Charles Dickens's Great(est) Expectation: *The Death of The Author*

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Keywords: *Dickens*; *Barthes*; *Merleau-Ponty*; *phenomenology*; *narrator*; *author*; *(post)modernism*

Academics, critics and readers frequently adopt a rather stereotypical view on Charles Dickens's literary work. Supposedly, the author of *David Copperfield* stands out as a remarkable story-teller and, implicitly, as a very popular writer, both during his lifetime and *post mortem*, but he pays a significant price for this popularity, nevertheless. The tribute in question would consist in an inevitable lack of intellectual sophistication, presumably manifest throughout his novels. Commentators generally argue that he was more interested, as a novelist, in addressing large and heterogeneous groups of Victorian consumers of literature than in shaping profoundly parabolic and symbolic textual constructions. Ultimately, this represents a critical prejudice and, therefore, the present article aims at asserting the opposite. Let us make no mistake about it! Undoubtedly, Dickens can be a very deep and subtle artist in his prose. The example used henceforth to demonstrate the above mentioned thesis will be the masterpiece *Great Expectations*, which remains, at least as far as the overall structure of the plot is concerned, a traditional melodrama. No one would be able to deny it! Yet, in the context of a close reading of this work, the more you immerse yourself into the narrator's subjective universe of perceptions the more you realize Dickens's artistic endeavor has a formidable design. The need of the reader to uncover it, even after more than a century and a half since the first publication of the novel in the form of magazine serial installments (between 1860 and 1861), becomes a hermeneutic and scholarly urgency.

The novel's protagonist (and narrator), Phillip Pirrip – called Pip due to the fact his "infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit" (Dickens 1994: 5) than such a strange word –, is placed in a *Bildungsroman* pattern of evolution, which implies, gradually, major psychological and biographic changes. From a 19th century countryside marginal boy he comes to be a distinguished London gentleman, ready, at the end of the story, to start businesses in remote places of the British Empire. Inevitably, one may think here of Dickens's proneness to autobiography. Certain Dickensian self-referent elements are obviously present, but Pip's formation should not be associated, in any way, with, say, David Copperfield's

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life trajectory (which reminds of Dickens's significantly!). Although an orphan (more or less like Dickens himself) and exposed to traumatic episodes during the growing up process, Pip appears as a rather autonomous character with a life and, perhaps more importantly, *an identity* of his own. He is *a narrator* in the modern sense of the notion, i.e. with a personal representation of reality, visibly uninfluenced by the convictions of *the author*. Dickens seems eager to transmit, from the very beginning, the message that there is a (huge) distinction between *the one who writes the story* (himself) and *the one who tells the story* (Pip). The encounter of the child with an escaped convict, at the outset of the novel, plays a crucial part in the configuration of such a distinction. In the symbolic value of this scene may we locate the key metaphor of the whole book, i.e. Dickens's meta-textual core!

Terrorized by his adult sister, Georgiana Maria, a Shakespearean shrew, likewise mean to her good-natured husband, Joe Gargery, Pip prefers to play in the churchyard, close to the graves of his parents and other already deceased siblings. The "preference" – only in appearance a bit awkward – constitutes, in reality, his childish form of escapism. One day, in that morbid place, he unexpectedly meets an oddly looking fellow, whom the experienced reader immediately identifies, based on the narrator's description itself, as a runaway prisoner. Pip, however, behaves exactly like an inexperienced child (completely independent from the author, let us notice!) and does not comprehend the danger he could find himself in, engaging in a dialogue with the intruder. His "perceptive" autonomy will be later amplified by the attitude he adopts during what passes for an "emotional" confrontation with the convict. In order to scare and make him act according to his intentions (the intruder evidently wants to obtain a file from the child's house to eliminate his fetters and be able to continue his getaway!), the escaped prisoner grabs Pip of one of his legs, turning him upside down. Instead of being terrified, the boy takes everything as a game, *observing (and communicating this detail to us, the readers!) that, consequently, the church in front of him has suddenly turned itself upside down*. The subtle meaning encapsulated by the image should not be omitted! Curiously, the tendency of most people would be to decipher here an allegorical summary of the text which is about to unfold itself, i.e. a metaphor alluding to Pip's future life-trajectory.

