

The analysis of Pip as a narrator and focalizer in *Great Expectations*

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this essay is to analyze the Victorian novel entitled *Great Expectations* (1860-61), by Charles Dickens. For this to happen, comments on how Dickens uses some features concerning the structure of the novel will be drawn. The analysis of Pip as protagonist, narrator and focalizer will be made with the use of some narratological critical tools. Brief comments on the time when the novel was written and some conclusions concerning the element of irony used in the novel will be pointed out in order to understand properly the events and the way characters behave in *Great Expectations*.

KEY WORDS: Pip, narrator, focalizer, narratological tools, *Great Expectations*.

Introduction

This essay attempts to analyze critically the Victorian novel entitled *Great Expectations* (1860-61), by Charles Dickens. For this purpose, I will draw on significant comments illustrating how Dickens strategically uses some features concerning the structure of the novel and its point of view as well. The main focus of the essay is to analyze Pip as protagonist, narrator and focalizer, making some side references to Estella and Magwitch when needed, since both of them are indissolubly linked to Pip's life. Also, a brief comment on Joe as part of the second stage of the novel will be made in the paper. I will make use of the narratological critical tools developed by Gerard Genette² in order to understand some aspects of the narrative instance, which refer to the narrative voice, the time of the narration and the narrative perspective and also with a view to interpreting the signs of the narrator's presence in the narrative. For this purpose, the analyses and the examples will be reported in every one of the nineteen chapters, following the three-part division designed by the writer. Stage one is acted in the marshes, stage two is set in London and stage three comes back to its origin in the marshes. The essay ends with a brief comment on the time when the novel was written so that we can understand properly the events and the way characters behave in *Great Expectations*, some considerations about aspects of narration and focalization, and some conclusions concerning the element of irony used in the novel.

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Great Expectations presents the story of the orphan Pip in his quest for maturation. As a *Bildungsroman*,³ Pip narrates his life retrospectively, from childhood to adulthood. Since Pip narrates his own story as an adult reliving everything that happened in his childhood, there are two Pips in *Great Expectations*, the one whose actions make up the main plot, and also the one whose thoughts and attitudes shape the reader's perception of the story. Once Pip has achieved his desired advancement and has learned many lessons about human values, he matures into the man who narrates the novel, completing the *Bildungsroman*.

The most important structural feature of the novel is that it is divided into three distinct parts marking the stages in the actualization of Pip's expectations. His life is described in nineteen chapters in each part, which correspond to the phases of his childhood, his youth, and his maturity, according to Nicola Bradbury (163). The novel has a thought-provoking title in that the reader becomes anxious to know what these great expectations are. In fact, there is already an irony suggested in the title itself for it depicts the triviality of Pip's life concerning the mysterious fortune he aspires to. The novel can also be considered semi-autobiographical, as much of this work is based on Dickens's own life experiences and knowledge of people. Dickens wrote the novel in the first person so that readers can see from Pip's point of view and may identify with Pip from the beginning. *Great Expectations* is the only other Dickens novel told entirely in the first person, besides *David Copperfield* (1849-50).

The first part, containing the first nineteen chapters, concerns Pip's world as a child expressing all the problems and feelings of his childhood, Pip's meeting with the convict and his introduction to Miss Havisham and Estella. Some characteristics of the narrative instance are evident here. We observe Pip as the narrator, as he addresses the suggestive side of the reader when he says that the only memories he has about his father are from the tombstone, making the reader feel pleased by the comic aspects of the narrative. See, for example, what he says on page 1: "As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones" The reference of the reality given by the narrator in an attempt to describe his past is more associated to his imagination than to

³ *Bildungsroman*: a novel whose principal subject is the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a usually youthful main character.

the real facts. This suggestiveness of the narrator seems to be an innovative aspect in Dickens's writing. At this stage, examples of Pip as a child, and the way he expresses his feelings of childhood are shown at the very beginning of the novel when the protagonist is telling about the way he came to be called Pip by everyone and why he also called himself Pip: "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (1). Also when he is looking at the gravestones and has his first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening: The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair (2).

In fact, the entire novel is told by an autodiegetic narrator who reports his own experiences as the hero of the story by structuring the narrative perspective, organizing the time and manipulating different kinds of distance. On the one hand, the main character tells his own story as an adult in *Great Expectations*, but on the other hand he sometimes, describes things as he saw and felt as a child. For instance, when the convict turns him upside down he sees and thinks that, in fact, it is the church which is upside down. In principle, focalization and narration are distinct activities; however, they may sometimes be combined (Guillemette and Lévesque, 2006), as shown in the long paragraph on page 2, in which Pip describes the marshes and the river as identifiable aspects of his environment. The definite article indicates something that is familiar to the speaker, that is, it suggests that these features are presented as knowledge shared between speaker and reader since they are familiar territory to the narrator or focalizer.

