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Charles Dickens's Great Expectations: A Pioneering Crime Novel

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ABSTRACT

It is almost a truism to say that every age is reflected in its literature and a study of the literature of a particular age becomes much more interesting and illuminating if we have some knowledge of the social history of that period. It is largely due to the fact that a writer does not write in an empty space. The creative insight of a literary artist reveals the social reality of an age more eloquently and more powerfully than the assiduous investigations of a social scientist or a social historian. It is a matter of artistic pleasure to unravel various threads of society subtly and artistically interwoven in the fabric of a literary creation and to assess how far they were social realities and why they were viewed in a particular way by a particular writer. The concept of crime and criminals in the novels of Dickens becomes a subject of immense interest and engagement, as throughout his life, he remained an ardent and vehement commentator on the society of his time which witnessed the emergence of crime in the Victorian society on a large scale. Though fiction is no substitute for fact, Dickens makes the social realities of his novels intense and bright by giving them the colour of his creative genius. In this paper, therefore, an attempt has been to discuss Great Expectations as a crime novel.

Keywords: *Contemporary, Creation, Crime, Cultural, Economic, Knowledge, Political, Victorian*

The novels of Dickens reveal his persistent obsession with crime, death and murder. They also highlight the plight of lower middle class people and the poorest of the poor. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, England entered an era of new economic prosperity. But the grim side of the picture was that whereas the English aristocracy and the merchant class were moving up towards the peak of affluence, the poor class was sinking down to the very nadir of abject poverty, filthiness, starvation and social crimes. Graham Smith rightly remarks that "Victorian prosperity rested upon a sub-stratum of fearful poverty and exploitation" (178). The permanent companions of the slum-dwellers were squalor, filth, disease and death. Pilfering was an occupation of many and the common forms of entertainment were taking intoxicating liquors and indulging in sexual licence. Expressing his views on the social conditions of the Victorian age, W. J. Reader says: "How could conventional morality make any sense to people sleeping seven or eight in a room? In fact, the marriage bond was fairly loose…" (94).

Dickens has a sort of macabre fascination for horrors and depicts the murky acts of crime and murder and their doers with unmitigated zest. Though a strong condemner of these deeds in his journalism, he feels their irresistible spell and enjoys "being shocked and revelled in righteous

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indignation" (Addison 32). He treats the acts of crime and murder as an essential part of human life and, though he is duly aware of their undesirability and anti-socialness, he thinks that their introduction in his novels is a necessity to make them broadly representative of social reality and also to make them serve as a means of giving vent to his own feelings, apparently of disapproval and condemnation, but inwardly of secret enjoyment, while describing them. That fascination was ingrained in him and is testified by George Augustus Sala, who observed that Dickens liked to talk among other things about "the latest … social swindle, and especially the latest murder" (qtd. in Collins 1).

During the nineteenth century, British society was dominated and ruled by a tightly woven system of class-distinction. Social relations and acceptance were based upon position. Charles Dickens presents *Great Expectations* as a fictional commentary on the system of class and each person's place within it. It is a novel which focuses on the destruction of the heart; not through violence, but through living in an uncaring, often brutal society. Commenting on the novel, Barbara Hardy says:

> One of … its successes… is its fusion of the individual story with the social indictment. Dickens shows in Pip the natural unconditioned life of the heart and the socially destructive process that weakens and distorts it, transforming instinct into calculation, human love into manipulation, generosity into greed, spontaneity into shame and ambition. (40)

Dickens condemns the love of money and extols the virtue of love and generosity. He amply reflects the money-obsession of the Victorian people. What Dickens says about this aspect of Victorian life was a stark social reality of the period. To what extent the Victorian people had become materialistic is illustrated by the following observation: "God was strongly twisted into the service of Mammon, and the service of Mammon made to seem that of God" (Batho 14). The Victorians had fully incorporated in their lives the maxim advocated by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* written in 1733: "That Reason, Passion, answers one great aim / that true self love and social are the same."

The novel shows that there was a subtle stratification in the society of Victorian England. At the top was a well-bred and purse-proud aristocracy. The source of their power was their estate, which kept them independent. They constituted the ruling elite. Deference showed to them was "a tribute to birth, education and breeding" (Leavis 110). They excelled in prestige, the upper-class people or rather the admitted upper-class people who had thrived on trade and commerce. Just below the upper-class there was the upper middle-class which also had gained status by industry. The middle class consisted of humanity in varying degrees. It was to this class that Dickens himself had belonged. At the bottom of the Victorian society were the lower class people and the extremely poor ones. The least calamity or the taint of social evil reduced them to destitution and starvation. But, in spite of the efforts made by the class-conscious gentry, the rigid walls had started giving way. Many of the wealthier industrialists had passed into the ranks of the upper class through self-assertion and marriage.

