

# Double Structures in Dickens's Novel *Great Expectations*

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Charles Dickens is one of the most popular British writers, belonging to the first generation of Victorian novelists, who combined history and fiction, realism and sentimentalism as well as gothicism and romanticism in his work. *Great Expectations* is the best example of the combination between novel and romance and this paper is going to analyze its system of double structures which is present in different forms and dichotomies: types of narratives, themes and subthemes, symbols and characters.

Novel; romance; double structures; poetic realism; allegory.

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## 1. Introduction

Dickens's place in the history of English literature is among the first generation of Victorian novelists. He was "a spokesman of his age, a social critic, a reformer and an inexhaustible inventor of characters and plots. There is hardly another English novelist of such wide popularity all over the world. His novels are history and fiction, a picture and a symbol of an age (Galea, 1996:65). At the same time, the harshness of reality is softened by a romantic vision and poetic language, proving an allegiance to sentimentalism, gothicism and romanticism. The manner in which he wrote can be identified as "poetic realism", i.e. a writing at the frontier between reality and fantasy, between novel and romance which found its best expression in G.K. Chesterton's words: "Dickens used reality while aiming at an effect of romance" (1966:54 quoted in Galea, 1996, p.67).

This duplicitary tendency is obvious in Dickens's entire work; however, it reaches its significant fulfilment in the novel *Great Expectations*.

"Just as the publication of *Great Expectations* both creates and expresses interesting links between the world of the novel and the world into which it came, the world of its author and readers, so we find ambivalence or duality running through the contextualisation and the intertextuality of the novel (its placing in history and in literary space), both in terms of the Victorian novel and in Dickens's

own career. The “dating” of the novel or its location in time, the link between the fictional modes of the novel and the social issues it treats, the place of the novel in Dickens’s oeuvre: each of these aspects of the novel sets up a kind of double perspective which also runs through the text in the ironic plot, ambiguous language and ambivalent narrative stance.” (Bradbury, 1990, p.3)

We are going to identify the system of double structures the novel is based on as well as their meaning and implications. The ambivalence romance/novel will constitute the background for developing further dualities at several levels.

## **2. Novel versus romance**

Clara Reeve first illustrated the difference between the novel and the romance in 1783 by saying that the novel is a picture of real life and manners and of the times in which it was written whereas the romance describes what never happened nor is likely to happen (quoted in Galea, 1996, p.53). Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog in *The Nature of Narrative* referred to a more precise distinction by identifying two antithetical modes of narrative: the empirical, whose primary allegiance is to the real and the fictional, whose primary allegiance is to the ideal. However, it is difficult to draw a line between the empirical mode and the fictional mode as they interact in various points in a literary work as it is the case with *Great Expectations*. Given the definitions above, one would be tempted to say that the novel *Great Expectations* is, in fact, an allegory. The paradox being created, the system of dichotomies, of double structures has a proper background. What Dickens actually did was to take reality and transform it through an allegorical effect of romance as Frye and Jameson referred to in the theory of romance: “Romance does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality, but rather a process of transforming ordinary reality” (Jameson, 1993, p.110). Reality is present throughout the novel, through social and historical events, as well as through many aspects of the characters’ life. At certain points, reality (as the domestic realism of the Victorian age) is submitted to the romance effect and ordinary facts are given an allegorical note. “The effect of this interplay between modes, which Bahtin called ‘dialogism’ is to unsettle, replacing ‘expectations’ with experimentalism in the novel” (Bradbury, 1990, p.8).

The title of the novel *Great Expectations* leads the reader into a general vision of hope and trust. The title announces the hero’s confidence and tends towards an idealistic and allegorical significance. It turns on the deepest and most complex ironies of the novel,

which pursues familiar dreams only to expose their emptiness. The novel is not about fulfilled expectations, but about loss and illusions. While the general outlook is allegorical, the deeper meaning and effect are bitterly realistic.