Pip's meeting with the convict, which seems to be the most important occurrence in the plot, in terms of narrative, happens in this first part of the novel. Magwitch is someone who has an unusual effect on Pip. At this point in the novel the narrator suddenly assumes the role of the character who observes his interlocutor from his own perspective, changing from external narrator to internal focalizer, that is, changing the perspective from the outside to the inside. A good example of that is brought out when Pip meets the convict and a dialogue is performed: "Hold your noise" (2). It is relevant to point out that this narrative perspective which refers to the point of view adopted by the narrator is called focalization according to Genette. And one of the three kinds of focalization distinguished by Genette is the internal

focalization in which the narrator knows as much as the character and filters the information provided to the reader. This unknown man, the convict, is described by the narrator from an individual point of view, privileging the psychological criteria of persuasion: “A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg” (2). This narrative strategy emphasizes the verisimilitude of the plot.

In the dialogue on page 12, the convict asks Pip, "Get me a file". Pip obeys the convict and brings him food and the file. Significantly, such a simple task will change Pip's life forever and Pip will discover at the end of the novel that the convict had a great influence on his expectations, and had paid him back his generosity for being his benefactor. It will be also revealed that he is the real father of Pip's first love, Estella. The readers will be able to feel that Magwitch is not as bad as he seemed to be. On the other hand, the guilt for taking the file to the convict constitutes a torment to Pip until the end as if the file were a living being. Many examples show how this feeling turns into a nightmare: “I was haunted by the file”, he recalls; or also: “In my sleep I saw the file coming at me out of a door, without seeing who held it and I screamed myself awake”. (10)

Pip's introduction to Miss Havisham and Estella triggers off an endless change in his life, since he falls in love at first sight and develops a strong desire for Estella. Estella represents wealth and culture and she is presented as an impossible dream for Pip. The title of the novel seems to suggest Pip's hopes for social advancement and romantic success with Estella. He even avoids a deeper relationship with Bidley and uses her as a scaffold to achieve his education and increase his chances of having a romance with Estella. But the relationship between Pip and Estella is very complex. She is cold and manipulative and, as readers eventually learn, she was raised to break men's hearts. A good example is when Estella kisses Pip after insulting and degrading him. This specific situation makes the reader as confused as Pip with Estella's actions and feels sympathy for Pip when Estella invites Pip to kiss her after he has knocked Herbert down: "Come here! You may kiss me, if you like". This livens up the story, since no one expects such a thing coming from Estella. (114)

Pip's move to London is the turning point for the second main stage of *Great Expectations*, far from the marshes. Pip faces a hard time in this period, since his rise in social status is followed by a strong decline in his confidence and happiness. And most

painful of all is that Estella, mainly known as the “coldly glittering distant star” (Pickrel, 166) treats Pip just as bad as ever when he comes back to Satis House. During this period, Pip got so confused that he started treating Joe, who used to consider him as a father, with hostility in his visit to London. It seems that the distinction between the narrator and character-focalizer becomes evident here. Pip as a character and internal focalizer feels angry and unhappy about his attitude and, as a narrator, he judges himself heavily for expressing these feelings, writing “God forgive me!” (302). This means that, as an adult narrator, he was able to look at his life from a broader perspective and judge himself. Pip’s guilt over his behavior mainly toward Joe and Biddy makes him feel terrible. Pip feels embarrassed by Joe, since he was conscious that his attitude to Joe during his visit was somewhat cold and not admirable showing how awkward Pip’s position between the social classes had become. An example of this scene is verbalized in “I had neither the good sense nor the good feeling to know that this was all my fault, and that if I had been easier with Joe, Joe would have been easier with me. I felt impatient of him and out of temper with him; in which condition he heaped coals of fire on my head” (275). Interestingly, what I found the most brilliant of all in this novel was the metaphor of metalsmithing that Joe used to describe the natural social divisions in life and to show Pip, in the most elegant and simple way, that he could wisely understand Pip’s social changes.

Another feature that shows how Joe could feel such unease is by the description of his hat and his addressing Pip as "sir" as shown in the following excerpt: “But Joe, taking it up carefully with both hands, like a bird’s-nest with eggs in it, wouldn’t hear of parting with that piece of property, and persisted in standing talking over it in a most uncomfortable way” (271).

