# *IMAGINATION IN DICKENSIAN FICTION: "GREAT EXPECTATIONS"*

**Valentina STÎNGĂ**[*]

***Abstract:*** *One of the finest novels written by the iconic British author Charles Dickens,* Great Expectations *is, in fact, the story of a young boy who has the courage to dream about crossing class boundaries and becoming a better self, only to discover that one's spiritual welfare is better than the material one. The character's imaginative powers brought him to the point of reaching his goal of transgressing the social gap and, at the same time, helped him perceive the true meaning of his identity.*

***Keywords****: class, imagination, boundary, identity.*

The most popular prose writer of the Victorian era, and one of the most popular writers of all times, Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) gained success due to his constant preoccupation with poor and miserable people, whom he recreated in his fiction with sympathy and compassion. He created most memorable characters in such famous novels as *David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, Hard Times, Bleak House* etc., to name just a few titles from the significant literary heritage he left to world culture.

One of the finest novels by this iconic British author, *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) continues to stir the readers' interest as a result of its approach of dissipated illusions, as well as due to the writer's treatment of his familiar themes of crime, punishment, and societal struggle in Victorian England. Due to the complexity of its content, it can be read and reread and new meanings can be extracted from it every single time.

The present paper seeks to dwell on the concept of *imagination* and the role it assumes in the development of the main character of this novel, Phillip Pirrip; for a better understanding of the matter, we find it adequate to begin with a succinct presentation of the plot of the novel. Traditionally, the literary reader thinks of this novel in terms of a Bildungsroman that revolves around the figure of Philip Pirrip, known as Pip, the central character and the teller of the story. The boy is an orphan and lives in the marsh country of the North Kent Coast, being brought up (as quite often underlined by the narrator, "by hand") by his bullying older sister (Mrs. Gargery), who sees her younger brother more like a burden, and by his loyal friend Joe Gargery (and at the same time his brother-in-law), who is a blacksmith. Therefore, Pip's condition as revealed to the readers' consciousness in the first chapters of the novel is typical of Dickens's view on children and childhood. Although he has a sister, she sees him as a burden, and this may explain the excessive sense of guilt we see from the first chapter of the novel. He tries to educate himself, he is intelligent and imaginative and these qualities help him look beyond the narrow world of the forge.

Life brings him in contact with the upper-class world, represented by the old spinster Miss Havisham and by Estella, a meeting during which the boy feels highly humiliated as the two women look at him with "*supreme aversion*" (865). "*Why, he's a common labouring boy!*" (104) exclaims Estella when seeing Pip, mocking his

[*] Universitatea din Pitești, valentina.stinga@upit.ro



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clumsiness and the way he speaks. The moment changes Pip forever – "*I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it*" (*GE,* 105); he is "*humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry*" (*GE,* 108), therefore his self-esteem is highly altered. The dialogue with Estella and the whole Satis House scene, in fact, represents an extraordinary analysis of the pathology of class in Victorian society. The boy becomes more, not less, deferential, angry not with his presumed "*betters*", but rather with his guardian, Joe, for not being genteel.

The feeling of humiliation is so strong that, after he leaves Satis House, Pip experiences an urgent desire to cry: "*I looked about me for a place to hide my face in, and got behind one of the gates in the brewery-lane, and leaned my sleeve against the wall there, and leaned my forehead on it and cried. As I cried, I kicked the wall, and took a hard twist at my hair; so bitter were my feelings, and so sharp was the smart without a name, that needed counteraction*" (109). This intense emotional reaction is generated by the child's developing a sense of injustice: "*In the little world in which children have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice. It may be only small injustice that the child can be exposed to; but the child is small, and its world is small…*" (109)

In order to annihilate this social gap, Pip is convinced that he should become a gentleman and this, in turn, would make him a better person. Thus, his ultimate goal is now to become a gentleman and win Estella's love. To achieve his purpose, he plans to leave the local forge so as to build a better life for himself and achieve self-learning. His desire of leaving is fulfilled by Mr. Jaggers, the lawyer who tells him about an inheritance received from a mysterious benefactor. This is the moment when Pip changes completely: he understands he now possesses a great fortune and is able to go to London in order to become a gentleman. The boy leaves his familiar surroundings and his life as a common apprentice and goes to London to start a respectable life as a gentleman. The city of London represents the second stage of the character's educational growth. It is in this stage that Pip becomes a dreadful snob, disdainfully neglecting his childhood friends. Increasingly isolated and alone, he grows disillusioned with the false glitter of London society and starts feeling that his education, manners and wealth have cut him off from his childhood friends, Joe and Biddy. When his secret benefactor is finally revealed, it comes as a shock to Pip and it leads him into a nightmare world "full of soul-searching psychological drama packed with action and danger" (Wright, 1986:56). After struggling with life and death issues, Pip succeeds in learning his lesson and finding his true identity. At the end of the novel, the protagonist comes to realize that it is in the forge that the true gentleman is to be found, and that was Joe, "a gentle Christian man" (Wright, 1986:35).

