

INTRODUCTION

In this work I am going to deal with Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, trying to make a comparison between countryside and city (in this case, the city is London, as in all Dickens' novels) and explaining how it is reflected in the novel.

Firstly, I am going to give a short summary of the Victorian Period, analyzing history, politics, religion, etc. for understanding the context of the author and the novel. Apart from that, a brief introduction of what a novel was in the same period is given at the end of this section.

Secondly, a small biography of the author, Charles Dickens, only as a reference; it is not a big biography, only some points of his life.

Finally, in the last section – and the biggest – I am going to deal with country and city; London and Pip's village, and at the same time, how London and the countryside was seen in real Victorian times.

The Victorian Age begins in 1832 and it ends in 1901. As all the periods in Literature, History, Arts, etc. there are a lot of incidents, reforms, kings, queens and so on. I am going to sum up this period with some points, following *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. The Major Authors* (6th edition).

Victorian Period is an age of expansion. In the 18th century the pivotal city of Western civilization had been in Paris; by the second half of the 19th century this center of influence had shifted to London, a city that expanded from about 2 million inhabitants when Victoria came to the throne (in 1837) to 6 and a half million at the time of her death (in 1901). This development brought the shift from a way of life based on the ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing. England was the first country to become industrialized. After England had become the world's workshop, London became, from 1870 on, the world's banker.

None of the various revolutions taking place in 19th century England could be described without reference to the extraordinary growth in population. This was a world-wide phenomenon, tentatively explained as the result of improved medical knowledge and hygiene. More people survived infancy and people lived longer.

As the 19th century proceeded and social conditions gradually improved, as the country became more and more urban and the population more mobile, as the lower classes began to have a small share in the prosperity of the higher and to imitate their habits, as the tone of self-righteousness at home developed into imperialism abroad, social questions, which for decades had been more or less directly the concern of novelists and poets, giving to their work an importance of a sort, became less and less apt for literary treatment.

Early Period: A Time of Troubles (1830–48)

In 1830 the first Railway is opened in England – from Liverpool to Manchester – and it coincides with the Reform Parliament, in 1832, the Reform Bill, that gives the right to vote to all males owning property worth £ 10 or more in annual rent. It includes the lower middle-class but not the working classes, who did not obtain it until 1867. The Reform Bill represents the beginning of a new age.

In the early 1840 a severe depression led to rioting. Even without the provocation of unemployment, conditions in the new industrial and coal-mining areas were terrible enough to create fears of revolution – workers and their families live in very bad conditions. Life in early Victorian mines and factories was poor and brutish, with 5 years old children working there.

Many remedies were being pointed out, as by the Chartist – a large organization of workingmen. But legislators in the 1840s were not ready to accept it.

There was an agitation to abolish the light tariffs on imported grains, tariffs known as the Corn Laws. These high tariffs had been established to protect English farm products from having to compete with low-priced products imported from abroad. But the population suffered severely from the exorbitant price of bread or food. In 1846 the Corn Laws were repealed by Parliament.

The Mid-Victorian Period (1848–1870): Economic Prosperity and Religious Controversy.

The Queen and her husband, Prince Albert, were themselves models of middle-class domesticity and devotion to duty.

Through a succession of Factory Acts in Parliament, which restricted child labor and limited hours of employment, the condition of the working classes was also being gradually improved.

Significant is the conflict between religion and science – not a new one. There were some different thoughts; to the Benthamites, religious belief was merely an outmoded superstition; others say that people had always needed a faith as they had needed food. This difference existed because of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859).

The Late Period (1870–1901): Decay of Victorian Values

For many Victorians, this final phase of the century was a time of serenity and security, the age of house parties and long weekends in the country.

In 1873 and 1874 a severe economic depression occurred; the rate of emigration to the USA rose to an alarming degree, because the typical English farmer had to confront lower grain prices and a dramatically different scale of productivity that England could not match.

Victorian Literature: The Novel

The weight of the puritan code on the literature of early – and mid – Victorian England was considerable, and the need to avoid topics that might cause embarrassment to young girls established taboos that novelists could not dare ignore. But it was not until near the end of the century or later than the novelists broke clear of those restrictions.

It will be obvious that any estimate of Victorian literature has to take into account the outstanding achievements of the Victorian novelists. From the time of Charles Dickens (1812–70), early in the period, to the final decade when the late novels of Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) appeared, a long line of novelists continued to turn out monumental masterpieces that delighted their contemporaries and that continue to delight readers today.

The novelists do not share the preoccupation of the Victorian poets and essayists with humanity's relationship with God. Most of the Victorian novelists were primarily concerned with people in society and with those aspects of experience categorized by the title of Lionel Trilling's essay *Manners, Morals and the Novel*, to which we can add an additional topic: Money. Typically these stories center on the struggles of a protagonist to find him/herself in relation to others, in love or marriage, with family and neighbours, or with associates in his/her working career.