A critical response of this kind is not, surely, inappropriate. By all means, the convict (Abel Magwitch or "Provis", according to a later alias) will change Pip's existence in the same dramatic manner in which he turns the little infant body upside down at the outset of the narrative. His *physical* action now may, indeed, open the door for his, so to say, *metaphysical* actions to transform the protagonist's life in the long run. Nonetheless, the connotations of the episode seem to go deeper. The fact that, during the act of abuse from the part of the intruder, the child *sees* the church turning upside down along with his own body and *tells* us this with perfect ingenuousness means, unconditionally, that everything we are on the brink of reading, learning or discovering in the following pages *will be seen* (and *evaluated*, one might add) strictly and unilaterally *by the protagonist himself*. If, as a child, he unavoidably perceives reality in a childish way, we, the readers, are bound to perceive it precisely in the same form, since we essentially depend on *him*. In other

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words, *the subjectivity* of a character, completely different from *the subjectivity* of the writer, comes to be placed thus at the heart of the epic construction. The governing consciousness will filter "reality" in the novel, establishing the norms by which we shall assess the authenticity of the whole narrative. Obviously, Dickens validates Pip's position *as a narrator* in *Great Expectations*, using the exotic image already presented and diminishing his own *authorship*, so to say, to a minimum. The *author* explicitly hands over, in a (post)modern style, the *text* to the *narrator*.

It may be too early to speak about the above mentioned "transfer" in highly theoretical terms, such as *the death of the author* or *the birth of the narrator*. Yet, just as a warning, we must assert that the way in which Pip's story of formation develops will make this discussion absolutely necessary at a certain point. So, in spite of the 19th century melodramatic aura of *Great Expectations***,** we should probably be prepared, as the plot moves on, for some quite sophisticated concepts. The complicated elements of the coded artistic ideology derive from the stages of the narrator's initiation. He undergoes a process of what phenomenologists call *"knowledge by degrees"* or *"mise en perspective"/"adjustment of perspective"* (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 253). Pip discovers the world gradually, as part of an effort which combines his subjective impressions with the more objective epiphanies provided by experience. Three of these levels of initiation in particular deserve a special analytical attention: firstly, the days spent in Ms. Havisham's house, secondly, the meeting with Jaggers in Joe's workshop and, thirdly, his new encounter, in London this time, with the once escaped convict, Magwitch. Let us look closely at each of these episodes! Basically, they represent the complete cycle of Pip's formation, composing the picture of the protagonist's walk from childhood to maturity. He "initiates" in the mysteries of existence growing up, i.e. moving through these moments, symmetrically depicted in the novel. The turning points of Pip's life therefore form a solid metaphorical structure underneath which one decodes a complex Dickensian aesthetic perspective.

As said already, the first "turning point" in Pip's formation relates to Ms. Havisham, the uncanny, enigmatic, old, rich lady of the community. The character's bizarre personality, although worth investigating in a strictly psychological study of *Great Expectations*, should not be of much interest in the present critical context. Moreover, for us, *what Pip – still a child at this point – learns and, eventually, knows about her matters*. Clearly, he "knows" and "understands" a few things: Ms. Havisham is *peculiar* (she lives in isolation with her adopted daughter, Estella; she had an unfortunate affair in her youth, when she decided to marry the man she loved against the will of her father, who immediately realized the person in discussion was, in fact, after her money; predictably, the plighted husband leaves her in the very day of their wedding; she goes through a profound shock and, consequently, her life stops when she gets the appalling news of the break-up; decades after the sad experience, she is still dressed the way she was at the time of the shocking event, i.e. like a "bride"; ever since, she has avoided human contact, with two exceptions, the already mentioned Estella and Jaggers, her trusted lawyer and accountant), Ms. Havisham is *prudent*, due to her previous tribulations (she keeps most of her relatives at a distance, because they, like the rest of the people, are interested just in inheriting her fortune; this distant attitude may pass for rigidity, but it is only self-

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defense) and, paradoxically, Ms. Havisham is *generous* (she privileges Pip by inviting him to the house *to play* with Estella and by offering money in exchange).