The novel has often been conceived as a Bildungsroman, i.e. a novel of formation. At the beginning, Pip is an orphan, therefore deprived of parental love, whose views are distorted by a sadistic older sister, by the dramatic encounter with the escaped convict, Magwitch, and then by Miss Havisham's stratagem of making him Estella's plaything, as well as, later on, by Provis's wish to transform him into a gentleman. This direction is doubled by the overall theme of the novel, i.e. that of false pride, which "is given a specifically monetary perspective: Pip's ambitions to be a gentleman, based on the belief that he is the chosen protégé of Miss Havisham, are shattered when he learns that his sponsor is the convict Magwitch" (*Penguin History of Literature*, 35). But *Great Expectations* is, in fact, "equivocal about money-values and its real strength lies in the quality of its psychological penetration, revealed not only in



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its account of Pip's reactions to his situation, but also in features like the (…) self-imposed death-in-life Miss Havisham, the consequence of her having been jilted many years before" (Pollard*,* 1970: 106).

The title of the novel encourages us to look forward while the narrator is looking back. This is altogether possible due to "the shifting, fascinating processes of exploration, corresponding to imagination, memory and reflection" (Pollard*,* 1970: 36-37). As a whole, Charles Dickens' novel appears as a painful exercise in recollection, Magwitch assuming somehow the role of substitute for the dead father. The name of Pip's benefactor is not to be ignored, on the contrary, it is quite suggestive: "the Latin *magus* and the English *witch* suggest the admixture of the mythical benevolence of gods with the Victorian mistrust of any sudden favourable turn of fortune" (Horsman, 1990:50). Because of the condition of imprisonment, it appears that Charles Dickens' own father stands in the shadow of Magwitch.

Through the novel is foremost a novel built on the inner structure of Victorian society, with its embedded conflicts and deep social issues, the novelist chose to endow his protagonist with a potential and propensity to imagine Imagination should be understood in this context as the character's faculty to rethink reality and reshape it in such a way as to respond to his/her inner structure, i.e. to expand his/her perspective on it from actual to possible/probable) plays a significant role in the development of the plot, and its power is confirmed from the opening scenes of Chapter I. On the dreary afternoon of Christmas Eve, 1860, young Pip sits sadly in the churchyard ("*a bleak place overgrown with nettles*") outside town where his parents and siblings are buried and tries to reconstruct their identity after such external objects like their tombstones: "*As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones*" (*GC,* 4) It becomes obvious from this extract and from the passages that follow that the author invested in Pip an imaginative power that can substitute his actual loss of roots with imaginative explanations and trials to find an origin:

> "The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, 'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,' I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine - who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle - I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence" (*GC,* 2-3).

The shape of the letters is the only means of knowledge about his dead relatives, but their scarcity is compensated by the richness and vividness of his imagination.

From this imaginative endeavour the child passes immediately to the harsh reality of his surroundings and, generally, of his life:



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> At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip". (*GC,* 4)

The injustice of reality is lived painfully by Pip during his stay at Satis House, who has the courage to reveal his true feelings only in front of kind Joe. It is to him that he confesses: "(…) I wish you hadn't taught me to call Knaves at cards, Jacks; and I wish my boots weren't so thick nor my hands so coarse" (*GC,* 122), going even deeper with his analysis "and that there had been a beautiful young lady at Miss Havisham's who was dreadfully proud, and that she had said I was common, and that I knew I was common, and that I wished I was not common" (*GC,* 123). This encounter is what determines him to try to change the ordinary course of events by surpassing his humble condition and gaining a higher social status: "That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me." (*GC,* 126) The boy has the power to nurture 'great expectations' that basically assume the meaning of a dream he can break social boundaries and have access to the privileges of the sophisticated aristocracy. "Pip suddenly loses the child's innocent view of his home, its assumptions and plans, its stereotypes, its sense of social sufficiency." (Golden, 169). After the several visits he pays to Satis House, Pip can no longer remain the one he used to be and take satisfaction from what used to provoke him satisfaction:

> "Once, it had seemed to me that when I should at last roll up my shirt-sleeves and go into the forge, Joe's 'prentice, I should be distinguished and happy. Now the reality was in my hold, I only felt that I was dusty with the dust of small coal, and that I had a weight upon my daily remembrance to which the anvil was a feather." (*GC*, 189)

Parting from his origin, Pip undergoes a series of adventurous experiences during which he is no longer accompanied by his gold old friend Joe, but only supported financially by what he thinks as a benefactress. It is she who sends Pip where young Dickens had also gone before: into the world of high class, culture, opportunity and sophisticated people. The young boy is eager to undergo this transformation, even if he understands he will walk on this path alone, as none of his childhood friends have such grand and 'uncommon' aspirations. Time passes and brings along various events and stages in Pip's becoming a gentleman, starting from getting educated and trying to "impart" his knowledge to Joe to make him "less ignorant and common" to such superficial and shallow actions as hiring a servant or buying rich clothes. Yet, at some point Pip comes to realize that his great expectations were founded on a painful illusion: "with the convict's revelation, Pip realizes 'how wrecked I was', for there had been no plans by Miss Havisham, no destined marriage to Estella" (Golden, 170). Reality strikes him hard and makes him understand the true meaning of gentility:



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> "But, sharpest and deepest pain of all - it was for the convict, guilty of I knew not what crimes, and liable to be taken out of those rooms where I sat thinking, and hanged at the Old Bailey door, that I had deserted Joe" (*GC,* 577).

Therefore, the status of a gentleman Pip has always dreamt of is much more about what is inside than what is outside, and Pip does not learn that until much, much later. Pip grows in the pages of this novel from a humble young boy, aware of his condition, to a discontented adolescent and, eventually, to a resigned adult.

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