But the historical novel has a lot of fans, with Walter Scott as the head of this genre.

Contributing to the underevaluation of the Victorian achievement was the assumption that novels published in serial form must be slapdash productions altogether deficient in art.

The novel follows the fortunes of Pip from the small bundle of shivers at the opening, orphaned in a graveyard (the first, most universal hint that every future expectation there is a rooted past), to the 34-year-old man of the conclusion, standing in the cleared space of his memories with the last of his poor dreams. This is the progress of the Bildungsroman, or the novel of development; but it is also a familiar pattern in myth and fairy-tale and Dickens makes oblique and direct references to several such fictions, surrounding his commonplace protagonist with the aura of inherited and traditional dreams, and showing as those ambitions fail how much of the individual man is left behind (We can say that the novel is a fairy-tale, with a terrible ogre, Magwitch, a wildly eccentric fairy godmother, an exquisite princess, and a sudden magical transformation).

Great Expectations is divided in three parts, the three stages of Pip's great expectations: the first leads up to the revelation that Pip is to become a gentleman; the second covers Pip's experience of the life of a young gentleman up to the revelation of the true identity of his benefactor; the third and final stage is the complete collapse of his great expectations and their replacement by a mature sense of life.

Dickens' *Great Expectations* is placed in both the countryside and London. And if there are three parts in Pip's great expectations, three are the places where the story is set. These three locals are referred to countryside and city. One of the places is a Kentish village and nearby market town compounded out of Dickens' memories of and recent revisits to Catham, Rochester, and the surrounding area, and it serves as one of the loadstones of the novel. The other, of course, is London, and the novel is almost evenly divided between the two.

The third important geographical location in the world of the novel, the marshes. More than a real place, they are a kind of moral litmus paper, a testing ground where the moral nature of every character can be seen as what it really is. They are not in any way a source of evil and corruption, as are Satis House and Newgate. People act on the marshes only as they do elsewhere, but they do so more openly. The violent confrontation of Pip and Orlick on the marshes is the most dramatic example of this (Schwarzbach, 186).

Other examples can be found, including the first scene set on the marshes, the chase of the escaped convicts.

The village of the novel, by contrast, is represented as a recognisably real place, made of memories and pieces of real places to be sure, but at the same time a type for the quiet country village that would have suggested home to anyone who had been born in one. It is one of Dickens' most satisfyingly accurate renditions of rural life, and it is as representative of a shared national heritage as Pip is representative of a common national character. Together with the neighbouring town, it is presented as a complete microcosm of country society, with a church, various merchants, a clique of local dignitaries, and most importantly, the prison hulks and Satis House. Clearly, then, Pip's childhood is not spent in an idyllic fairyland, but in a place where all of the unpleasant and compelling institutions and influences of society are already present.

It is worth looking more closely at the hulks and Satis House. The hulks need little description: they are prisons, and particularly vile ones, all the more so for their actually having existed. Satis House, on the other hand, is the physical and economic centre of the village, as Miss Havisham occupies the place of squireen. But despite Pip's high opinion of it, it is presented in a way that presses home its virtual identity with the hulks. And to press home the analogy, Miss Havisham lives in the house as if she were a convict sentenced to it for life.

Nevertheless, this house becomes the focus of Pip's desires to rise in the world. Even though Estella lives in the house, it is clear Pip needs little additional prompting from her to make it so. Satis House comes to represent all that Pip wants in life – wealth, status and Estella.

To make the emptiness of Pip's desires even more graphic, Satis House has a ruined garden, a grim, ironic parody of the supposed pastoral qualities of the village. There are several gardens in the novel, but one that produces a crop fully as miserable as this, and to which we are probably meant to connect it, is Newgate. Wemmick walks through the prison much as a gardener might walk among his plants (Dickens, 246), treating each prisoner like a young shoot. The ruined garden is in this sense an image of society as a whole, which grows from the pips of human beings only the stunted weeds of the criminals and the guilty.

This link between Satis House and Newgate demonstrates that London in *Great Expectations* has no monopoly of corruption and evil. At the first section (more or less 1/3 of the book) which is set in the country, the action shifts for a time to London, but everything we see in the metropolis is in essence no different from its Chatham analogue, merely larger and more exaggerated. The dehumanisation enforced by the hulks – Magwitch has the habits of an animal, not a man – is no different from that of Newgate in London. No sooner is Pip in the city that he comes to Smithfield Market and the filth and fat and blood and foam attendant upon the slaughter of animals; and immediately afterward he comes to Newgate, where four persons are to be hanged the next morning. The slaughter of men like animals in the city is an image Dickens had used before in *Oliver Twist*, but here is only as amplification of one already placed in the Kentish countryside.

