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NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

STRUCTURE

Great Expectations is structured in three stages. These correspond to the three volumes of the first edition but they are integral to the overall organisation of the text and not just to publishing expediency. One pattern that may be discerned is the Christian one of innocence, fall and sin, and final redemption through expiation and suffering. Dickens was an instinctive Christian and thought in religious terms. Pip must lose the world (at least temporarily) in order to regain his soul. In several key episodes like the discovery of his expectations (Chapter 19), the burial of Mrs Joe (Chapter 35) and the death of Magwitch (Chapter 56), biblical references are used to make an ironical or moral point. The use of the Miltonic phrase ‘the world lay spread before me’ (Chapter 19, p. 160) which ends the first stage of the novel is clearly designed to suggest Pip’s departure from the forge is analogous to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden.

CONTEXT

The reference to ‘the Eastern story’ (Chapter 38) is to one of James Ridley’s *Tales of the Genii* (1776), a great favourite of the young Dickens. The story implies the collapse of Pip’s hopes and the destruction of an impostor.

Another, quite different, narrative strategy is highlighted by the reference to the crushing slab in the ‘Eastern Story’ near the end of the second stage of the novel (Chapter 38). Some of the greatest and most significant stories in Western literature, like *Oedipus Rex* and *Macbeth*, contain a moment of recognition and reversal of fortune. The hero has pursued a course of action, on the basis of knowledge and understanding, which events suddenly reveal is false. The hero’s plans are shown to be useless, his hopes and aspirations futile or self-destructive. He has been deceived all along. Clearly much of the power of Pip’s narrative is gained by Dickens structuring his story along these lines.

Finally, Dickens’ story can be read as a kind of moral **fable** illustrating the dangers and possibilities inherent in a newly affluent, competitive society. Pip is torn away from his roots at the forge, comes to no good in London but receives an education and other social advantages. When disaster strikes, he discovers that there is no going back to his simple origins but, sadder and wiser, he is able to prosper as a businessman overseas by using his own talents instead of living corruptly off inherited, unearned money.

PLOTS

At the beginning of the novel, Pip is the victim of the plotting of others. Not only do Magwitch and Miss Havisham have plans for him, but some of the minor characters cast him in dubious roles for their own entertainment, too. Wopsle sees him as the Prodigal Son in the Bible story (Chapter 4) or Barnwell the apprentice murderer (Chapter 15); Pumblechook insists on casting him as his ungrateful protégé.

Until Magwitch’s reappearance in Chapter 39, Pip consistently misreads the nature of the plot he is in. He thinks that he is the changeling of fairy tale who is really of noble birth. Miss Havisham is a fairy godmother, and Estella an enchanted princess imprisoned in Satis House. It is his destiny to rescue her. The reality proves to be different. Miss Havisham is the wicked witch after all, and Estella a genuine ice-maiden. Pip needs to be cured of his day-dreaming romanticism. His wealth has no magical source; London streets are not paved with gold, but squalid, criminal and treacherous. Magwitch’s plot is repressed but keeps surfacing fitfully in ominous signs and omens like the reappearance of the file, the two ‘sweltering’ pound notes (Chapter 10, p. 78), or the convicts on the coach.

Part of the appeal of *Great Expectations* is that it contains a false romantic plot and an ironically realist one and they interact with each other. Once Pip is fully aware of his true situation, he becomes an active plotter in his own right. He schemes to hide and save Magwitch and, playing the detective, he unearths the secret of Estella’s parentage, which even Jaggers does not know. The story is made from a web of plots, some embedded in others: the fate of Pip and Estella is already determined by plots hatched by Arthur, Miss Havisham’s half-brother, and the arch villain Compeyson, many years before the story opens. One particularly sensational plot, adding to the excitement in the final stages of the novel, is Orlick’s revenge in the sluiceway, also aided by Compeyson.

HALLUCINATIONS, NIGHTMARES AND INTIMATIONS

From the start of his search into the ‘identity of things’ (Chapter 1, p. 3), the reader follows Pip’s progress as he moves through a world of confusing and conflicting signs. Part of the evolving drama in the



CHECK THE BOOK

G. Robert Stang’s essay ‘Expectations Well Lost: Dickens’s Fable for His Time’, *College English*, 16 (October 1954), pp. 9–17 takes this view. Extracts from this essay can be found in Tredell’s *Reader’s Guide*.

History

1788 First convict settlement is founded in Australia

1802 First Act of Parliament is passed protecting factory workers

1819 First Factory Act is passed to restrict employment of children in mines

1825 First passenger railway opens

1832 Cholera epidemic sweeps across England. The Great Reform Bill is passed. Last gibbeting

1834 Parish workhouses introduced. ‘Tolpuddle Martyrs’ are convicted and transported to Australia. Returning illegally from transportation ceased to be punishable by death

1837 Victoria becomes Queen. ‘Hulks’ system condemned

Author’s life

1812 Born
1812-19 Spends early childhood in Portsmouth then Chatham

1819 Moves to London with parents

1824 Dickens’ father is imprisoned for debt; Dickens works in Warren’s blacking warehouse until family’s fortunes improve

1827 Starts work in a law firm

1832 Becomes a journalist

1836 Marries Catherine Hogarth. *Pickwick Papers*

1838 *Oliver Twist*

Literature

1789 Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation*

1811 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

1813 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

1815 Lord Byron, *Collected Works*

1820 Thomas Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*

1830 William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*

History

1840 Transportation to New South Wales abolished

1842 Employment in mines of women and children under ten is outlawed

1848 Municipalities are empowered to set up local boards of health. Widespread civil unrest sweeps across Europe

1851 Great Exhibition in London

1858 Last ‘Hulk’ closed

1867 Some sections of the working class are given the vote for the first time

1869 Imprisonment for debt is abolished

1870 Forster’s Elementary Education Act establishes School Boards with power to set up schools in areas where there are no church schools

Author’s life

1840-41 *The Old Curiosity Shop*

1843 *A Christmas Carol*

1850 *David Copperfield*

1853 *Bleak House*

1854 *Hard Times*

1856 Buys Gad’s Hill near Rochester

1857 *Little Dorrit*

1858 Separates from Catherine

1860-61 *Great Expectations*

1864-65 *Our Mutual Friend*

1870 Dies of overwork and exhaustion. *Edwin Drood* left unfinished at his death

Literature

1842 Edwin Chadwick, *Inquiry into the Sanatory Condition of the Labouring Population*

1845 Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil*

1847 Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

1859 Charles Darwin, *Origin of the Species*. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*

1860 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*

1861 George Eliot, *Silas Marner*

1863 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

1867 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*