

The Reconstruction of Identity of the Gentleman in *Great Expectations*

Madhumita Majumdar

Bhagar Mahavidyalaya, Kolkata

When people say that Dickens could not describe a gentleman, what they mean is ...that Dickens could not describe a gentleman as gentlemen feel a gentleman. They mean that he could not take that atmosphere easily, accept it as normal atmosphere, or describes that world from the inside....Dickens did not describe gentleman in the way that gentlemen describe gentlemen...He described them...from the outside, as he described any other oddity or special trade.

G. K. Chesterton only put into words what was usually thought of Dickens during his life time. It was usually believed that Dickens could not describe a gentleman because he was himself not one. In 1871, Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* reported the imprisonment of Dickens' father on charges of debt non-payment and his own childhood employee status in the blacking factory. This revelation only gave confirmation to Dickens' detractors that he was not the conventional gentleman. It stood ratified more by the words of Dickens daughter: 'My father was not a gentleman – he was too mixed to be gentleman.' (Kate Dickens Perugino, *The Dickensian*; 1980). When Dickens was writing his contemporary happened to be William Thackeray. Both Dickens and Thackeray were novelists of the middle-class emergence but at opposite ends of the scale. Thackeray's area was the land between the aristocracy and the middle classes while Dickens was concerned with the lower reaches of the middle class in its most anxious phase of self-definition, struggling out of trade and domestic service.

Dickens found and mastered a fictional form capable of expressing the social ironies underlying, both in his own and his generation's preoccupation with the 'idea of gentleman' and in doing so delivered what is in many ways his most profound commentary on Victorian civilization and its values. Also, Dickens could write *Great Expectations* because he was deeply involved in the process of social evolution. Dickens came of age after the 1832 Reform Bill (the bill attempted to give more clarity and equal representation to the suffrage character of England of the time). Dickens also shared the age's fascination with the idea of gentleman. It is thus obvious and clear as to why he was pulled in many directions by the conflicting images of gentlemanliness in the early Victorian age. Dickens who saw gentleman from the outside came to appreciate both the centrality of the gentlemanly idea in Victorian culture and its underlying irony that however moralized; the concept depended for its existence upon exclusion on separating the gentleman from the non-gentleman. *Great Expectations* is the fruit of that understanding.

Great Expectations like *Hard Times* was written on the prompting of urgent external circumstances. In October, 1860, Dickens wrote to Foster, his editor of many of serialized writings but later went on to become his friend: 'It was perfectly clear that one thing to be done was for me to strike in. I have therefore decided to begin a story, the length of *Tale of Two Cities*, on the first of December... dashing in now, I come in when most wanted.' Dickens was referring to the financial crunch that was being faced by *All the Year Round* (1859), the magazine that had also published his *Tale of Two Cities*. This gesture of Dickens was not an exclusive thing; he had done so with *Household Words* by publishing *Hard Times* in it when the magazine was in a similar financial dearth. *Great Expectations*, Dickens' thirteenth novel was published in his weekly journal *All the Year Round*. However, an American edition was also published, curiously a week in advance of the English version, in *Harper's Weekly*!

It is another of the novel of Dickens that contains a strong autobiographical element, though not as openly as in *David Copperfield*. Dickens reread *Copperfield* before beginning *Great Expectations* to avoid unintentional repetition. Called Dickens' darkest work by some, it was very well received by Victorian readers and remains one of Dickens' most popular works till date. Many consider this novel Dickens' greatest use of plot, characterization, and style and hence his masterpiece. The novel in itself is a reflection of its time and life. There many examples in the novel to prove this:

'I don't know why it should be crack thing to be a brewer; but it is indisputable that while you cannot possibly be genteel and bake, you may be as genteel as never was and brew, you see it every day.'

'Yet a gentleman may not keep a public house, may he?' Said I.

'Not on any account,' returned Herbert; 'but a public house may keep a gentleman....' (*Great Expectations*, Chapter 22).

