time the novel ends, then, it doesn't really matter whether Pip gets or doesn't get to marry Estella. By this time, Estella has been so discredited as a fantasy, and Pip so disillusioned as a fantasist, that they are not the same people they once were; at most, they are a middle-aged couple who have failed.
- c. The forge provides the central moral point of reference. When Pip returns to the forge at the end of the novel, Joe has married Biddy and they have produced a child named Pip, a new "seed," a generation untainted by the cruel loves of the past. Things have righted themselves - though, in keeping with the novel's deep sense of compromise, Pip himself is to be only a peripheral member of the new family.
 - d. One way to view the novel is as a reflection of Dickens's own attitudes towards its narrative: part Joe and part Jaggers, one half sentimental and emotional and the other part deeply controlled and materialistic.