GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PIP AND MAGWITCH

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Abstract

The interplay of the characters in Great Expectations *achieves the global reading; the Pip-Magwitch interrelation is pervaded by ethic and social overtones, as Pip's evolution is primarily marked by lack of social adaptability. Pip's pity for a fellow-creature contravenes the vagueness of his moral criteria, thus opposing the 'decent' people's standards. The Pip-Magwitch relationship runs parallel to the Christian Good-and-Evil split. Pip's is a positive response to the social evils he has to face, while his way to the top is a sequence of cases of sham and moral distortion. His narcissism is eventually defeated by sheer reality, which revivifies his morals – with the outcast as the actual moulder of gentility.*

The famous Dickensian character-mythology can be said to be the very hallmark of the author's energetic creativity and inexhaustible imagination: the *personae* live their own lives; but they also participate in creating the general fabric of the respective novel – despite the fact that some Dickensian characters verge on would-be two-dimensionality, and their depiction was said to be, at times, tainted by caricature or the grotesque. Sometimes, the novelist can go as far as personifying the very scene of the plot, which may thus be considered a character in the respective novel. Only two examples in point would suffice: the background of the actions in *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*. Still, the most important contribution of character creation in Dickens's novels (and especially *Great Expectations*) is that represented by the interplay of two (or more) characters from the point of view of significance, with a view to achieving a global reading of the novel.

The place held by *Great Expectations* within the framework of Dickens's writing can be said to be a real turning-point as far as the conception of his novels is concerned: a certain restructuring is felt in the book, assumedly owing to the challenge of some new authors emerging (such as W.M. Thackeray, the Brontës, G. Eliot), which implied not only a greater preoccupation with the aesthetic theories of the day, but also a greater leaning towards clear etching and more strongly emphasised social themes.

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From the above perspective, it is only too obvious that *Great Expectations* marked, besides the literary craftsmanship, which is more elaborate than that in Dickens's previous novels, a better planning of plot and a more serious tone – both of which can be felt in the novel's character drawing, mainly through the Pip-Magwitch interrelation, which is heavily coloured in the social overtones pertaining to the period the plot is set in.

Both characters bear witness to a deep embedding of social elements into their human frames / moulds / casts / receptacles / matrixes. Thus Pip's evolution is strongly marked by his social lack of adaptability and his uneasiness, as his childhood and youth are constantly under attack by a sense of (social) guilt. This guilt arises from every social determining factor relating to his life, for example: for being an orphan or for having stolen from Joe's wife. Therefore the character is continually modelled and reshaped by the 'flow' of accidents, as it were, which colour his self-awareness with permanent hesitancy, discontent and weakness. Magwitch is, seemingly, one of those things that just happen to him. If it is Society, on the one hand, that discovers Pip, it is Magwitch, on the other, who reveals himself to Pip instead of being discovered by the boy. And if initially the boy's sense of guilt is only a burdening, prosecuting presence, the first contact with the Convict marks / signals the boy's dignified consciousness and acceptance of his guilt. When stealing the victuals, Pip knows that he is doing it for a noble cause, since his action is supported by (genuine) pity for a fellow-creature (see the boy's compassion at the sight of the Convict in the churchyard: "He hugged his shuddering body in both his arms – clasping himself as if to hold himself together (...) he looked in my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people stretching cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in (...) 'I wish I was a frog or a eel" – Chapter 1). Like Twain's Huck Finn, Pip has the moral strength to bear his virtual entanglement with the "dregs" of society when naïvely discriminating between moral stance and personal involvement (i.e. his own feelings) in his guilt debate, in spite of the vagueness of the moral criteria, which he is aware of. Thus, a clear conscience will be associated, in his inner being, with the simple action of having helped a persecuted fellow-being, while the 'decent' people (e.g. Pumblechook) are constantly associated with negative feelings. In the readiness for human behaviour which characterises him, Joe Gargery may be perceived as Pip's other ego ("We don't know what you have done, but we wouldn't have you starved to death for it, poor miserable fellow-creature. –Would us, Pip?" – Chapter 5). Pip's ensuing searchings of the mind – he had a nightmare – are only the result of his newly shaped moral stand, which is still shaky ("If I slept at all that night, it was only to imagine myself drifting down the river to the Hulks; a ghostly pirate calling out to me through a speaking-trumpet, as I passed the gibbet-station, that I had better come ashore and be hanged there at once, and not put it off." – Chapter 2).