Such witty registration of social reality leaves the theorist of manners far behind and this incidentally is a reflection of the times when this novel of our discussion was being written. None the less, the very frequency with which the question: 'What is it to be a gentleman?' was being asked in the 1850s and 1860s is a fact which becomes an important aspect to understand the novel as it testifies of a growing uncertainty about the old landmarks of gentle hood which the fiction itself attempts to reflect and bring us to think upon. The problem of the self-made man or would be gentleman can be found to the subject of many a novels of the time for example *Mrs. Craicks John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), *Meredith's Evan Harrington, or, He Would be a Gentleman* (1861), *Trollope's Doctor Thorne* (1858) contains a vulgar self-made man as well as an illegitimate heroine who puzzles over her humble birth: 'If she were born a gentlewoman! And then came to her mind those curious questions; what makes a gentlewoman, what makes a gentlewoman?'(Chapter 6) Apart from these there were

many feature writings about the idea of a gentleman that filled spaces in periodicals, magazines etc. One such example is quoted for reference here:

In this age of rivalry, money worship, and spurious equality...we all seek to be gentlemen and gentlewomen. The pursuit is laudable, the aim is noble; and what is more, in running this race, we may be all winners; for we each can reach the goal from our own point, and bear off our crown. To be gentleman admits of such various interpretations, that whilst on the one hand, nothing is so difficult, on the other hand nothing is so easy. (James Hain Friswell, *The Gentle Life*, 1864)

Also, *Friswell's The Gentlelife* (38 edition) stated that between 1864 and 1892, there are indications that there was a receptive audience for the message that good birth was not essential for the gentleman or gentlewoman. William Sewell of Radley actually preached a sermon in the school chapel on the subject of 'Rank' and delivers himself of the following sentiments:

A gentleman, then, and a Christian, whether boy or man, both knows, and is thankful that God, instead of making all men equal, has made them all most unequal, hereditary rank, nobility of blood, is the very first condition and essence of all our Christian privileges; and woe to the nation, or the man by whom such a principle is disdained, who will honour no one expect for its own merits and his own deeds!

Incidentally, Dickens did use known incidents in newspapers in his writings and *Great Expectations* was known also to use some. In February, 1861 inmates at the Chatham Convict Prison dissatisfied with their treatment erupted in a bloody riot. In the installment of the novel that appeared in 13 April, 1861 in *All Round Year*, Pip, the narrator with whom Dickens shared his aversion to the molly coddling of the jailbirds, described his visit to Newgate Prison with Wemmick in Chapter 32 of the novel as appalling. This approach where newspaper events moulded the course of the novel is not an exclusive hallmark of Dickens but a number of other Victorian novelists also followed the journalistic pattern of writing. Again, it is not that Dickens always found appreciation for such an approach. A reviewer in *Rambler* (1862) complained of Dickens' writing style: "It is the mere poverty of an imagination self-restrained to one narrow field of human nature that makes him search curiously for such follies and ransack newspapers for incidents to put into his books." In spite of the snide remarks, there is no denying the contemporary weaved in the novel adds to the rich texture of the work/s.

Referring back to the quote on brewing of Chapter 22, in the given light, it is important to state that wholesale trade was finally considered genteel in the second half of the nineteenth century--as is the case with the proud, haughty Miss Havisham, a brewery heiress who fancies herself an aristocrat. Pip begins with iron chains at Joe's

forge but yearns for golden chains, those which also bind Miss Havisham to her past and her thirst for vengeance. At the close of Ch. 19 Pip changes clothes (an act symbolic of his changing class) and leaves his true friends, Biddy and Joe, for the vain and superficial society of London. Like Martin Chuzzlewit in the 1843 picaresque novel, Pip leaves the unspoiled countryside for a city of filth, crime, and oppression. However, Pip becomes a gentleman only in the true sense when he learns from the mouth of his benefactor the actual source of his great expectations; he proves his fundamental humanity by deciding to assist Magwitch, his great-hearted fairy- godfather who is to Pip what Miss Havisham is to Estella. Abel Magwitch, victim of the aristocratic and depraved Compeyson (Cain?), is Dickens' indictment of the nineteenth-century British society's callous disregard for the welfare of the lower orders. From him Pip unlearns the lessons of Miss Havisham, Jaggers, and Wemmick; once again he values people for what they are rather than for their 'portable property' and pocketbooks. The central plot--with its secrets that Magwitch is responsible for Pip's fortune and that he is Estella's father--is obscured by surprisingly few digressions; the book's action is tight and well-knit, owing in part perhaps to its weekly as opposed to Dickens's usual monthly serial structure. Like its weekly-serialized brethren, *Hard Times* (1854) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the 1861 novel has fewer characters and little sub-plotting. Expectations and exploitation are its organizing and unifying motifs and both work to build the larger frame of the novel: 'the true gentleman'