The plot of hidden identity in *Great Expectations* constitutes a re-assessment of *Oliver Twist*. But this re-assessment goes beyond Pip's discovery that his sudden wealth allies him to the underworld rather than to the aristocracy. While *Oliver Twist* defines the genteel and the criminal spheres as distinct, contrary and anti-theatrical, *Great Expectations* maintains that the upper class

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world of the gentleman is implicated in the criminal domain of the underclass; and the relationship between the two, far from being mutually exclusive, is redolent of complicity and interdependence. This makes the novel, among other things, mediation on the law, because it bases its demonstration of the inherent kinship between human beings on the inter-relationship between the criminal world and its non criminal counterparts, this interrelationship results in a redefinition of the manner in which Dickens depicts the criminal class in this novel. The criminal class is here presented as more important for its anti social behaviour. Magwitch belongs to the underclass of the underworld but the fortune he sets apart under will supports Pip at the topmost rung of the social ladder.

Because its emphasis is on the social position of the convict rather than on his criminality, *Great Expectations* generalizes the moral dimension of crime. To be a convict in this novel is to occupy a position of shame, a shame which is primarily associated with being outcast and reviled rather than with being a villain. Evil, which had previously been a major preoccupation in all of Dickens's fiction, is no longer simply black in this novel; nor is it exclusively associated with crime. In fact, the concept of criminality has been generalized to include such flawed beings as Pip himself. The world of *Great Expectations* is not totally amoral, as is the natural world in *The Origin of Species*. Neither is it Manichean quite to the same extent as in the earlier novels. Instead, the moral distinctions between categories of behaviour have become blurred and overlapping. Because it generalizes criminality by universalizing the concept of guilt, the focus in the novel is on punishment rather than on crime.

So completely woven into the fabric of the novel is the underworld motif that the two poles of the society – the gentleman and the convict are consistently presented and are linked. Dickens suggests that what is true of the connection between Miss Havisham and Pip is true for the society as a whole. The criminal element is eventually discovered to stand in some form of relation to nearly every character, a discovery which implies that criminality stands for whatever is universal in the elemental nature of man. Criminals represent the least developed aspects of human nature – the primitive, the emotional, and the base. It is the fundamental material out of which and away from which all civilized behaviour must evolve. Once the design of the novel is revealed, it becomes clear that the only common denominator is the lowest.

Abel Magwitch appears as a vicious and threatening convict. He makes his appearance in the first chapter of the novel as he gets hold of Pip, the little child, one evening in the churchyard. The narrator describes him as:

> A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin. (*Great Expectations* 2)

As Magwitch seizes the young boy, Pip simply responds "Oh! Don't cut my throat, Sir, Pray, don't do it, sir" (2) and Pip is forced into submitting to the convict's demands, mainly due to his naive fear of Magwitch's fictitious companion who has a secret way peculiar to himself of getting at a boy, and at his heart and at his liver. Even though he aids the convict, the reader's sympathy for Pip soon increases as his robbery in his own home weighs greatly on his conscience. Similarly when Mrs. Joe leaves the Sunday dinner to retrieve the savoury pork pie,

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which Magwitch has already enjoyed heartily. Pip is tortured by the thought of his actions and his mind screams, "Must they! Let them not hope to taste it. He seems to regret his actions and the fact that he had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I know to be wrong" (40). Thus Magwitch's requirements are met, Pip brings him food and he uses the iron to cut off the iron of his leg and yet he allows himself to fall into the hands of soldiers in order to get another escaped convict arrested.