It is not long before we realise that the entire city is like the prison – both are places which systematically incarcerate and dehumanise their inhabitants. It is not only Newgate which does this. Barnard's Inn, Pip's London residence, looks to him like a flat burying-ground whose houses contain a mixture of dilapidated blind and curtain, crippled flower-pot, cracked glass, dusty, decay, and miserable makeshift (Dickens, 162). When he opens a window it slams shut and almost decapitates him like a guillotine.

The city, as Pip puts it, is ugly, crooked, narrow, and dirty (Dickens, 153). Jagger's office, another stifling place, is located in Little Britain intended. One is hardly surprised to hear Wemmick's remark in the office that hanging is quite the natural end here, I assure you (Dickens, 189).

Before the advent of the railway, in real Victorian London, questions concerning town and country were raised and discussed in much the same form and manner as they had been in the late 18th century. The railway brought something new into the argument: It changed the tempo of life and altered relationships between people and places as much as it transformed the physical environment both of country and of town. There was as much disagreement about the aesthetics of railways, however, as there had been about the aesthetics of early industrial towns. Dickens pointed out the devastation that railways could do to London. Yet the conservative Croker could write to a constituent who condemned the desecration of the countryside that when he contemplated a railroad which ran through the beautiful valley of the Derwent, he concluded that triumph of art sets off, as well as renders more accessible, the natural beauties of the scene (Ford, 419).

By 1870 there were 13,500 miles of railway track, a figure which increased to 18,000 in 1895. They made up what was called a railway system, just as the factories, main units of industrial production, by the end of the century some of them large, made up a factory system.

Dickens was profoundly conservative; he loved the old England before the railroads, and was the last great chronicler of the stagecoach, the country inn, the roast beef of Old England (Price, 168). London is the central city of Dickens' fiction, and *Great Expectations* is not an exception. But, London is seen in this novel as something corrupt. The crowding of the city affords contrasts, and Dickens exploited any and every contrast that the city made available to him. London is like a prison, it dehumanises its inhabitants. Dickens knows nothing of alienation in the philosophical sense of Marx and Engels, but he understands that alienation is a common condition of urban man.

Descriptions of the industrial landscape include impressionistic, the photographic, and the symbolic, although in an age when painters preferred other themes, ranging from honeysuckled cottages to lakeland peaks, they were mainly verbal. The early industrial landscape had sometimes inspired the writers both of prose and of

poetry.

By the end of the century industrial towns were taken for granted, and interest in cities had shifted from the provincial cities, which had been transformed by the industrial revolution, back to the metropolis, London, the world city. Yet the critique of the new industrial environment never lost its force. D.H. Lawrence, born in a mining village in Nottinghamshire said God made the country, man made the town, the town affords the better target for an attack on human failure – the country is so lovely: the man-made England so vile. The crowding, contrasts, and changes of the city provide the satirist with the image of word confusion that he requires. Other writers saw their immediate urban or industrial surroundings in different ways from Lawrence: they might even feel the smoke to be romantic and the marble halls of the central city to be magnificent.

It was in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition of Industry in the newly built Crystal Palace – itself dependent for its design and construction on iron – that the census revealed that fractionally more than half the total population of England and Wales were town birds, that is to say living in urban districts with a population of 10,000 or more. For the first time in modern history a body politic had got into a mainly urban condition and no other country in the world approached such a condition until after 1900. Already, indeed, nearly a quarter of the population were living in urban areas with a population of over 100,000. In 1801 there had been no cities of this size outside London: by 1851 there were 23. It was in 1851 also that the first absolute declines in county population totals were revealed, and by 1861 the position was beginning to concern contemporaries. A writer on rural life and labour in 1911 was still bemoaning the alarming and increasing depopulation of our rural districts.

As industry developed throughout the 19th century, the relative importance of agriculture declined: 22% of the population were engaged in it in 1851, only 8% by 1911. There was much talk in consequence not only of rural depopulation but of challenge to traditional rural ways of life, some perhaps less traditional than at first sight they seemed. People went to the cities to obtain money, as Pip made for his great expectations.

The decennial censuses, the first of which was carried out in 1801, encouraged statistical interpretation of what was happening. Yet the interest in statistics, which had 18th century, even late 17th century origins, was not reserved for 10-year reviews. It was particularly strong during the 1830s and 1840s, as the Blue Books, the great official enquiries of the 1840s, testify, and it was satirized not only by Dickens in *Hard Times* but almost each week in the pages of Punch. Statistics certainly had a moral dimension, for it was the moral as well as the physical implications of differential disease and morality rates which promoted the sanitary idea, an ideal which appealed to George Eliot as much as to Dickens.