In the novel, Dickens shows how from infancy the individual is oppressed, moulded, and channelled into his adult identity: "The Child is father of the Man" (Wordsworth). Satis House and London are a complementary microcosm and macrocosm. Dickens's symbols generally and of the world-as- prison metaphor in particular involve mud, dust, gardens, seeds, the courts, and the river. He contrasts the purity of the Thames in the marsh country, at its mouth, with its pollution and corruption in the metropolis. Dickens' ability to build suspense through adapting the devices of the late eighteenth-century's Gothic novel (the eerie setting, the child or young woman in danger, the evil and deformed monster, the plosive and villainous aristocrat, the nightmare, and so on) has served as a model for later novelists. Dickens uses the persecution and exploitation of children and the theatricality of funerals to build pathos.

Apart from the direct influence of life around him that went into the making of the novel, Dickens also used episodes reported in newspapers or elsewhere. One of the odd, striking characters of the novel, Miss Havisham is once again a composite character - the street recluse in the *Annual Register* for 1778 that was etched to his memory because of a play performed only once in 1831 in which two characters "Rouge et Noire" and "The White Women" were suggestive of demented woman who were actually living at that time. Secondly, there was news of a jilted bride who entirely

dressed in white would parade in Barnes Street and this was described by Dickens in an essay in *Household Words* (1st Jan., 1853). But the fragment of London lore and life that would have most immediately recalled the character of Miss Havisham to the readers of *Great Expectations* is the legend of 'Dirty Dick', the son of a well-to-do son of a hardened street iron monger whose engagement feast was abruptly cancelled by his intended's death. He then sealed the undisturbed dining room that had been set for the banquet. Unlike Miss Havisham, he did not immune himself but became a wanderer till he died some fifty years later. There is another possibility that the character was inspired by what appeared in the January 1850 issue of *Household Narrative* (magazine) supplement to *Household Words* where there was the mention of a Miss Havisham like character, an eccentric called Martha Joachim of York Buildings, Stanford.

There is no denying that newspaper bonded readers and by the time of Dickens, the readers had become a substantial number rather than just a select few and were provided with common sense of information, a shared vocabulary centering on topicalities that novelists, among other writers, could rely on as they chose their allusion. Such borrowings actually helped them to choose topics of modernity and that helped them to cater to needs of the readers for whom they were writing for.

Published in three volumes by Chapman and Hall in 1861 (July), there were no illustrations and there was no preface to *Great Expectations* and was dedicated to Chauncey Hare Townshend and the advertisement for the novel went thus: 'Three volumes post 8VO for 31S.6d'. This was something that had never been done by Dickens earlier and none of his earlier works were ever issued in this form (Patten). The reviewers hailed it as a welcome return to the earlier manner of writing 'after passing under the cloud of *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*' wrote the *Saturday Review*. E.S. Dallas of *The Times* wrote in a similar strain:

Mr. Dickens has good –naturedly granted to his hosts of readers of the desire of their hearts....The public insisted upon seeing the Dickens chiefly the humourist and however great he may be in other directions; they count all as nothing beside his rare faculty of humour. To those who may not be satisfied with a work of this author's unless humour sup abounds most, we can heartily commend *Great Expectations*.

Mrs. Oliphant writing in *Blackwood's Magazine* found the novel 'feeble, fatigued and colourless' while modern critics like Lionel Stevenson have called it a 'dark novel' . Incidentally, the modern critics have stressed on its somber, disillusioned quality, so it does come as a surprise that the contemporaries of Dickens found the work robust and refreshing. However, Dickens spoke of it as 'primarily comic and grotesque in conception'. 'I have made the opening, I hope', he told Forster, 'in its general effect exceedingly droll' and then went back to speak of the 'pivot' of the story – the

relationship between Pip and the convict 'on which the story will turn' – as a 'grotesque tragic-comic conception'. To Mary Boyle, Dickens wrote: 'Pray read *Great Expectations*, I think it is very droll.'