We should agree on the fact that, generally speaking, this is an acceptable list of "pieces" of the information. Considering Pip's early age and inexperienced perspective over life, it looks quite remarkable. One of them, nevertheless, raises a flag to the attentive reader, i.e. the detail according to which the boy was invited to the house *to play* with Estella. As it happened in the case of the escaped convict, the more experienced reader understands something else here than the naïve narrator. Pip was not *invited to play* with Estella, but, in an optimistic scenario, he was *hired to entertain* Estella, who, like her adoptive mother, lives in seclusion, with few people around. "Watching" the "film" of the childish relationship between Pip and Estella, even through the immature eyes of the narrator, we become aware of more disturbing elements. The child was brought to the house *to be constantly humiliated by the spoiled and arrogant Estella*! Ms. Havisham "supervises" these scenes of rudeness and ruthlessness *without intervening and*, presumably, *developing a feeling of personal satisfaction*! Beyond Pip's deviated perception of the reasons for his presence in the house, the proficient reader will decode a dark strategy: *Ms. Havisham uses Pip "to educate" Estella to hate men, "to be able" to avoid becoming their victim in life or, in other words, "to be tougher" than her once superficial mother!* This twisted "pedagogical" act may be seen as a reversed *paideia*. The irony of the whole thing comes however from a different direction. In spite of the humiliation he is put through, the boy, surprisingly, *falls in love with Estella*!

This last detail represents "the heart of darkness" – to paraphrase the title of another masterpiece of the period (more or less) – inside Pip's unusual process of formation. It actually constitutes the basis of the next "turning point", the visit Jaggers, Ms. Havisham's lawyer and accountant, pays to Joe Gargery at his workshop, where Pip, an adolescent in the meantime, is an apprentice. Certain aspects of the story must be clarified! Pip finished his weird "activity" in Ms. Havisham's house a long time before, being paid, generously indeed, for his efforts. He returned to the family, getting, in a sense, "restored" to his previous social condition. Thus, Mr. Jaggers's visit generates intense emotions both to Pip and to his brother-in-law. The news Ms. Havisham's employee brings is even more troubling. Jaggers says he has been hired by an extremely rich person to offer Pip an agreement. The mysterious benefactor is willing to pay (consistently) for the young man's education (in London) with the precise purpose *to turn him into a gentleman***.** The enigmatic provider has one condition only: the adolescent has to take the deal as it is, without ever trying, in any circumstance and in any form, to find out anything about the identity of his benefactor (the benefactor will come out whenever the benefactor considers this to be appropriate!). Joe, a man of common sense and a humble witness to the scene, immediately considers such a scenario ludicrous, believing that the balanced Pip he knows will turn it down. To his and to the reader's surprise, *Pip does not only accept it, but he accepts it with enthusiasm,* instantly creating turmoil in the family.

Yet, it is not Joe's disappointment and shock at Pip's reaction that really matter here, but Biddy's. Biddy, a countryside girl herself who, practically, lives

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with the blacksmith's family, taking care of Georgiana (now hemiplegic), seems to be secretly in love with Pip. She deems him, obviously, a good match for her in the future. Learning about his intentions to go to London and his sudden change of social status, she appears desperate, abruptly deciding to unveil her hidden love and determining him to reject the offer and stay where he belongs. Pip's response to that is, by all means, astonishing. He repudiates Biddy, *unexpectedly saying something for which no one – including the experienced reader – looks totally prepared*. Pip implies that *it is his destiny to go to London in order to become a gentleman*, adding, solemnly, a confession which the protagonist himself later considers completely "lunatic": "I want to be a gentleman on her (on Estella's) account" (Dickens 1994: 120). What has just happened? The answer, albeit surprising, is rather simple. *The narrator has remarkably become at least as experienced as the reader.* He no longer "understands" less than his listener. On the contrary, he *conceals* information (which he thinks private) from the reader, thus distorting reality and displaying, implicitly, elements of *unreliability*. The information in question is *his apparently desperate and tormenting love for Estella* (desperate, because it has secretly continued years after they "played" under Ms. Havisham's "supervision" and tormenting, because Pip has evidently developed an erotic obsession, i.e. an emotional compulsion).