From the point of view of novel typology, *Great Expectations* is well-integrated in the European bildungsroman tradition. It is the story of the raise and fall of the main character, Pip, in which "the hero's development is viewed as a process that involves a loss of direction and culminates in his finding of the way" (Daleski, 1970, p.246). It is the common progress of the bildungsroman, as well as the familiar pattern in myth and fairy tale. *Great Expectations* is also a typical Victorian novel, i.e. the presentation of a hero's life from childhood to maturity. Hence from, the structure of the narrative is typical for the novel of development. Firstly, the structure is circular: it begins with Pip in the churchyard and it ends in the same way, this time little Pip being replaced by Joe and Biddy's son. Secondly, the novel is divided into stages according to the evolution of the character's expectations. The first stage (chapter 1 to 19) presents the hero's childhood, his natural and bitter condition of being an orphan raised "by hand" by his older sister. During this stage the hero acts instinctively and therefore virtuously. In the second stage (chapters 20-39), Pip denies his child-like simplicity and his moral values deteriorate. He believes in the apparent fulfilment of his expectations; however, Magwitch's return spoils everything. The fall of the hero is the main part of the third stage. After a redemptive suffering, the regeneration begins. Pip returns to his birthplace, accepts the limitations of his condition and "achieves a partial synthesis of the virtue of his innocent youth and the melancholy insight of his later experience" (Brooks, 1989, p.167).

The form of the novel is typically realistic. Nevertheless, the narrative modality, which is first person narrative, goes back to romanticism, autobiography and confession writing. The reader learns only what the character wants to tell him and is forced to see the events only through the main character's eyes. The effect of the confession is also highly emotional: "it was Dickens's decision to use Pip as a first-person narrator that determined the emotional centre of the novel, which is not the relationship between Pip and Estella" (Daleski, 1970, p.241). The adult Pip admits the mistakes of the younger Pip and looks at his own experience in a different way. Confessing to himself, Pip confesses to the reader and gives a new meaning to the events of his childhood and youth "In a word, I 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. I had had no intercourse with the world of the time, and I imitated none of its many inhabitants who act in this manner. Quite an untaught genius, I made the discovery of the line of action for myself" (Dickens, 1994, vol.1, p.50). The interaction between past and present, the enlargement of the moment by guilt and desire, by perception and recognition, all these fluctuating tendencies give life to the text and to the teller. "*Great Expectations* can, in this sense, be read as part of the Romantic and post-romantic development of literary exploration of the self: part of the movement

from Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude* to Proust's "*A la recherche du temps perdu*" (Bradbury, 1990, p.7).

As most of the novels of the Victorian age, *Great Expectations* was published in serial. It appeared in the periodical "All the Year Round" from December 1860 to 3 August 1861. In order to meet the desires of his readers, Dickens used suspense, surprise and mystification. The novel acquired the value of a detective story thanks to the intricate plot which culminates with the discovery of the relationships between characters. All the people who influence Pip's life are somehow related. Estella, the woman he loves, proves to be the daughter of his benefactor whereas Compeyson, the one who sent Magwitch to prison, is Miss Havisham's former fiancé. According to these connections, the subplots develop the personal stories of the characters and Dickens shows himself as a master in creating thrilling situations. The stories exploit and challenge the process of storytelling itself. Revelation and suspension are equally weighted and thus the narrative process acquires an interesting complexity generated by the interest in autobiography, doubled by the detective story and enhanced by the social aspects.

### 3. Plot and themes

The subplots of the novel can be grouped according to the narrative themes. These themes are actually nothing else but the characters' expectations. Not only Pip, but also Magwitch and Miss Havisham have "great expectations" and allow their lives to be dominated by them. There is a common pattern in the origin of the expectations and in the means by which the characters trust they will be realized. In each case, expectations have their source in a desire for change, for the transformation of an existing situation, and they are sustained by the belief that such a transformation may be effected through the agency of another. Pip's desire is for a change of status from working-class boy into a gentleman and he hopes that this change will be brought about by a patron. Magwitch also wants a change of status, a transformation from a social outcast into "the maker" and "owner" of a gentleman and finds in Pip the object of his expectations. Miss Havisham's desire is for a change of condition of passive suffering into one in which she may inflict suffering onto others and she uses Estella to work this change for her. Since the plot shows that none of the expectations held by these characters is fulfilled, the general theme would be "The self-defeating folly of a reliance on such expectations" (Daleski, 1970, p.239).

