

The great expectation

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Our expectations change us. They affect everything: the way we dress, the things we talk about and most of all, our judgments and interpretations of other people and events.

Expectations ll us with hope and purpose. They can also tragically betray us. Charles Dickens depicts this for us in Great Expectations. Through the life story of his hero, Pip, Dickens teach us a lot about the tricky business of managing our expectations.

Pip's expectations deceived him several times. Most importantly, he is deceived into thinking that Miss Havisham has chosen him to be her heir and Estella's husband. Whether or not this delusion is entirely his own fault is disputable but not the point of this essay. I would like to focus simply on Pip's expectation that he will one day marry Estella. His love for her is what blinds him to all other considerations.

From the very beginning, Pip is aware that Estella is proud and haughty. Unlike many of her later lovers, Bentley Drummle (her future husband) and others, he saw how Miss Havisham corrupted Estella to make her as proud and disdainful towards men as possible. Remember their first meeting. Estella objects to playing with a common working boy yet Miss Havisham convinces her to play with him by telling her, "You can break his heart." 1 true love.

'I'll tell you,' said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, 'what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter – as I did!' 3

Unknown to Pip at the time, Miss Havisham is someone who also was disappointed in her greatest expectation and who won't hesitate to inflict a similar punishment on others. Meanwhile, under the influence of Estella's beauty Pip follows Miss Havisham's advice and he falls asleep that night with the following sentiments:

Far into the night, Miss Havisham's words, 'Love her, love her, love her!' sounded in my ears. I adapted them for my own repetition, and said to my pillow, 'I love her, I love her, I love her!' hundreds of times. Then, a burst of gratitude came upon me, that she should be destined for me, once the blacksmith's boy. Then, I thought if she were, as I feared, by no means rapturously grateful for that destiny yet, when would she begin to be interested in me? When should I awaken the heart within her, that was mute and sleeping now? 4

Overwhelmed by the passion of his love for Estella, Pip begins to lose perspective and forget those to whom he owed much, especially Joe, his foster father who had loved him and cared for him in the hard moments of his childhood. Pip acknowledges to himself that his expectations had changed him and not necessarily for the better:

As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me. Their influence on my own character, I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very well that it was not all good. 5

With the wisdom that came after years and many sufferings he reflects upon that night spent dreaming of Estella:

Ah me! I thought those were high and great emotions. But I never thought there was anything low and small in my keeping away from Joe, because I knew she would be contemptuous of him. It was but a day gone, and Joe had brought the tears into my eyes; they had soon dried, God forgive me! Soon dried. 6

In the end Pip's great expectations fall apart and he suffers on that account, he nearly dies. Though perhaps not the most lovable character in the book, Mr. Pumblechook's words on the situation seem to ring true, "Young man, I am sorry to see you brought low. But what else could be expected! What else could be expected!" (7) Maybe not all would be in agreement with Mr. Pumblechook. Though I dislike him for the hypocrite he was, I still think that there Dickens is putting the truth on his lips.

Was there something really wrong with Pip's love for Estella? Why is there no redemption for Pip? Did it necessarily have to end that way? Dickens doesn't often end his books punishing his characters so severely. At the end of David Copperfield, despite all of his mistakes, David marries Agnes and they live happily ever after.

Little Dorrit ends with the marriage of Arthur and Amy who quietly go down "into a modest life of usefulness and happiness." In A Tale of Two Cities Charles Darnay is saved from the guillotine by the heroic sacrifice of Sydney Carton to go back to England and live in peace with Lucie Manette. So many of Dickens characters have great expectations and they are fulfilled. G.K. Chesterton remarks, "We might very well, as I have remarked elsewhere, apply to all Dickens's books the title Great Expectations.... But the only book to which he gave the name of Great Expectations was the only book in which the expectation was never realized." 8

Here we have to face the famous problem of the two endings for the book. The original ending portrays a chance meeting between

Estella and Pip and ends with this sentence:

I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be. 9

The second ending, though still sad, gives us the hope that Pip and Estella will eventually be married. They meet at the ruins Miss Havisham's mansion and speak together. At the end "I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her." 10 It seems that they will eventually be married.

But whether we prefer the first or the second ending to the book, the question remains, what have Pip and Estella learned about love? Why do they suffer and what do they learn?

A quote from another one of Dickens's novels can give us some light into his opinions about love. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the narrator offers us the following reflection about life:

To have drunk too much, to have had a great holiday, and to have fallen in love, are one and the same things in their next day consequences. A sense of something lost and gone, of a dim uncomfortable ghost perpetually haunting us, of a re gone out which is never to be lighted any more, of water with its soul filtered away, of vapid air from half-extinguished ovens, of earth dull, dry and arid; of a compounded moral and physical staleness, blear-eyedness, consciousness of not having shaved, and feeling of utter discomfort –such is the common dust into which these three great things of earth resolve themselves the next day. 11

I think all of us can identify with this reflection. It is the morning after experience. I would like to emphasize that Dickens includes falling in love. I think that in *Great Expectations*, Pip was in the situation of someone who simply fell in love but never learned how to love. His love for Estella was unrealistic and fantastical from the very beginning, and he did not wake up the next morning until it was too late and many things were ruined. This is especially true considering his relationship with Joe. Joe who had been the one who loved him unconditionally as a true and loyal friend is the person he treats the worst. Then there is Biddy, who loved him and he knew it, but he was too infatuated with Estella to care about her.

I think that what Pip learns is that he needs love in his life, but that the love of a woman isn't able to satisfy him completely. Falling in love is a great thing as Dickens says, but it needs true love or eventually the morning after will come. Pip learns that love is not just about the good things we receive from the other but also about what we give to the other. He learns that his love for a woman should not blot out all other aspects of his life like his family, his friends, and his work.

Dickens doesn't offer a fully satisfying solution to man's need for love. He reminds us that no matter how beautiful it may be, the love between a man and a woman is not absolute. However, I think John Paul II offers us a solution. In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* he reminds us that man needs love and that the fullness of love which brings man to his fullness is found in Jesus Christ.

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer fully reveals man to himself. 12

We are all born with the great expectation, the expectation of love.

1. C. dICKens, *Great Expectations*, Penguin Books, London 1985, p. 89.

2. Idem, p. 253-254.

3. Idem, p. 261.

4. Idem, p. 264.

5. Idem, p. 291.

6. Idem, p. 265.

7. Idem, p. 483.

8 G.K. CHesterton, *The collected works of G.K. Chesterton*, v. XV, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (CA) 1989, p. 380.

9. C. dICKens, *Great Expectations*, Penguin Books, London 1985, p. 496 (Appendix A).

10. Idem, p. 493.

11. C. diCKens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Clarendon & Oxford University Press, New York 1997, p. 307.

12. *Redemptor hominis*, 10.