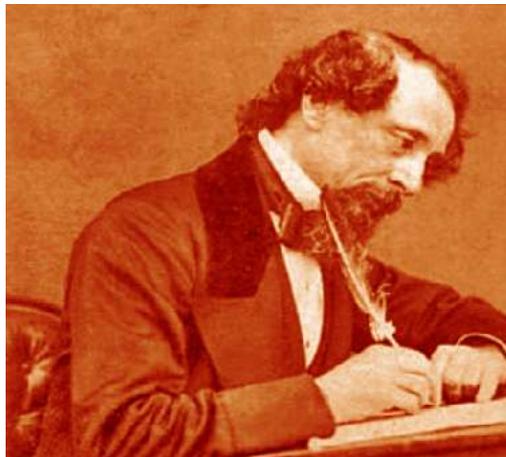


Great Expectations

by Ian Brinton



English Association Dickens Bookmarks
No. 12

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The first weekly instalment of *Great Expectations* appeared in *All the Year Round* on 1st December 1860, and it continued to appear until 3rd August 1861. A three-volume edition was published by Chapman & Hall in July 1861. While many of the contemporary reviews of the novel were not glowing, the weekly sales of *All the Year Round* rose to about 100,000 copies per week, which led Dickens to publish the novel in three volumes for purchase by lending libraries. In November 1862, a one-volume edition was published containing a revision of the last line of the novel and this change became accepted for many later editions. The first section of this Bookmark presents a piece of close textual analysis from the opening of the novel and the second section looks at the variant endings with which Dickens was dealing.

The child is father to the man

At the same time, he hugged his shuddering body in both his arms—clasping himself, as if to hold himself together—and limped towards the low church wall. As I saw him go, picking his way among the nettles, and among the brambles that bound the green mounds, he looked in my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in.

When he came to the low church wall, he got over it, like a man whose legs were numbed and stiff, and then turned round to look for me. When I saw him turning, I set my face towards home, and made the best use of my legs. But presently I looked over my shoulder, and saw him going on again towards the river, still hugging himself in both arms, and picking his way with his sore feet among the great stones dropped into the marshes here and there, for stepping-places when the rains were heavy, or the tide was in.

The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then, as I stopped to look after him; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed. On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered—like an unhooped cask upon a pole—an ugly thing when you were near it; the other a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again. It gave me a terrible turn when I thought so; and as I saw the cattle lifting their heads to gaze after him, I wondered whether they thought so too. I looked all round for the horrible young man, and could see no signs of him. But now I was frightened again, and ran home without stopping.

These closing three paragraphs from the first chapter of *Great Expectations* emphasize the associations Pip feels between himself and the convict, Magwitch, as well as highlighting the fears felt by a vulnerable young boy who feels himself isolated. As the convict 'limped' towards the wall, we are given a foretaste of Pip's difficulties as he keeps the hidden piece of bread down his trouser leg and the 'hands of the dead people' act as a reminder of the conscience which strains to pull Pip down. As opposed to limping, Pip 'made the best use' of

his legs in going home, but here again there is a contrasting association with the convict: in chapter 5 he recalls being associated with 'a fierce young hound' if he joins the hunt for the convict. The use of the word 'bound' in terms of the nettles and brambles echoes what becomes for Pip a restriction upon his future aspirations which is also associated with crime. In chapter 3, as he searches in the cold morning for the escaped convict, 'I couldn't warm my feet, to which the damp cold seemed riveted, as the iron was riveted to the leg of the man I was running to meet' and he knows his way to the Battery because he had been there with Joe, who had told him that when he was apprenticed he would be 'regularly bound'. The criminal emphasis associated with 'bound' is further explored in chapter 13 when Pumblechook announces that 'This boy must be bound out of hand'. He then repeats the sentiment with a sense of glee:

'A pleasure's a pleasure all the world over. But this boy, you know, we must have him bound.'