There is a whole system of main themes and minor themes in the novel, built on dualities of virtues and their opposites. It has been speculated that the main theme in *Great Expectations* would be the corruption of the Victorian society. However, this is only partly true, because it is not actually corruption, but what produces it i.e. money. Money constitutes one of the two main themes of the novel. It is money that destroys Pip's innocence and values; it is money that creates conflict between Magwitch and

Compeyson. Money allows Miss Havisham to raise Estella the way she wants. Money provokes ingratitude, hypocrisy and sin because money leads to revenge. As G. Smith said: "Dickens's largest concern is with the destructive effects of the material upon the spiritual. Now we see Dickens merging the motif of money and gentility with the most intimate of human emotions, that of love" (quoted in Bradbury, 1990, p.7).

The second main theme of the novel is *love*. Love emerges from the characters' inner nature, from a kind of natural goodness and spiritual reliance on universal values. *Great Expectations* is built on the characters' profound need for love and is concerned with various manifestations of the search for love. While the search of money will lead to revenge, the search for love leads to forgiveness. All the characters, at a certain point of their life ask for forgiveness: Pip for his ingratitude towards Joe, Miss Havisham for creating false expectations to Pip, Estella for her coldness, Magwitch for being a convict. In a memorable scene with Miss Havisham, Pip, by forgiving her, expresses his own desire of being forgiven:

"– My name is on the first leaf. If you can ever write under my name, "I forgive her", through ever so long after my broken heart is dust – pray do it!

– O, Miss Havisham, said I, I can do it now. There have been sore mistakes; and my life has been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much, to be bitter with you." (Dickens, 1994, vol.2, p.184)

The dominant form of love in the novel is parental love, as A.O.J. Cockshut asserted "the animating myth of *Great Expectations* is surely that of the search for the father" (quoted in Daleski, 1970, p.249). Pip and Estella are orphans and they try to find the love of a family in the people they live with. Pip is luckier than Estella as he finds in Joe, his brother-in-law, somebody between a father and an elder brother, somebody who really loves him. Pip also finds another "father" without looking for him. It is Magwitch who assumes the role of a protector out of his free will. First, Pip rejects this new father, but eventually comes to love him and to appreciate his devotion and sacrifice. Estella's inner desire for parental love is not fulfilled by Miss Havisham; consequently, she becomes a cold-hearted person who is unable to answer to the others' feelings for her. Only after a long range of disillusionings and experiences, suffering gives her the key to her own inner nature and to her real desires she has been denying.

Erotic love is also present in the novel, though it does not dominate the action. Pip's love for Estella, dating from the time he first saw her at Miss Havisham, is part of

his expectations and illusions. He persists in loving Estella “against trust and against hope” and despite the fact that she is constantly causing him pain.

All the characters in the novel finally get a new sense of love out of experience. They understand that the meaning of love is first and foremost giving and not asking, possessing, not devouring. If money leads to ingratitude, hypocrisy and sin, love gives birth to gratitude, friendship and repentance up to redemption. Thus, a system of dichotomies and double structures is created at the level of the novel subthemes.

#### **4. Dichotomies and subthemes**

*Gratitude versus ingratitude* are mostly concerned with the relationship between Pip and Magwitch. It is the old outcast’s gratitude which creates Pip’s expectations and takes a protective form:

“Yes, Pip, My dear boy, I’ve made a gentleman of you...I swore that time, sure as ever I earned a guinea, that guinea should go to you... I lived rough and you should live smooth, I worked hard so that you should be above work”. (Dickens, 1994, vol.2, p.93)

The encounter with the boy reminds Magwitch of his own lost daughter and this is why he actually adopts Pip: “I’m your second father. You’re my son –more to me than any son” (Dickens, 1994, vol. 2, p.93). His initial attitude to Pip was both generous and selfless; however, over the years, it becomes thoroughly self-centred. His ‘making a gentleman’ becomes for him a personal reward, a means of keeping himself going and of transforming his condition. To use a person as a thing is a mark for the loss of true value and so Magwitch ironically devalues what he should prize.