From the account of his life that he gives to Pip and Herbert, it becomes clear that the life of crime which Magwitch had led was not only due to his own nature but also due to the pernicious influence of Compeyson upon him. This is how Magwitch describes his early life:

> Tramping, begging, thieving, working sometimes when I could – though that warn't as often as you may think, till you put the question whether you would ha' been over-ready to give me work yourselves – a bit of a poacher, a bit of a labourer, a bit of a waggoner, a bit of a haymaker, a bit of a hawker, a bit of most things that don't pay and lead to trouble, I got to be a man. A deserting soldier in a Traveller's Rest, what lay hid up to the chin under a lot of taturs, learnt me to read; and a travelling Giant what signed his name at a penny time learnt me to write. I warn't locked up as often now as formerly, but I wore out my good share of key-metal still. (332)

Eventually, when he had become a seasoned criminal, he and his boss, Compeyson, were taken into custody and put on trial for felony. At this time, Compeyson deserted him, with the result that, where as Compeyson is sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, Magwitch is sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment. They both are put on the same prison ship. It was on account of this background of Compeyson's treachery that Magwitch had become a sworn enemy of Compeyson.

Megwitch is crude and clumsy. He is not fit for the company of refined gentlemen; he has no delicacy of feeling. Pip was not prepared for the kind of revelation that Magwitch brings with him. That is why he shrinks from Magwitch as from a snake. Pip can scarcely conceal his disgust when Magwitch meets him in his apartment. This is how Magwitch is described by Dickens:

> He ate in a ravenous way that was very disagreeable, and all his actions were uncouth, noisy and greedy. If I had begun with any appetite, he would have taken it away, and I should have sat much as I did – repelled from him by an insurmountable aversion, and gloomily looking at the cloth. (316)

Magwitch becomes a symbol of money which governs social life and without which nobody can hope to make any headway in life. He also represents the criminal section of the society of the Victorian England.

Compeyson is representative of evil characters. He is born a lawbreaker. His business is swindling, handwriting forging, and stolen bank-note – passing and such other crimes. He can set all sorts of traps and keep his own legs out and get the profits from it and let another man in, for that is his main business: "He'd no more heart than a iron file, he was as cold as death, and he had the head of the Devil afore mentioned" (333). It was Compeyson who, after having courted

Miss Havisham and having promised to marry her, betrayed her by not turning up on the day fixed for the marriage and this event plunges her into bitter misery for the rest of her life. He was also responsible for plunging Magwitch deeper and deeper into crime and then forsaking him at the time of the trial in the Court of Law. Magwitch describes the situation in the following words: "That man got me into such nets as made me his black slave. I was always in debt to him, always under his thumb, always a working, always a getting into danger (335).

Compeyson is a great hypocrite and is expert in hunting people down and entrapping them in his own net in order to earn money through them illicitly. There is no evil deed on earth, which cannot be done by him in order to serve his purpose. After having exploited Magwitch to his best advantage, he betrayes him most meanly and treacherously. Compeyson follows Magwitch like a bloody hound to get him re-arrested, when the latter returns to England in order to see how far Pip has become a gentleman and also to feel his real love for Pip. Compeyson was Magwitch's evil star; it was he, who had robbed and swindled Magwitch and exploited him to the utmost, until at last in one case of forgery the former managed to get a much more reduced sentence for him than that of Magwitch by a clever and secret manipulation of the Jury which he had possibly bribed through his lawyer. Magwitch, however, got the maximum punishment. Thus Compeyson is a professional rogue, a villain of first water.

Great Expectations is characterized by attacks on social evils, injustice and hypocrisy. Dickens had also experienced oppression in his youth, when he was forced to end school in early teens and work in a factory. There is a lot of injustice depicted in this novel: not only the injustice which individual human beings do towards one another under the influences exerted by money and other values and otherwise, but also the injustice done by society collectively towards different individuals. The description of conditions in the English prisons during the Victorian age also reveals the injustice of society as a whole to human beings. When Pip pays a visit to the Newgate Prison, he carries a sense of shame with him. He finds the scene "frouzy, ugly, disorderly, and depressing" (*Great Expectations* 250). After coming out of it, he feels fully contaminated. He feels the pollution in his breath and on his clothes and he tells: "I beat the prison dust off my feet as I sauntered to and fro, and I shook it out of my dress, and I exhaled its air from my lungs" (254).

At that time, jails were much neglected, and the period of reaction against public wrongdoing was still far off. The treatment meted out to prisoners was most callous. The same criticism of the kind of legal justice that prevailed in the Victorian age is to be found in the manner in which a description is given of convicts being sentenced at the sessions. Pip gives a shocking account of the manner in which thirty-two men and women are sentenced to death: "some defiant, some stricken with terror, some sobbing and weeping, some covering their faces, some staring gloomily about" (439).