When he is then taken to the Town Hall to be 'bound apprentice to Joe in the Magisterial presence', he feels 'exactly as if I had that moment picked a pocket or fired a rick'. Pumblechook holds him 'all the while as if we had looked in on our way to the scaffold'. Further associations between Pip and the criminal world are hinted at in the reference to the executed pirate who appears to have come down and is now returning to 'hook himself up again'. After the prisoners have been retaken and Pip and Joe have returned to the Forge in chapter 6, Mrs Joe takes Pip to bed in such a manner as to suggest his being hauled up the gallows: she 'assisted me up to bed with such a strong hand that I seemed to have fifty boots on and to be dangling them all against the edges of the stairs.' There is a similar criminal association when Pip first visits Miss Havisham at Satis House in chapter 8. When Pip has finished his card game with Estella, Miss Havisham, acting the role of judge, says 'Estella, take him down. Let him have something to eat, and let him roam and look about him while he eats.' With the echo of the pirate who has 'come back to life, and come down', Pip is identified here with Magwitch when he is eating the stolen food in chapter 3:

He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction of somebody's coming to take the pie away.

The association which Pip feels between himself and the criminal world is further highlighted in chapter 15 when Mr Wopsle is reading 'the affecting tragedy of George Barnwell' who had been 'running to seed, leaf after leaf, ever since his course began', and the association between 'Pip' and 'seed' suggests a career which is destined for prison since, as Mrs Joe told him in chapter 2, felons always begin their careers by robbing, forging and asking questions. At that point Pip 'felt fearfully sensible of the great convenience that the Hulks were handy for me.'

Images of being captured or trapped and slaughtered reappear throughout the early chapters of the novel. At their first meeting, in chapter 1, Magwitch threatened to eat Pip: "You young dog," said the man, licking his lips, "what fat cheeks you ha' got" He then terrifies the boy by telling him of the young associate of his who 'has a secret way peccoliar to himself, of getting at a boy, and at his heart, and at his liver.' At the Christmas dinner on the following day, Pumblechook refers to Pip as a pig, and suggests that

'You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher would have come up to you as you lay in your straw, and he would have whipped you under his left arm, and with his right he would have tucked up his frock to get a penknife from out of his waistcoat-pocket, and he would have shed your blood and had your life.'

This particular position has already held Pip when Mrs Joe administers the tar-water in chapter 2:

On this particular evening, the urgency of my case demanded a pint of this mixture, which was poured down my throat, for my greater comfort, while Mrs Joe held my head under her arm, as a boot would be held in a boot-jack.

Pip's association with the criminal world is also highlighted by the way in which he runs out of the house at the end of chapter 4

head foremost into a party of soldiers with their muskets: one of whom held out a pair of handcuffs to me, saying, 'Here you are, look sharp, come on!'

When the party sets out in pursuit of the convicts, Pip whispers 'treasonably' to Joe that he hopes that they won't find them.

The association between being a gentleman and being a criminal is first raised by Magwitch as he clutches onto Compeyson in chapter 5: 'He's a gentleman, if you please, this villain. Now, the Hulks has got its gentleman again, through me.' Pip's imprisoning connection with Magwitch is then further cemented by the secret signal of complicity which passes between them:

I had alighted from Joe's back on the brink of the ditch when we came up, and had not moved since. I looked at him eagerly when he looked at me, and slightly moved my hands and shook my head. I had been waiting for him to see me, that I might try to assure him of my innocence.

Chapter 5 ends with the torches being 'flung hissing into the water' and going out 'as if it were all over with him.' However, as chapter 6 opens, Pip recognizes the taint of what is left behind from the experience and his fear of losing Joe's confidence leads him into being 'too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong.' Like the 'hands of the dead people' in the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, which seem to stretch 'out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in', the past will haunt Pip like an irremovable stain.

In my end is my beginning

In a letter of 23rd June 1861 to Wilkie Collins, Dickens refers to the ending of *Great Expectations* as it was to appear in *All the Year Round*: 'Bulwer was so very anxious that I should alter the end of *Great Expectations*—the extreme end, I mean, after Biddy and Joe are done with—and stated his reasons so well, that I have resumed the wheel, and taken another turn upon it. Upon the whole I think it is for the better. You shall see the change when we meet'. Writing to Bulwer Lytton the next day, he enclosed 'the whole of the concluding No. of *Great Expectations*, in order that you may the more readily understand where I have made the change'. In the same letter Dickens expressed a concern that he may have laboured the rewritten section and got it 'out of proportion.' The revised ending is about 1,000 words long, as opposed to the 300 originally intended. However, in writing to Forster on 1st July he expressed no doubt about the effect of the changes made:

You will be surprised to hear that I have changed the end of *Great Expectations* from and after Pip's return to Joe's, and finding his little likeness there. Bulwer, who has been, as I think you know, extraordinarily taken by the book, so strongly urged it upon me, after reading the proofs, and supported his views with such good reasons, that I resolved to make the change. I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could, and I have no doubt the story will be more acceptable through the alteration.