Pip’s attitude towards his benefactor is highly controversial. He is in fact the best example of ingratitude in the novel. However, *ingratitude* is not part of his nature. It is the environment, the experience, the everyday temptations which lead Pip towards showing the opposite of the feelings he should normally have. It is again the destructive effect of the material upon the spiritual that makes Pip turn from an innocent young man into a snob. The new Pip is ashamed of his birthplace and of the low condition of the man who loved him most (Joe). When finding out what the source of his money is, Pip is not able to show gratitude towards Magwitch; he sees only the convict, not the benefactor. He is too disappointed, if not too coward, to thank Magwitch. G.K Chesterton was quite rough in describing Dickens’s characters: “The key of the great characters of Dickens is that they are all fools. It is the utterly unknown people who can grow in all directions like an exuberant

tree.” (Chesterton, 1925, p. 182). This foolishness grows inside the character, but the character is also able to get rid of it anytime. Pip’s attitude changes; he finally cares for Magwitch and this is the key to his moral revival. “If Dickens was an optimist, he was uncommonly active and useful kind of optimist. If Dickens was a sentimentalist, he was a very practical sentimentalist” (Chesterton, 1925, p. 193). Optimism and sentimentality go hand in hand when it comes to believing in people’s goodness and in the victory of good upon evil. Like Pip, Estella is also a victim of her benefactor. She sees gratitude as a duty “And if you ask me to give what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities” (Dickens, 1994, vol. 2, p. 76). Both Pip and Estella become the distorted creations, the doublings of the people who created their fortune, i.e. their failure.

The second dichotomy deriving from the main themes is *friendship versus hypocrisy*. Joe and Herbert are the expression of unconditioned friendship, whereas the opposite example is Mr Pumblechook. As the name implies, he is a rather grotesque character, the embodiment of hypocrisy and manners. He plays an important part in Pip’s life, he considers himself the tutor of the young Telemac; however, when Pip loses his fortune, his attitude changes radically. “He is felt rather as one of the idle and evil fairies who are so malignant and who live forever because they never really live at all” (Chesterton, 1925, p.181). When it comes to money, everybody becomes hypocritical: the rich are praised and respected, but when they lose their fortune, they are despised.

A third opposition is built on the patterns of innocence versus guilt tending towards sin and repentance which leads to redemption. Pip’s innocent child world is opposed to the grown-ups’ world, to their violence and lack of feelings. The patterns of culpability/guilt are so intricate that the whole world of the novel is caught in a single web of awful responsibility. Pip himself becomes guilty of losing his simplicity and moral values, turning into an ungrateful snob. There are two types of sin which are dealt with: the moral sin and the physical sin. Pip, Miss Havisham, Estella, all of them commit moral sin in one way or another: Miss Havisham through giving Pip false hopes, Estella through her coldness. Magwitch is guilty of cheating and killing and so is Orlick who kills Mrs Gargery. However, Dickens’ belief in human goodness made him allow his characters to find redemption. The moment they feel sorry and ask for forgiveness, the redemptive process begins. Magwitch redeems his crimes through the affection for Pip and the way he helps him. Miss Havisham understands her mistakes and she is eventually forgiven. Estella, after experiencing an unhappy marriage, loses her coldness and admits her mistakes, looking for forgiveness. Pip becomes aware of his own responsibility for what happened to him and after his attack of brain fever, his regeneration begins.

## 5. Conclusions

George Robert Stange said:

“*Great Expectations* is a particularly satisfying and impressive novel. It is unusual to find in Dickens’s work so rigorous a control of detail, so simple and organic a pattern. The simplicity is that of an art form that belongs to an ancient type and concentrates on permanently significant issues. *Great Expectations* is conceived as a moral fable.” (quoted in Kettle, 1972)

This moral fable has the charm of contrasting issues at all levels. Starting from the dichotomy romance/level up to an antithesis of themes and characters and an ambivalent ending, *Great Expectations* remains one of the most representative novels in English literature.

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