Still, the question must be asked again: what has just happened here? A more theoretical answer would state that the narrator, proving his "unreliability", has made a dangerous move, allowing the reader to catch a glimpse into what may be called the meta-textual level of the novel. It is beyond any doubt that, in *Great Expectations*, we have two "stories" – the one *we read* and the one *we decipher*, i.e. *a textual one* and *a meta-textual one*. In the "textual" one, we "see" the nice and decent Pip living with Biddy and Joe, whereas, in the "meta-textual" one, the dark, absurdly and obsessively infatuated (with Estella) Pip intermittently comes into being. Should we be then puzzled by his acceptance of the enigmatic benefactor's offer right away? Not at all. *Pip already has an articulate scenario at the back of his mind concerning Jaggers's proposition.* He has an "explanation" of the "mystery" at the meta-textual level of the narrative (i.e. the level of his secret life, never fully exposed to the reader). The explanation sounds like this: Ms. Havisham is aware of his profound and pure love for Estella and, as a good parent, decides to take action in securing her daughter's future. She will never find a better husband than Pip. However, in order to make him acceptable for Estella, she has to change his social condition, to transform him into *a gentleman*. So, Ms. Havisham *is* the "benefactor" behind Jaggers's offer (and Jaggers works *for her*, in Pip's eyes, let us not forget!). Consequently, *Pip takes the deal*. It was about time for him to fulfill his secret and compulsive love! *He will be a gentleman by all means. A gentleman on "Estella's account"!*

The hero finds himself here, *avant la lettre*, in the position of the orphan described by Sigmund Freud in an article from the beginning of the 20th century, *Der Dichter und Phantasieren/Creative Writers and Daydreaming*. Freud's character should be imagined, according to the Viennese psychiatrist, as coming of age. He has the opportunity to turn the tables of his unfair destiny, by presenting himself to a job interview. As he walks there, Freud argues, the orphan will inevitably begin to "daydream" about his future. *He will be hired, appreciated and protected by his new employer* (whom, *nota bene*, he does not know yet!). *In the*

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long run, he and the employer's daughter (whose existence, *nota bene* again, is entirely uncertain to him!) *will irreversibly fall in love with each other and get married. Eventually, he will inherit the company.* Laughable as it may seem, in psychoanalytic terms, the act of daydreaming constitutes a shield in front of the harsh reality. Thus, the Freudian orphan emotionally heals the traumas of his childhood (he never had a family and he "gets" one in his "dream"; he never knew true love and he "experiments" it in his fantasy; he never enjoyed social and economic stability and he "obtains" it in his personal fairy-tale). The real world comes to be replaced by an illusory scenario (Freud 1908: 24–37). Pip's story is not very much different. His secret love for Estella represents the center of his universe, i.e. his *axis mundi* (see **Image 1**!).



Image 1

In his fantasy, Ms. Havisham plays the part of the classical *deus ex machina*, appearing as a "parent" to Estella and as a "benefactor" to him (see **Image 2**!).

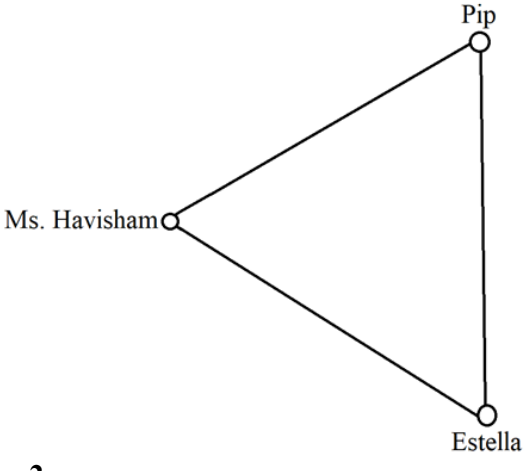


Image 2

Having clarified the psychological mechanism by which the protagonist *substitutes* reality with a *daydream*, it is about time to address the conclusion of