Both Pip, who tells the story, and Biddy, who is patient in teaching Joe, at the time of the events narrated, point to Joe's virtues. There are some slight touches of sentimentality as they describe him as a humble, honest and deep character. Pip realizes Joe’s dignity only when it is too late at the end of the paragraph, which seems to be one of the most moving moments in the novel:

I had not been mistaken in my fancy that there was a simple dignity in him. The fashion of his dress could no more come in its way when he spoke these words, than it could come in its way in Heaven. He touched me gently on the forehead, and

went out. As soon as I could recover myself sufficiently, I hurried out after him and looked for him in the neighbouring streets; but he was gone. (278)

Another crucial fact that seems to be a relevant point in his maturation is his sister's death. His twenty-first birthday marks his official transition to adulthood and a new phase in the novel, in which he is even called "Mr. Pip" by Jaggers from that moment on.

Pip and Estella both share a common history of self-knowledge and humiliation. They both have been made use of, since Pip, the gentleman, has been created by Magwitch as his revenge on society, and Estella, the unwilling to love girl, is Miss Havisham's creation. And they also have much to regret about what happened to them. This passage is well described by Pip as an external focalizer when Estella, disappointed at being accused for heartlessness and cruelty, reminds Miss Havisham for being responsible for making her as she is now. This is shown on page 382:

Or, said Estella, "—which is a nearer case—if you had taught her, from the dawn of her intelligence, with your utmost energy and might, that there was such a thing as daylight, but that it was made to be her enemy and destroyer, and she must always turn against it, for it had blighted you and would else blight her—if you had done this, and then, for a purpose, had wanted her to take naturally to the daylight and she could not do it, you would have been disappointed and angry?"

So, said Estella, "I must be taken as I have been made. The success is not mine, the failure is not mine, but the two together make me".

This metaphor for love by the use of daylight signals that Estella could never be expected to understand things due to the fact that she had never been taught that way. This perception indicates her arrival at self-knowledge. In relation to Pip, it is because his dream world was created by himself that his humiliation is so deep. He is absolutely responsible for his own faults. Besides, he feels ill-used by Magwitch before knowing all about the truth that Miss Havisham is not the real source of his fortune. Because Pip's vision is so innocent as a child and purblind focalizer, he makes lots of mistakes of interpretation, and gives the reader the chance to make judgments of him, since he exposes himself fully. His honesty cannot be pretended and the reader may find more confidence in his narrative.

The previous example as well as the following sentence represent examples of irony, in which the language is used to convey a meaning that is opposite of what is intended. “You stock and stone!...You cold, cold heart!” (283) Miss Havisham is accusing Estella of being too harsh and uncaring, when she was the one who made her that way.

It seems that many chapters of this second part of the novel are marked by external focalization since the narrator acts like a camera lens, describing the characters' actions and gestures from the outside without taking part in it. Although it is the writer-narrator who is speaking, it is the character that sees and reacts to the events.

Moreover, the discovery of his benefactor is also an important milestone in the book's narrative development and marks the end of the second important stage in the novel. It establishes a link with the last one, which is resolved through some surprises. Magwitch can be considered one of the wisest inventions in this novel, he haunts Pip as he grows up but he does him no harm. It seems that Pip would prefer that his fortune had come from Miss Havisham's inheritance than Magwitch's hard work. Through the character of Magwitch, it is shown that many so-called criminals are normally good people, and that some crimes committed by "gentlemen" like Compeyson are much crueler in their consequences, and how the legal system reinforces this aspect and enables the rich to oppress the poor. But since Pip has no idea that Magwitch is led into crime by Compeyson, he only realizes his mistakes when he learns who the real source of his wealth is. Among the various mistakes he makes, one seems to be when Pip hears that an escaped convict from the prison ships is blamed for the attack on his sister and he feels guilty over the incident as he says on page 151, “it was horrible to think that I had provided the instrument, however undesignedly.”

From this last part of the novel on, the adult Pip – who had already lived through all the problems as a child and ignored the truths – now, starts to perceive and understand all the mistakes he made. Now, Pip recognizes Magwitch as a truly human being in spite of an ordinary criminal. He becomes fond of him, nurses him and his clear-sighted love is the end of any doubt, mistake or snobbery. This transition is illustrated in the following paragraph in which the change in its context is very convincing through the manipulation of the narrative technique.