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The parallel Pip-Magwitch can only be conceived in the light of the simple Christian division between Good and Evil (see also the Convict's forename – Abel – a transparent allusion to the biblical pair: Cain and Abel), as it is clear that this division overpowers class distinctions in *Great Expectations*. Pip reconciles his intelligence and his warm fellowship (hence, Christian) feelings as a positive response to the social evil he, like other characters, has to cope with. Similarly, Magwitch – here the Sinner, the Fallen One – has nothing to oppose reality than his striving to reform, both in social and moral / Christian terms (as he manages to do through hard work and moral forbearance).

Pip's route to the top of society is in fact a series of innumerable instances of the false pretence governing it – and, of course, one must see Miss Havisham, Magwitch's implicit counterpart, through the role of "benefactor" which has been initially assigned by Pip's imagination, as an epitome of such falsehood, while Magwitch himself was meant to represent the opposite pole (see Pip's first impressions of Miss Havisham: "she had a crutch-headed stick on which she leant and she looked like the witch of the place" – Chapter 11). Pip's aspiration towards gentility is on a par with the young man's acceptance of oddities, as moral distortion goes hand-in-hand with his way out of his own social class (under the emblematic 'patronage' of Miss Havisham, as it were). The boy feels as if he were a prisoner in his own existence ("see how I am going on. Dissatisfied, and uncomfortable, and – what would it signify to me, being coarse and common, if nobody had told me so!" – Chapter 17).

Yet Pip's narcissism is under attack by the naked facts of reality – **realism**, as embodied in Magwitch's very figure and actions, being implicitly opposed to the romantic / melodramatic mood (a dichotomy characteristic of Dickens's own frame of mind, as a matter of fact). The novel itself can be seen as having two distinct / distinctive sections: 1. Pip – Miss Havisham – Estella, accounting for the romantic side; 2. Pip – Magwitch – Joe Gargery, meaning realism and self-revelation.

The evolution of the two characters, although parallel, has an opposed sense and direction: while Magwitch, released from the pressure of material misery, especially from his captivity, is striving to find resources to become a good man, Pip, once rich, descends into wickedness. Of course Pip's is the more relevant evolution: from a symbolic standpoint, he undergoes a moral rebirth. Magwitch's mission is cut short in contentment and admiration in front of the 'gentleman' of his 'creation'. As applied to the description of Pip's ascent from egotism to self-denial and human affection, it was meant as a final test to pass on his way to genuine gentility. The best evidence of Pip's newly acquired quality is given by Magwitch himself, as he refers to young Pip's behaviour: "You acted noble, my boy. Noble, Pip! And I have never forgot it!" (Chapter 39).

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Pip's moral 'upsurge', achieved through his becoming entangled with Magwitch, interferes with the reverse mood, which, explicitly or not, is morally condemned by society – i.e. his acting against the standards of behaviour and morals set by society (and seen as 'secure'), an 'underground' action, liable to be punished. When lying to help Magwitch, Pip has to distinguish between his social and moral guilt (i.e. whether he still deserves the status of a gentleman in spite of his helping the hunted convict and, towards the end, whether he can remain a 'real gentleman' after trying to help him flee England).

The guilt-ridden atmosphere Pip is only too familiar with (see the scenes in which the child is lectured by his 'betters', e.g. "Do you hear that? Be grateful. 'Especially (...) be grateful, boy, to them which brong you up by hand'. (...) 'Why is it that the young are never grateful?' (...) 'Naterally vicious.' – Chapter 4) culminates, through the figure of Magwitch, in an immortalisation of the sufferings and humility of the poor and humble, of the simple creatures living in the England of that time. Magwitch comes to represent the violence of that world – and, in this light, Pip serves as a 'perceiving eye' of that oppressing reality that the Convict suddenly embodies in front of his childish (thence, *new*) look. Pip acts in his relationship with Magwitch as a middle term / 'hinge' element: on the one hand, he bears witness to the brutal division of the contemporary reality into two sharply differing sections – those who are considered to be always right and those who can hardly aspire to be so (and who, besides, have all the chances of, and reasons to be wrong) and, on the other hand, he himself is, through his foibles, one of the latter set.

The convict's very forename – Abel – implies, together with the sense of victimisation, a shade of irony. He is the good one, betrayed by the bad brother (viz. fellow-creature). His generosity is extreme, when lavished on his former benefactor – and, oddly enough, it has a twofold, rather paradoxical character: it conforms to generally accepted social standards as it is rooted in the burdening feeling of his own failed life, yet it is directed against society, as it is meant as a sort of revenge: "I've made a gentleman of you! It's me wot has done it! (...) I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work. (...) Do I tell it, fur you to feel a obligation? Not a bit. I tell it fur you to know as that there hunted dunghill dog wot you keep life in, got his head so high that he could make a gentleman – and Pip, you're him!" – Chapter 39). Like Victor Hugo's Jean Valjean, Magwitch is a representative of a kind of literary 'mythology' illustrating the reformed sinner's striving towards redemption (and re-humanising his past through substantial efforts and doing of good; Magwitch's link to Pip is – figuratively, but also possibly literally, if we consider all the strength of his affection and capacity for self-sacrifice – a parental relationship ("Look 'ee here, Pip! I'm your second father. You're my son – more to me nor any son (...) 'If I gets liberty and money, I'll make that boy a gentleman!" – Chapter 39). Abel Magwitch is the epitome of the Victim – like Pip, in fact, a victim of his own greenness / naïveté when

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confronted by society; he is a victim of poverty, abuse and repression, doomed to a sad plight – one may say a sacrificial act – and finally to death.

