

Robert Barnard , [Image and Theme in *Great Expectations*]

[In the following excerpt, Barnard describes Dickens' symbolic use of prison and animal imagery to suggest the transference of guilt from one character to another.]

It becomes clear through a variety of subtle means in the early chapters of *Great Expectations* that the young Pip soaks up guilt like a sponge. From the moment he knows he has to rob the larder, everything around him takes on an accusatory or revengeful air. The very coals in the household fire seem to him "avenging," he dreams of pirates who summon him to be hanged, the boards on the staircase cry "Stop thief," the cattle (especially one with a clerical air) accuse him, and even the gates and dykes run at him as if they were pursuers. The whole picture of a guilty and terrified childish mind is remarkably vivid, so much so that the reader is never tempted to stop and ask himself whether the depravity Pip feels in himself is commensurate with the offense he has committed. He has deprived himself of a piece of bread and butter, and stolen random items of food from the family larder--no very enormous sins in the mind of the average child. Even granting the distorted vision of a terrified boy, it would seem that Pip is exaggerating his crime.

But of course the guilt he feels on the score of this minor theft is only part of a larger guilt--congenital, as it were, since it seems to have been generally regarded as criminally stupid in him to allow himself to be born at all--fostered in him by his sister, his sister's friends, and his surroundings. To Mrs. Joe he is not just a burden; he is a delinquent, to be treated as such. As a suitable topic for conversation during that most appallingly unmerry Christmas dinner which follows the second meeting with the convict, she regales the company with a catalogue of "all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave, and I had contumaciously refused to go there." When, after the convict-hunt, he is sleepy, she removes him as "a slumbrous offence to the company's eyesight." The very food she allows him is given "a mortifying and penitential character." The rest of the company follows suit. It is Pip's misfortune, both in childhood and in adulthood, to be brought into contact with overbearing characters whose most usual method of conducting a conversation is inquisitorial. His position vis-à-vis Pumblechook and Jaggers is at best that of a slippery witness, at worst that of a criminal in the dock. Whether it is Pumblechook sticking the point of the conversation into him as if he were "an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena," or Jaggers, gnawing his forefinger and throwing it at him, Pip's position is as abject as that of any nineteenth-century delinquent, before the court on a trivial but capital charge.

The notion that Pip's fallen condition requires constant repentance and moral "touching up" is metaphorically expressed through the clothes he is forced into. They, like his diet, are of a "penitential" character:

As to me, I think my sister must have had some general idea that I was a young offender whom an Accoucheur Policeman had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated as though I had insisted on being born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends. Even when I was taken to have a new suit of clothes, the tailor had orders to make them like a kind of Reformatory, and on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs.

The intensive concentration on Pip's feelings of guilt and delinquency culminate in the extraordinary suggestion that he himself is in some way responsible for the attack on his sister. Orlick, the real attacker, puts it bluntly during the scene in the sluice-house by the lime kiln: "It was you as did for your shrew sister." The more conventional Pip of those days replies: "It was you, villain." The younger Pip would have had a more ambiguous reaction. The attack occurs after two scenes in which the imaginary guilt is very obviously laid on Pip's shoulders. First we have the scene where he is "bound" to Joe, and treated as a criminal by court, family, and by-standers alike--specially by Pumblechook, who held him "as if we had looked in on our way to the scaffold." Then the reading of *George Barnwell* fixes on him, in his own eyes as well as Wopsle's and Pumblechook's, the role of ungrateful and murderous apprentice. The feeling that he had "had some hand in the attack upon my sister" is intensified when the weapon is found to be the convict's leg-iron, the symbol of Pip's "criminal" connection with the convict.

In all these ways, some with comic overtones, some completely serious, a degree of uncertainty is given to the question of guilt and innocence in this novel. With the exception of Joe, who is still in a paradisaic state of grace and innocence, the guilt of one character tinges the other characters, just as the moral regeneration of one character tinges the others. Thus all the characters participate in the fallen state of the others, and participate in their redemption too. Sin and crime are complex, both in their causes and in their consequences. In this novel the involved coincidences and connections, the gradual revelation of past wrongs which provide guilty links between disparate characters--in short the creaky machinery of a Dickens novel, so clumsily handled in *Little Dorrit*, for example--have an artistic purpose which totally justifies them. Magwitch, Miss Havisham, Pip, and Estella are connected by chains of guilt and corruption, and their roles as betrayers and betrayed, corruptors and corrupted, are deliberately allowed to become ambiguous. Miss Havisham, betrayed by Magwitch's associate, herself corrupts both Pip and Estella; Pip's childish pity for the convict starts a process of regeneration in him which itself contributes materially to the process of corruption in Pip. Guilt is infectious: Jiggers compulsively washes it off with scented soap; Pip feels contaminated by Newgate; when Magwitch is spied on after his return, it is Pip who gets the "haunting idea" of being watched, and who feels that, if the convict is caught, he, Pip, will in some way be his murderer. In this matter of guilt and crime the characters are members one of another.

This fact, of course, explains why Newgate Prison has so often been felt by readers to have an importance in the novel quite incommensurate with the space devoted to it. Corruption spreads outwards from there, and almost all the major characters are affected

by that corruption. In addition, a real prison is necessary to reinforce the many "images" of prison in the novel. Prison is no mere "overspill" theme from Dickens' previous novels; it is an inevitable concomitant of the main theme. Miss Havisham's crazy self-immolation is no mere repetition with variations of Mrs. Clennam's grim voluntary imprisonment in *Little Dorrit*: it is a still more powerful symbol of man's propensity to cherish his emotional wounds, distort them to mere theatricality, use them as an excuse to pervert others. In all the scenes involving Satis House, strong emphasis is placed on keys, bars, chains, and blocked windows. And throughout the novel the windows of rooms Pip is in give no view of the world outside: they are shuttered, dirty, damp, "patched like a broken head." One comes down "like a guillotine" and nearly beheads him as he tries to look through. Everywhere he goes Pip feels shut in, "caged and threatened" as he describes himself in the little causeway inn on the Thames. Innocence provides no escape from the prisons; indeed, the only way Wemmick can keep his innocence free from the contamination of Newgate is by shutting himself off from the world in his miniature castle at Walworth. Prisons, then, permeate the book, though not quite so completely as in *Little Dorrit*.