The third main Part of *Great Expectations* concerns Pip's conflicting feelings, the purpose to find out the mystery of Estella's origins and Magwitch's death. Pip's secret guilt and the world of his expectations share the same end, since he is afraid of the convict, but he also fears for the convict's safety. At first, Pip faces the convict as an unwanted father, but later, in the final section of the novel, the relationship between them develops so deeply that Pip will value Magwitch as a new father figure. As Pip says, "For now my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had . . . felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously toward me with great constancy through a series of years" (558). Finally, Pip learns the novel's greatest moral lesson, emphasizing that loyalty, love, conscience, and human affection are more important than social standing and ambition. Also, as shown in the example above, the words "affectionately", "gratefully", and "generously" seem to imply a strong evaluative power used by the narrator. This recognition is the most evident example of structural irony created by the difference in knowledge of the events and understanding between the adult Pip and the child.

At this stage, focalization is perceived and changes from the outside to the inside, since there is an identification of the character and an evaluation made by the focalizer as can be seen when Pip is describing Magwitch's disguise: "To my thinking, there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him" (418).

The great discovery that Estella is not the princess he thought her to be, but instead, Magwitch's illegitimate daughter just makes the mature Pip finally see her the way she is and someone who is able to change despite her damaging influences and someone who can return to him at the end of the novel as a much better human being. The thawing of Estella's heart seems to be somewhat ironic. This is visible when Pip narrates this scene: "The freshness of her beauty was indeed gone, but its indescribable majesty and its indescribable charm remained. Those attractions in it, I had seen before; what I had never seen before, was the saddened softened light of the once proud eyes; what I had never felt before, was the friendly touch of the once insensible hand" (604). It also seems that Estella's life was used to emphasize the idea that happiness is not always connected to social position and her painful life forces her to learn to trust her inner feelings as can be seen in the last chapter: "And if you could say that to me then,

you will not hesitate to say that to me now — now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but — I hope — into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends” (606).

Through the narratological analysis, I have tried to illustrate how the narrative instances, that is, the understanding of the relations between the narrator and the story are explored in the novel. By examining these characteristics and particulars of the narrative mood, the mechanisms of the narrative act can be clarified and methodological choices made by the author can be pointed out. The use of different narratological processes causes different outcomes for the reader which can produce a great sense of realism and credibility. In the case of this novel, a naïve narrator is invented and the reader shares the knowledge of the author’s ironic intention but the speaker does not take part in this sharing nor does he understand the facts.

Great Expectations describes the effect of the industrialization of England in forming two distinct classes of people in society in the mid-nineteenth century: the rich, and the poor. The few rich people were respected, and that is why Pip’s struggle to elevate his social standing never leaves him in order to be a wealthy person and gain Estella’s respect. It is a “realistic” novel in the sense that it reflects the values of the society of those times. The people and events in the novel seem to be like real people or events which are already known to the readers. We move from the real world of everyday life into the grotesque world outside time and place and with logic. It seems to feature a sort of novel in which the characters face problems that are similar to ours, since we feel they are human beings like us. As Goulart and Silva point-out, “going deep into the novel, we feel like co-authors of the history” (113).⁴ In other words, the facts are pretty convincing and so close to real life that they allow us to compose or imagine narrative sequences that are not expressed in a written way by the novelist. Instead, they are only suggested as if something were left unfinished. That is why we, readers sometimes get surprised at the end of some novels. In *Great Expectations*, for instance, it is suggested by the last paragraph of the novel that Pip and Estella will never be parted again. As he takes her hand, and they walk around the grounds and says “I saw no shadow of another parting from her”, it seems that the world perhaps provided him

⁴ “penetrando fundo no romance, sentimo-nos como coautores da história” (My translation).

with new expectations of fulfillment and, who knows, some romantic success and happiness which was so long hoped for and is intimately linked to the title of the novel.

Great Expectations is a complex and engaging novel in which the application of irony is one of Dickens's remarkable strategies to create diversity and he has great skills to make use of them all in several different ways. Dickens uses irony to better highlight the changes that the characters experience throughout the book, mainly Pip's transformation into adulthood and awareness of understanding of attitudes and events by performing either as an adult narrator, being aware of the problems once lived or as purblind focalizer, being totally unaware of his so many misinterpreted mistakes. *Great Expectations* is the sort of literary work that exhibits structural features to sustain duplicity of meaning and evaluation throughout the work with great ability and style.

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RESUMO: O objetivo do artigo é analisar o romance Vitoriano intitulado *Great Expectations* (1860-61), por Charles Dickens. Para tal, a forma que Dickens usa algumas características em relação à estrutura do romance será descrita. A análise do Pip, como protagonista, narrador e focalizador será feita através da análise narratológica. Comentários sobre o tempo em que o romance foi escrito e conclusões sobre elementos de ironia usados no texto serão apontados para o melhor entendimento dos eventos e da maneira que os personagens se comportam em *Great Expectations*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pip, narrador, focalizador, análise narratológica, *Great Expectations*