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his "formation", i.e. the last "turning point" of Dickens's *Bildungsroman*. We are obviously referring to Pip's second encounter with the once escaped convict, in London this time. Our main character is *a gentleman* now and, if we may add (with respect to his so-called "process of initiation"), already an adult. The episode closes practically a narrative circle which the writer (shall we say the narrator?) skillfully conducted throughout the novel. Abel Magwitch shows up abruptly (again!) in Pip's life, reminding him, *ab initio*, of the "episode" they shared, a long time before, in the churchyard, and, then, telling him something equally disturbing and embarrassing. *He is his benefactor.* Sentenced to death initially for major crimes (crimes resulting not necessarily from his evil nature, but from the manipulations of a villain, Compeyson, who ironically will also turn out to be Ms. Havisham's double-crossing fiancée!), the prisoner is eventually banished to the Colonies, more precisely to Australia, where he makes a fortune. Since he was compelled to depart without the legal possibility to return (consequently, we may notice, coming to visit Pip in London, under the name of "Provis", puts him at an enormous risk!), Magwitch realizes the uselessness, after all, of his wealth. The epiphany generates action: *what about placing money in the education of someone with no social privileges?* Pip, the innocent boy who helped him out in a moment of crisis, appears to be the perfect choice.

We should not be diverted, however, from the actual background suggested by Abel's gesture of generosity. There is a lot of *social* and *cultural* symbolism in it. He implies to the narrator, with fatherly affection no doubt, that, in the process of making him *a gentleman*, he also intended to prove his money, i.e. *the money made by a convict,* can be as good as anyone else's money. The reader might identify here the mentality of a world in full transformation, within which, in strict keeping with the rules of the capitalist society, *the margin*, *the periphery*, *the outcast* aspire to become *the center*, *the axis*, *the gentleman*. Pip is not impressed nevertheless by Provis's story, at least at the beginning. He is definitely appalled, horrified, disgusted, but not impressed. Immediately after the meeting with his real benefactor, he runs to Jaggers for confirmation. Strangely, despite him being Ms. Havisham's employee (an element, for Pip, supporting the validity of his sweet daydream about "becoming a gentleman on Estella's account"!), Jaggers has a long history with Magwitch as well. The lawyer defended Abel and his wife, Molly – Jaggers's maid, a criminal herself and, overwhelmingly to hear, *Estella's actual mother* –, in Court. While Molly gets sentenced to death and, finally, executed, Magwitch is exiled. Ms. Havisham's attorney will confirm everything! Moreover, to his despair, the narrator learns (from Herbert, his best friend) the ultimate truth: "Provis" is, certainly, Estella's father. Alas, the convict turns out to be *his* benefactor and *her* parent! A more shocking revelation a narrator could have never experienced, we must honestly admit!

Hence Pip's "reality" (with Ms. Havisham detaining exactly these "positions", that of "a benefactor" and that of "a parent") comes to be dissolved. Abel Magwitch turns the protagonist's world upside down in the same way he did when reversing the image of the church back in his childhood. An uncanny effect is caused by this last stage of "initiation". Pip's phantasy world (with Ms. Havisham and Estella as main characters in it) is reflected, *upside down*, in a mirror-like form, in the real

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world (with Abel Magwitch taking over all of Ms. Havisham's attributes). **Image 2** must therefore be completed with an inevitable **Image 3** (see below!).