Some people recognized that cities were not only problem places: they had their attractions too. The fact that the cities had problems did not necessarily repel, for one man's problem could be another man's beguilement – drink, for example, or anonymity. As far as their collective problems were concerned, by generating interest and promoting voluntary effort to change things the cities encouraged a more forceful approach to the study of social action, beginning with more informed awareness of matters relating, for example, to the problems of public health, to public order and to public education.

The attractions of cities, whatever their problems, and particularly the attractions of London, were noted by many writers at different stages of the 19th century from the Cockney writers during the first decades to Henry James and beyond. Of course, the London which was hymned by the aesthetes was a very different London from that which spilled out for miles through border territories which were neither urban nor rural and through single-class suburbs, where the lights came not from the streets but from the houses – detached villas with gardens, semi-detached and with gardens too, or in the working-class suburbs, houses in long rows.

The visible differences in suburbia reflected the social system as much as the industrial scene reflected the economic system, and the two were of course interrelated. The significant occupational shifts of the 19th century included not only the decline in agriculture but the growth in the service sector of the economy and in

the professions.

The garden city ideal, made much of the marriage of town and country: all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life could be united in perfect combination with all the beauty and delight of the country (Ford, 426). In this sense, there is one character in *Great Expectations* who successfully manages to exist in London, and more than just exist, even flourish, and that is Wemmick. Wemmick's role in the novel is a large one and it cannot be said to be wholly justified by his relatively minor contribution to the plot. Wemmick's role is rather symbolic: his lifestyle is meant to represent the way in which life in the overgrown jungle of the city – and by implication, life in the world – can be sustained.

The solution with which Wemmick solves the problem is compartmentalisation. He leads a double life, part in the city, and part at home in his little fortified cottage. The two are kept as far apart as possible; as Wemmick tells Pip: the office is one thing, and private life is another (Dickens, 197). Wemmick must deal with a world in which guilt and criminality exist, and where prisons and gibbets are ineradicable fixtures of the landscape. One must accommodate oneself to them, as Wemmick does, but at the same time he can maintain the Castle in Wolworth, where one can brush the Newgate cobwebs away (Dickens, 197).

Wemmick's strategy for urban living is essentially that of modern suburban man, and it may not be entirely coincidental that the period in which this part of the novel is set, 1825–30, was the time of one of London's great suburban explosion. Now, thanks to mass building techniques, the residential charm of suburbia had become available to the middle and lower middle classes as well.

In *Great Expectations*, living in a state of untarnished innocence is possible only for those characters who are completely disengaged from the city and the world, and who have no contact with or power in them, like Joe and Biddy (and presumably Pip junior).

What Wemmick understands is that life must be a compromise, a recognition of the distance between the real and the ideal, and expectation and fulfilment. This simple statement is the kernel of wisdom at the heart of the novel, and if it seems so much more powerful in the novel than it does abstracted here, it is because Dickens conveys it with great tact, profound generosity and humble understanding. As Ford said some paragraphs before, the marriage between country and city is the harmony of human being, and Wemmick in the novel, knew how to do it.

Victorian public houses have been studied as carefully as Victorian country houses. And there has been an interest in 19th century materials, the cast iron or terra cotta, a favourite Victorian product, which could be used cheaply for every kind of mass-produced effect in every colour, and brick, which was used by Butterfield and others in polychrome combinations.

By contrast, the countryside, which might look picturesque, kept its worst features out of view. The cottage was frequently glamorized, particularly if it was thatched. It had historical as well as aesthetic qualities, for, unlike the American log cabin, it was a symbol of continuity. So, too, was the village itself, though there were as many variations between different towns and cities. Some villages were closely dependent on nearby market towns; others were remote and isolated. Some were badly hit by the decline in arable farming; others flourished on the basis of market gardening or dairying. Many had an industrial element in them, or in the Midlands and the north of England could be completely industrial: all above a certain size had craftsmen as well as workers on the land.

The only generalization possible is that most of the landscape was the product of human activity, including speculation, rather than of undisturbed nature.

We have seen that the difference between country and city is very big. In Victorian times population grew a lot, while in the country depopulation started. People went to the city to work and obtain money and social

status.

The novel reflects the problems between these two places. Pip lived peacefully in the village, and in London he started working, obtaining money and discovering his expectations, that in the end they were not fulfilled. London, in the novel was a city of horrors and disgusts, where corruption exists and catches everybody who starts living there.

Probably, real Victorian London was not so bad as Dickens showed in *Great Expectations*, but his life, as we saw in his biography, was related to this city, and his memories were not very good. Maybe, that is why Dickens had bad memories with London and good ones with the village or countryside.

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