As related to Pip's destiny, Magwitch plays the part of a sort of dark, mysterious deity, aiming at finding the light. It is in order to attain redemption that Magwitch turns into a Creator – the maker of a destiny. First of all, in material terms: he has his own contribution to everything Pip-the gentleman means ("He looked about him with the strangest air – an air of wondering pleasure, as if he had some part in the things he admired" – Chapter 39); then, in moral terms: like any Demiurge, he is certain of the perfection of his creation (Magwitch's conscience is perfectly clear concerning Pip's possibilities of starting a new life – "he had no perception of the possibility of my finding any fault with my good fortune" – Ch. 41).

The convict's name itself – *Magwitch* – can be considered as illustrative of the part the convict has in the evolution of the central character: it may be read as *MAG + WITCH* (the first, a diminutive derivative from *Margaret* – also, *Meg* or *Mab*, this latter reminding us of / recalling the popular figure of the Fairy Queen in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*; or it can be an allusion to Mary *Mag*dalen, the prototype of repentance through morality and doing of good; the second part – *witch* – is easy to fit into the general fairy tale atmosphere characterising young Pip's intimate feelings, rather naïve opinions and occasional fits of mythomania – see Pip's fantastic account of his first visit to Miss Havisham's castle: "She was sitting in a black velvet coach (...) and Miss Estella handed her in cake and wine on a gold plate (...) We played with flags", etc. – Chapter 9). Thus the character's name can reveal his double nature: the good fairy is not very attractive (a 'witch'), or a 'witch' who has learnt how to do good actions, thus being able to play the part of the 'Fairy Queen'. (The message concealed in the name could perhaps be also read as *Mag*ician + *witch*). The same archetypal, or rather fairytale-like, quality operates as far as Magwitch's self-disclosure is concerned: Pip, the newly created gentleman, facing the darker 'alter ego', resembles the Charming Prince about to receive the help of the Fairy who has not yet shed her frog's (lizard's, snake's, etc.) skin. The idea of the *test* imposed on the hero so that he might show his merit is supported, in Pip's case, by his progress to genuine humanisation (cf. the concept of 'gentility') through compassion and – what is more – labour (in which a biblical note is also perceptible: "Thou shalt earn thy daily bread in the sweat of thy brow").

Moral purification – for Pip – is the acquisition of a more serious, 'graver man' character (i.e. a winner); while the source of his moral regeneration, the 'ugly fairy' – Magwitch – dies a sacrificial death, as a perfect winner. An *anti-hero* initially (and apparently), Magwitch finishes as the real hero of Pip's existence – mainly through his great, almost inhuman resolution ("I recalled how he had made me *swear* fidelity in the churchyard long ago, and how he had described himself

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last night as always swearing to his resolutions in his solitude." – Ch. 40) and strong character ("This is an ignorant determined man (...), a man of a desperate and *fierce character*" – Ch. 41).

The Outcast (Magwitch) is actually the creator of gentility – the message of the two characters' interrelation may be seen as a moral parable, as Pip's striving towards 'gentility' without knowing its real value proves fruitless, while the cruelty of the scene in which Magwitch reveals himself as the source of Pip's 'expectations' serves as a mirror held up to vanity (i.e. false gentility) by one who considers himself well above the falseness of the social system built on material acquisition. By fighting against the system with its own weapons, Magwitch acquires a sort of tyrannical, obsessive behaviour, almost to the point of making a puppet out of Pip (cf. Pip's observation "He is intent upon various new expenses – horses, and carriages, and lavish appearance of all kinds. He must be stopped somehow!" – Chapter 41). Even the pseudonym of Provis, which the convict adopts can be interpreted in this light: a "provider"/ a "provident" man – hence, one who wants to play God by giving / providing.

Magwitch's last words ("Dear boy, I'm quite content to take my chance. I've seen my boy, and he can be a gentleman without me" – Chapter 55) demonstrate his awareness of having created a *man* (not only a *gentleman*), while he himself has lost his former revengeful frenzy to become a man (i.e. the very best for a human creature, which is in between the Beast and the Angel – see Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*).

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