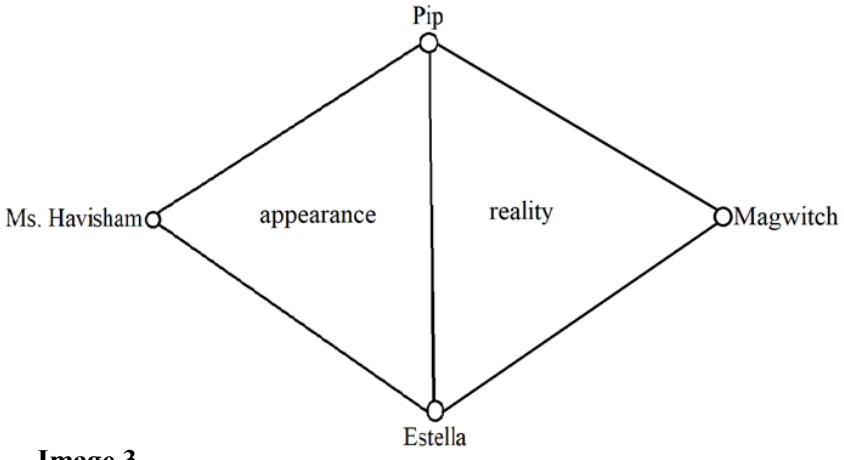


Image 3

"Appearance" and "reality" constitute the two facets of the narrator's "knowledge by degrees". He swings between them, due to his unavoidable subjectivity. Evidently, this provisional conclusion of our analysis may be helpful in understanding the metaphor from the title of Dickens's book – *Great Expectations*. If we see ourselves in Pip or if we see mankind, generally speaking, in him, then we are bound to comprehend that, in life, one's horizon of "expectations" will always be contradicted and even ridiculed by the actual facts of reality. It is in our deep nature to define *outside* only what has been defined *inside*, to project, in other words, our inner beliefs onto the aspects of concrete existence and, eventually, to be disillusioned by their incompatibility. Pip remains an *alter ego* of each and every individual who, at least once in a lifetime, hoped for the best, *without* expecting the worst *and*, because of that, at last, living it fully.

Yet, this cannot be all. There is something else in the climax of Dickens's masterpiece, in its already defined meta-textual architecture, that the reader has to decode. The starting point of our final "descent" into the subtleties of the novel should be Jaggers's awkward remark, when he is confronted by Pip, regarding the identity of the "benefactor". Instead of showing some compassion for the young man's disappointment, he curiously appears *to enjoy* the protagonist's confusion, telling him quite cynically: "Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence" (Dickens 306)! Undoubtedly, in this paradox one finds the narrator's seed of misinterpretation, but – let us face it – now is hardly the time to amplify his anguish! Jaggers seems to be willing to suggest, both to the perplexed narrator and to the still disorientated reader, that *he has been in control all along, in spite of the fact that he never interfered with whatever was going on in Pip's ambiguous mind*. He kept, that is, his complete neutrality, an indispensable factor of a privileged position in a given system. Does Jaggers have, indeed, a privileged position in the narrative mechanism of *Great Expectations*? He certainly does. If we try to place him within Pip's network of apparent and then real perceptions (i.e. within **Image 3**), we must put him *in the middle* (see **Image 4**!).

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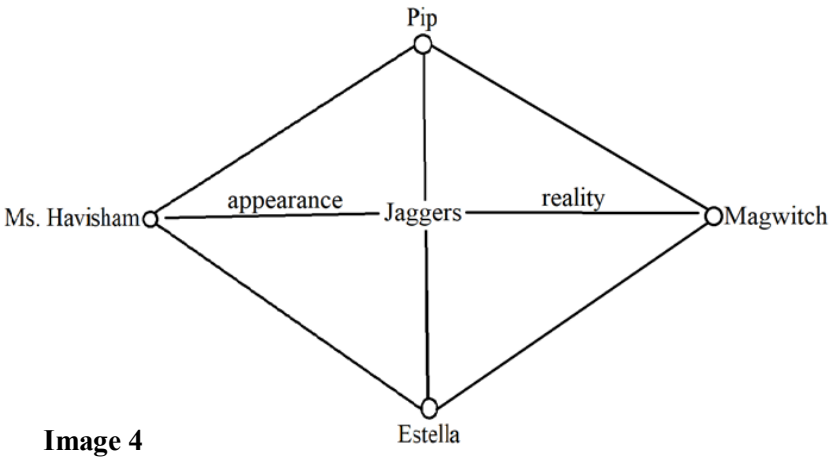


Image 4

This central position justifies at least two (if not more) of his main attributes in the story: *his omniscience* and *his omnipotence*. To them, however, an attentive reader may add *Jagers's omnipresence*. By all means, the lawyer manifests himself as an *omniscient* and *omnipotent* character. Perhaps even as *an omnipresent* one.