The original shorter version survives in proof, and it was published in Forster's *Life*. Dickens originally intended the novel to end with chapter 58, when Pip returns to the Forge after an

absence of eight years. In his conversation with Biddy he is asked whether he has 'quite forgotten' Estella, and replies:

'My dear Biddy, I have forgotten nothing in my life that ever had a foremost place there. But that poor dream, as I once used to call it, has all gone by, Biddy, all gone by!'

It was two years more, before I saw herself. I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, brutality, and meanness. I had heard of the death of her husband (from an accident consequent on ill-treating a horse), and of her being married again to a Shropshire doctor, who, against his interest, had once very manfully interposed, on an occasion when he was in professional attendance on Mr. Drummle, and had witnessed some outrageous treatment of her. I had heard that the Shropshire doctor was not rich, and that they lived on her own personal fortune.

I was in England again—in London, and walking along Picadilly with little Pip—when a servant came running after me to ask would I step back to a lady in a carriage who wished to speak to me. It was a little pony carriage, which the lady was driving; and the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another. 'I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!' (she supposed the child, I think, to be my child.)

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.

The revised ending continues from Pip's visit to the Forge having spent eleven rather than eight years in the East, and it involves 'a walk over to the old spot before dark'. When he arrives at Satis House, 'the day had quite declined':

There was no house now, no brewery, no building whatever left, but the wall of the old garden. The cleared space had been enclosed with a rough fence, and, looking over it, I saw that some of the old ivy had struck root anew, and was growing green on low quiet mounds of ruin. A gate in the fence standing ajar, I pushed it open, and went in.

A cold shivery mist had veiled the afternoon, and the moon was not yet up to scatter it. But, the stars were shining beyond the mist, and the moon was coming, and the evening was not dark. I could trace out where every part of the old house had been, and where the brewery had been, and where the gates, and where the casks. I had done so, and was looking along the desolate garden-walk, when I beheld a solitary figure in it.

The figure showed itself aware of me, as I advanced. It had been moving towards me, but it stood still. As I drew nearer, I saw it to be the figure of a woman. As I drew nearer yet, it was about to turn away, when it stopped, and let me come up with it. Then, it faltered as if much surprised, and uttered my name, and I cried out: 'Estella!'

During the conversation between Pip and Estella it transpires that the ground they are on belongs to Estella now, 'the only possession I have not relinquished', and she intends to build

upon it. The reason for her visit, the first one since the fire, is so that she can 'take leave of it before its change'. The forward-looking qualities of the tone of this writing echo the reference to the green ivy growing over the ruins. The stars, associated with Estella's name, are shining and the clarity of Pip's memory is emphasized by his ability to 'trace out where every part of the old house had been'. A measure of the ambiguity attached to this re-written ending is felt by the reader as we are informed that 'The freshness of her beauty was indeed gone', and we recall the earlier references to her disastrous marriage to Bentley Drummle, concluding in his death:

This release had befallen her some two years before; for anything I knew, she was married again.

As they prepare to separate, as friends, Estella suggests that they will 'continue friends apart'. Her last words are, however, contradicted to some extent by the concluding paragraph:

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 the shadow of no parting from her.

The implication that they are now to remain together is heightened by the reference here to the closing of Book XII of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where 'evening mist' glides over the marshes and 'gathers ground fast at the labourer's heel/Homeward returning'. The last line had itself been subject to change since the manuscript reads 'I saw the shadow of no parting from her but one' which Dickens altered at proof stage by removing the last two words. The inference behind the two words may be that the final parting will be that of death. The paragraph quoted above remained the one published in *All the Year Round* and in the 1861 three-volume edition. However, for the 1862 one-volume edition, the line was subject to further revision so that it became 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her' and that is how it remained for the 1867 Charles Dickens edition of his works.

Further reading:

Ian Brinton, *A Reader's Guide to Great Expectations*, Continuum 2007

Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, Macmillan 1962

Jeremy Tambling, 'Prison-Bound: Dickens, Foucault and Great Expectations', in *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State*, Macmillan 1995

Great Expectations by Ian Brinton is Number 12 in the Dickens Bookmark series, published by

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