The picture of the judge reading out his judgment on Magwitch is quite depressing. Magwitch's account of his criminal career largely shows that society is responsible for the excessive punishment given to a criminal even when he is repentant and reformed. Elaborating the notion of the identity of self in the novel, Drew has rightly remarked:

> Each of the chief characters in this novel seeks an identity of the self within a society which is riddled with injustice, greed and cruelty. Each of the chief characters is in isolation, yet entangled with others in a common guilt. Each is forced to face the mystery

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> of evil, passion and pain. Reconciliation and forgiveness come from the discovery of the basic element in human relationship and understanding and the true identity and escape from isolation are reached in humility and compassion. It is symbolized in Pip's feelings towards Magwitch after he is captured towards the end of the novel: For now my repugnance to him had all melted away. (140).

In his novels Dickens makes references to other prisons and places of imprisonment. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver is locked up in a dirty stone cell of a police station; one of the dungeons "compared with which, those in Newgate, occupied by the most atrocious felons, tried, found guilty, and under sentence of death, are palaces" (*Oliver Twist* 87). Dickens's dissatisfaction with the prison-system is evident when Wemmick is giving Pip a walking tour through the streets of London. This is evident in the following passage of the novel:

> We were at Newgate in a few minutes, and we passed through the lodge where some fetters were hanging up on the bare walls among the prison rules, into the interior of the jail. At that time, jails were much neglected, and the period of exaggerated reaction consequent on all public wrong-doing ...was still far off.... and a frouzy, ugly, disorderly depressing scene it was. (250)

Dickens expresses his deep-rooted memories of poverty and of his father having been sentenced to Debtor's prison. This contradicts the fact that in real life Dickens believed the model prisons to be too lenient to their inmates and extolled instead the "virtues of hard and unrewarding labour… a regime, which relied more upon punishment than moral improvement" (Ackroyd 377).

Dickens felt that it was more important to focus on the punishment of criminals, rather than on giving them a second chance to redeem themselves. Further evidence of Dickens's concern for maximum punishments can be found in this statement regarding the punishment of a local street ruffian: "I would have his back sacrificed often and deep" (Collins 17). This attitude most likely stems from the fact that Dickens's legal training gave him a far stricter outlook on prisoners. He is often credited for having been influential in the passing of the Capital Punishment Act of 1868, which banned public executions. The reason why Dickens was against public executions was that he felt that these executions only made people sympathize too much with murderer, rather than the victim. This nullifies the horrible and sickening feelings Pip has towards Capital Punishment.

Dickens's novels took a more conservative stance towards crime, as pointed out by Collins: "the harsher side of his attitude to criminals came not from the novels, but from his journalism" (90). Further evidences of Dickens's harsh views towards criminals are demonstrated in this statement: ".... it is a satisfaction to me to see that determined thief, swindler or vagrant, sweating profusely at the threadmill or the crank" (Ackroyd 377). Once again, this contradicts the horrible and sickening concern Pip shows when he observes the Debtor's Door, reflecting the subconscious tendency of Dickens to feel a certain degree of sympathy towards criminals. His sympathy, more than likely, stems from the fact that his father was placed in Debtor's prison when Dickens was barely twelve years old. The passage where Pip is sickened by the Debtor's Door demonstrates how Dickens was constantly torn between his own childhood perceptions of crime and his later legally educated adult views. In his book, *Charles Dickens and the Law* Robert Coles rightly points out that:

ISSN NO.2395-0692
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> No acclaim, no amount of achieved influence seemed enough to ... prevent him from going back, time and again to the memories generated by an earlier life: the child in a Debtor's prison, the youth struggling with a harsh and mean life, the young man observing law makers at their shilly-shallying or corrupt worse, and above all, the apprentice writer taking note of lawyers- who, of course, are right, there men and women go to prison, or lose whatever rights or privileges they may have had, or find themselves in severe straits because the laws work this may rather than that way or on behalf of these people rather than those. (566)

Dickens's personal experiences with each side of the legal coin allowed him to show the variety of the ways of crime and law operating in the Victorian society and this put Dickens at an advantage when he came to tell stories that were, more often than not, centred around crime, violence and law. Crime which was the focus of Dickens's journalism, maintains a continuous presence in *Great Expectations*. Even casual conversations in pubs are centred around crime, such as the scene at the Three Jolly Bargemen, where Mr. Wopsle reads a newspaper article about a highly popular murder. Pip himself is aware of the presence of crime both in his own life and the London society. After following his second visit to the Newgate Prison, he says:

> I consumed the whole time in thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime; that, in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening I should have first encountered it; that, it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a strain that was faded but not gone; that, it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement. (*Great Expectations* 253)

Dickens is full of disgust and revulsion towards the justice administered in the Courts of Law, which he finds to be utterly inhuman, inefficient and corrupt. The Courts of Law, which are supposed to be holy edifices, giving shelter to those that are wronged, were, during the time of Dickens, the breeding grounds of corrupt ways and evil practices. The noble aim of the law to protect the wronged and exploited had completely been lost sight of and the legal institutions had grown into an inextricable mass of red tape and inefficiency. Before Dickens, Fielding, Smollett and others had satirized the misuse of power and the adoption of corrupt practices by the J.P's. Trevelyan corroborates the fact that during the time of Dickens there was corruption in the Courts. According to him: "There was a corrupt type of J.P. known as trading justices', men of a lower order of society who got themselves made Magistrates in order to turn their position to financial profit" (353).

Crime and imprisonment are inseparable from law. The law is the mechanism, which society has developed and which it enforces to protect its own interests and to dispense justice. The law protects the strong and the weak alike, the gentleman and the commoner, the adult and the child. Dickens, however, gives us the bitterest satire on legal pretensions, and on the cruelties inflicted by the powerful upon the helpless, especially upon the children. Dickens's comment on the ruthlessness of the law is found in the Court as Magwitch is condemned to death. Magwitch is one of the thirty-two men and women who were given death sentences. They are herded together, surrounded by legal officials, and by a large crowd of people who have come to watch the show. Dickens condemns a public institution, which abuses its authority. The direct personal cruelties of power are best symbolized in Pip's sister, Mrs. Gargery, who wears a coarse apron,

which she never takes off and which speaks vividly of her negation of all womanly love, because the apron bears a pattern of pins and needles on it.

Another problem, which has been highlighted by Charles Dickens, is that the society is dominated by money values. This novel contains many examples of the humanly destructive effects of money. This novel is a statement of what money can do, good and bad, or how it can change and make distinctions of classes, how it can pervert virtue. Most of the characters in the novel show a hankering after money. Early in the story, we see Herbert prowling about Miss Havisham's house in the hope that the rich old woman might favour him with her patronage. Otherwise too, Herbert keeps speaking of his big plans to make money, and accumulate capital, thus reflecting the general Victorian domination of money over the minds of the people. In *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* readers find the profoundest pictures of childhood. This is corroborated by David Cecil:

> Who that has read it can forget the vast sinister marsh of *Great Expectations,* with the convict rising like a giant of fairy tale from its oozy banks; and the forge with its entracing sparks; and kindly, clumsy Joe Gargery and Mrs. Gargery as they appear to the wondering, acute six year old gaze of Pip? But still better are the first hundred and sixty pages of *David Copperfield* the best, Dickens ever wrote, one of the very best in the whole of English. Here for once Dickens seems not only living but life-like: for though the world that he reveals is more exaggerated, lit by brighter lights, darkened by sharper shadows than that of most grown up people; it is exactly the world as seen through the eyes of a child. He shows his sympathy for the woe and sufferings of child life. He is primarily interested in presenting the sorrows, sufferings and privations suffered by the child characters. (345)

The foregoing discussion shows that Charles Dickens's attitude towards crime in was highly complex. He was drawn to crime by the mere fascination with the ugly and the perverse and by the opportunities it gives to a writer for exploiting the sensations of mystery, suspense and terror, and for throwing the cheerful elements into high relief. He was fond of showing the tragic retribution that follows crime, and was particularly impressed by the thought of the criminals as people haunted by evil. Crime and villainy take their place among other social phenomena as inevitable effects of evil in the social body. Nancy Sikes and Magwitch are bred to crime or driven into it by poverty, ignorance and injustice. The presence of criminals makes it a novel of dark vision. It is befitting to close the paper with an observation made by a literary historian:

To the last phase of Dickens's literary career belongs Great Expectations, a work regarded by many critics as his best. The story of the benevolent convict, young Pip, the proud Estella, and the tragically eccentric Miss Havisham is well told, while the description of the great salt Marsh where Pip first meets the convict creates an atmosphere of cold horror that challenges comparison with Hardy's study of Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native. (Barnes 132)

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