A brief explanation might be required here. Jaggers appears to be *omniscient*, because he is the only one who knows all about everything and everyone: Pip, Estella, Ms. Havisham and Magwitch. Similarly, he can be viewed as *omnipotent,* because he could change the story in any way he would like, did he decide to intervene, concretely, at any point in its development. Moreover, one may even talk about the attorney's *omnipresence*, because of his unique ability of being constantly encountered everywhere in the text and of his continuous (direct or indirect) contribution in the action of putting the pieces of the plot together. In fact, if we take a good look at the new image resulting from Jaggers's inclusion in Pip's narrative network (i.e. **Image 4**), we become aware of *his placement, in reality, at the top of the whole system*, since, from a geometrical point of view, **Image 4** shows clearly *a pyramid* (see **Image 5** below!).

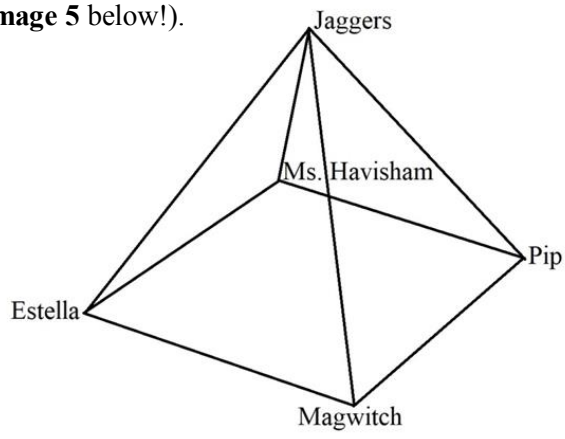


Image 5

Who is the mysterious lawyer after all? We have one answer only to such a question. He cannot be anyone else but Pip's very opposite! He *is* everything Pip *is not* and seems to be willing to suggest that at the end. If Pip is *a narrator*, Jaggers must be *the author*, the "omniscient", the "omnipotent" and, perhaps, even the

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"omnipresent" author who *no longer wants to interfere with the life of his own text, granting it freedom and autonomy*. He thus represents a metaphor – the metaphor, *avant la lettre*, of the modern writer who cherishes the independence of his creation more than his God-like position. He is simultaneously *deus otiousus* ("an indifferent God") and *deus absconditus* ("a hidden God").

Roland Barthes's 20th century critical parable *La mort de l'auteur/ The Death of the Author* (Barthes 1968: 15–18) is prefigured by Dickens's 19th century novel *Great Expectations*. The French theorist sees the modernization of writing as a symbolic "disappearance" of the traditional author from the artistic mechanism. The author becomes *the past* of the literary work, whereas the text will always be *its present* (Barthes 1968: 16). The narrator (a textual component), in the novel at least, takes over the role of the author himself, replacing what may have been considered once "the epic objectivity" with his own "subjectivity". The text cannot be seen anymore from top to bottom (i.e. from the author's perspective), as it happens in the classical narrative, but, symbolically, from bottom to top (i.e. from the viewpoint of the narrator). In a sense, a bizarre one undoubtedly, *the text writes itself* (that being the ultimate Structuralist dream!), proclaiming its *independence*. This is what *Great Expectations* confronts us with at its meta-textual level. Pip's autonomous voice, although unreliable and even deviant due to the subjectivity that animates it, constitutes a factor of epic self-construction. Dickens disassembles the traditional authorship, giving free access to the core of the narrative to a character with limited knowledge, but with a huge desire to live independently. Thanks to him the text goes through a process of self-articulation. The author of *Bleak House*, a forerunner of the European aesthetic modernity, succeeds thus in letting his own work live by itself and for itself. We are certainly in front of the first experiment of *sui generis* creation in the English literature.

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Abstract

Academics, critics and readers frequently adopt a rather stereotypical view on Charles Dickens's literary work. Admittedly, the author of *David Copperfield* stands out as a remarkable story-teller and, implicitly, as a very popular writer, both during his lifetime and *post mortem*, but he pays a significant price for this popularity nevertheless. The tribute in question would consist in an inevitable lack of intellectual sophistication, presumably manifest throughout his novels. Commentators generally argue that he was more interested, as a novelist, in addressing large and heterogeneous groups of Victorian consumers of literature than in shaping profoundly parabolic and symbolic textual constructions. Ultimately, this represents a critical prejudice and, therefore, the present article aims at asserting the opposite.

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