And, unlike *Little Dorrit*, the novel is also saturated with other aspects of punishment and legal repression, used symbolically. For example, Pip's "guilty" connection with the convict leads to his metaphorically bearing his leg-iron as well. The bread and butter he secretes becomes a "load on my leg," and that "made me think ... of the man with the load on *his* leg." The cold morning earth rivets itself to the young Pip's feet "as iron was riveted to the leg of the man." The convict, and his messenger at the Jolly Bargemen who "rubs his leg," never appear but that we are reminded again of the iron and the associations it has for Pip.

Chains, too, pervade the novel: on a literal level, obviously enough, on the door of Satis House and attached to Jaggers' watch, sign of his mastery of the underworld characters he deals with. The symbolic use is more interesting. In a Dickens novel we usually have a symbol of "destiny," the complex interweaving of people, events, and past actions which provides the plot of the novel and makes the characters what they are. Often this symbol is quite a conventional one: in *Little Dorrit* it is a road; in this novel we have the river and the ships on it, which are several times identified with Miss Havisham and Pip's delusions concerning his expectations from her. But Pip's real destiny is connected with a chain:

Think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.

The significance of the symbol becomes more explicit when Magwitch returns. Now he is no longer a man, to be pitied, but an object: "what I was chained to." When Pip comes to contemplate the realities of his situation, as opposed to the rosy vision of a calm sea and prosperous voyage with which he had been deluding himself, he realizes that Magwitch has been "loading me with his wretched gold and silver chains."

Similarly the "traps" which have sealed Magwitch's destiny catch Pip as well. The traps are set both by the law and Compeyson. Early in the novel the convicts are described as

game "trapped in a circle"; Compeyson's criminal activities involve the entrapping of others: "All sorts of traps as Compeyson could set with his hand and keep his legs out of ... was Compeyson's business." Magwitch sees these traps as an occupational hazard of his kind: "I'm an old bird now, as had dared all manner of traps since he was fledged." Pip is less adept at keeping out of them; indeed, he makes his own. Jagers is compared to a man who sets a trap--"Suddenly--click--you're caught"--and Pip is a victim of his legalistic equivocations. The sluice-house is described as a trap, which indeed it is, set by Orlick. But his delusions concerning Estella are at least partly of his own construction: "You made your own snares," says Miss Havisham.

Perhaps the most subtle way Dickens suggests the transference of guilt from one character to another is by his use of the image of the dog. In chapter iii, while Pip, with the pity for his desolation which is to have such momentous consequences, is watching the convict eating the food he has brought him, a comparison occurs to his mind which is to reverberate through the novel:

I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather shaped 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. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it, to appreciate it comfortably, I thought or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaws at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like dog.

It is a comparison which has been hinted at on the convict's first appearance in the churchyard--"a man ... who limped and shivered, and glared and growled"--and which is maintained throughout the early chapters in which he appears. The soldiers growl at the captured pair "as if to dogs," as Pip is to remember when he travels home from London in the company of the two other convicts. It is, indeed, an identification which Magwitch himself accepts, using it as a description of himself only less frequently than his favorite "warmint." When he hears of the existence of the escaped convict Compeyson he vows to "pull him down like a bloodhound." When he reappears to reveal to Pip the source of his expectations, he refers to himself as "that there hunted dunghill dog wot you kep life in." At this time, in spite of his resolution to keep "a genteel muzzle on," he disgusts Pip not only by his low talk, but by his eating:

He ate in a ravenous way that was very disagreeable, and all his actions were uncouth, noisy and greedy. Some of his teeth had failed him since I saw him eat on the marshes, and as he turned his food in his mouth, and turned his head sideways to bring his strongest fangs to bear upon it, he looked terribly like a hungry old dog.

Though the novel is full of animal imagery, the identification of the convict with a dog, by implication a miserable, starved cur, is interesting because no other character, except perhaps Pumble-chook, is so surely and continuously identified with any one species. The comparison is not a particularly surprising or unusual one, but what makes it especially

significant is that it spills over onto the young Pip. The convict himself calls him "young dog" and "fierce young hound," and this last phrase is remembered with anguish by Pip when he fears that the convict will imagine it was he who betrayed him. But it is later in the book, when Pip himself is in the position of the despised outcast, that the comparison comes through most clearly. Curiously enough, it comes in a scene in which he is being fed:

She came back, with some bread and meat and a little mug of beer. She put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry--I cannot hit the right name for the smart--God knows what its name was--that tears started to my eyes.

It is through his treatment by Estella, so different from the spirit in which he himself watched the convict, that he comes to find himself in the position of the hunted convict whom he had feared and compassionated: a spurned outcast, despised, almost beneath contempt, his humanity degraded or denied, reduced to the level of a beast.

It is through the use of this image that we see most clearly that, as Pip takes over the same metaphor as the convict, he assumes his share in his guilt and emotionally comprehends his position in society. The child can both pity the convict and put himself imaginatively in his position. The young man with "expectations" and a horror of crime can do neither, which makes doubly ironical Magwitch's part in bringing about this change in character.

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