True, the presentation of the hero and society at large is sufficiently sober and even melancholy but there is a good deal of comedy in the novel, certainly more than its predecessors as weekly serials *Hard Times* and *Tale of Two Cities*. On the other hand, such characters as Mr. Wopsle, Mr. Trabbo and Bill Barley might have strayed from *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Nicholas Nickleby* and such episodes as Wemmick's wedding seem self indulgently light-hearted whilst the home life of the Pocket family is distinctly a throwback. But these are minor characters and minor episodes whilst they render intelligible the response of Dickens' earliest readers, the novel as a whole is profoundly serious. Perhaps the clue to the tone of the novel lies in Dickens' own term for the novel - 'tragi-comedy'. It is (at least with substituted ending) a comedy in the sense that enables *Measure for Measure* or *A Winter's Tale* to be qualified amongst the comedies of Shakespeare, and this although for example Dickens told Forster at the outset he had 'put a child and a good natured foolish man in relations that seems funny'. Needless to say, this is a very incomplete presentation of the role of Joe Gargery – a role that can show him both as a figure of fun (the hen pecked husband of music hall jokes, the comic illiterate, the rustic absurdly tricked out in his uncomfortable Sunday best) and as possessing genuine dignity and the power to touch our feelings deeply (as in his visit to Pip's London Chambers and his nursing back of Pip to health). What Dickens achieved in *Great Expectations* is a subtle bending of genres that were earlier kept separate in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for instance farce and sentiment usually occupy different blocks in the said novel but in *Great Expectations*, they are shown to be the different aspects of the same character or experience.

Apart from the tragic-comic structure of the novel, another interesting aspect of the work is the first person narrative that helps to recreate the past with a vivid sense of immediacy and to comment on it, often ironically from the standpoint of a man who is older, wiser and sadder. Chapters 8,11,12,19 uses words like 'then'- thereafter, the narrator gives a double or triple perspective on his experience that is like the blending of comedy and seriousness that goes on to produce a subtly ambiguous and bitter sweet flavour. Even an experience at a particular point in time can be revealed as existing in the memory only as a result of the larger accumulated that is through subsequent experiences, so had Pip described his first impression of Miss Havisham (Chapter 8). Thus the honesty of the narrator is retained at crucial points in the novel, though the narrative voice gets a little exaggerating in describing Miss Havisham such as when comparing her to a fairy god-mother.

Great Expectations has been noted for its economic style of writing but a discussion on the text is incomplete without a comment on the ending of the text –

there is the original ending and the second ending which Dickens had to rework under popular demand. Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright, loved the novel but deplored the second ending. It was largely believed that behind the second ending was the relationship between Dickens and his readers and their confidence in him as a great entertainer who while showing the darker side of life would make everything right in the end. The original ending had Bidy asking Pip about Estella, 'You are sure you don't feel for her?' David Lodge favoured the first ending to the second and put across his argument thus:

Estella was, after all, the sexual symbol of all the false values on which Pip based his early life, and to reward him with his renunciation of these values with marriage to her is a kind of contradiction. It also comprises of the novel's sober recognition that not all the damage that we do to ourselves and to others is repairable. In the original version, Pip having realized belatedly that Estella is incapable of love, turns too late to the loving Bidy, and twice disappointed, accepts his single, childless state as in a sense his lust deserts him (hence the irony in the cancelled conclusion of Estella's assumption that little Pip as his own child. (Ambiguously Ever After in Essays by Drivers Hands n.s.XLI [1980], P.43

On the other side is David Lean's film of *Great Expectations* (1946) that justifies its happy ending by having Pip save Estella who had been jilted by Bentley Drummble in the rewritten script from becoming another Miss Havisham. Polhemus developed his argument by concentrating on Pip's symbolic 'rape' of Miss Havisham, finding in the 'tension and energy latent in the 19th Century drive to reconcile the desire and the prohibition [against incest] without diminishing the power of either' (Polhemus, p.1, A Dickens Companion, Macmillan,1984). There have been studies that have shown how David Copperfield's suppression of death and sex results in the formulation of his doubles as in Heep etc. To add to this is an interesting fact: Dickens prepared a reading version of *Great Expectations* before the end of the summer of 1861 (it was printed privately but never performed). In it remained young Pip's encounter with Magwitch in the churchyard to Magwitch's death in prison; Estella and Bidy are never mentioned, nor are Orlick, Drummble and other minor characters. It does remain a question whether Dickens himself did feel that the Estella episode was not that important in the growth of the character of Philip Pirrip?

Whatever might have passed the mind Dickens, *Great Expectations* without fail is a brilliant evocation of a time and place, a view of the English class system that is both realistic and critical.

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Madhumita Majumdar is Assistant Professor in English at Bhangar Mahavidyalaya, Kolkata.
