

How effective is the opening chapter of "great expectations"? essay sample

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How Effective is the Opening Chapter of “Great Expectations”? Essay Sample

The novel ‘Great Expectations’ was written by the much admired Charles Dickens. It was firstly written in a weekly series for a magazine and finally published into book form in 1861. Dickens’ childhood influenced his writing to a great extent. At a very young age his father was imprisoned for failure to pay debts. This meant that Charles was sent to work in a blacking factory, living his life in poverty and adversity. Dickens had much compassion for the lower classes, especially children and this is shown in many of his books. In the first chapter of ‘Great Expectations’ we see Dickens’ childhood reflected into the main character of his novel, Pip. The story begins with Pip in a graveyard when a convict approaches him. To make a successful opening it must immediately grab the readers’ attention and make them want to read on by using a narrative hook. Dickens has done this skilfully by using certain aspects such as language and vivid characters to make it effective.

Pip is firstly introduced into ‘Great Expectations’ when in a graveyard visiting the grave stones of his parents and five brothers. Even though the reader does not know much about Pip at this point, they are made to feel sympathetic towards him as he has lost the majority of his family.

Furthermore, this shows that Pip was an underprivileged child as high infant mortality was common in those of the lower classes. Throughout the novel the readers are given several small details about Pip’s physical description, for example, ‘small bundle of shivers’ and ‘I was at that time undersized for my years’. By describing him in this way, the reader will imagine him to be

young and vulnerable. Also, his image is portrayed when Magwitch describes his cheeks as being fat. This is usually thought to be an adorable quality, making the reader again feel sympathetic towards him.

In the opening chapter Dickens effectively uses a variety of skills to put us into the perspective of Pip. At the beginning Pip uses repetition of his name suggesting that he is going to be the main character in the novel. Also, Dickens tells the reader that Pip can not yet pronounce his name 'My infant tongue could make nothing longer or more explicit than Pip'. This is important as it puts emphasis on Pip's age, again adding to his vulnerability and making the reader increasingly fond of him. By talking in the first person narrative, the reader can tell that Pip is narrating. By doing this the reader can begin to understand the way Pip is feeling and see things from his point of view. The use of a dual narrator also helps us to understand the way in which he was feeling at the time and the way he makes sense of it all now. Pip uses intricate vocabulary for example, 'authority' and 'my infant tongue' showing he is now older. This additionally shows that the story is being written in retrospect.

When Pip is approached by Magwitch, he talks very politely. Magwitch threatens Pip a number of times for example saying that he will cut his throat. Pip replies by saying, 'Pray Don't do it, sir.' This shows that even though Magwitch may be intimidating him, Pip maintains his respect for his elders showing he has been well educated about talking to superior beings. In addition, the reader can assume that the novel is dated from the style of this language. Furthermore, Pip says, 'sir' when addressing Magwitch. This

along with his innocent behaviour gradually adds up making us grow fonder of him. For example when Magwitch is tilting Pip, causing him to feel discomfort, Pip attempts to stop him from doing so in a very polite manner.

The reader can see that Pip is very imaginative. The idea of this is put across when Pip is picturing what his deceased parents look like. This image is derived from the letters on the tombstones of his parents. Dickens has done this again to add emphasis to his age as a child would only come to this kind of conclusion. It additionally shows the relationship between Pip and his sister. The reader can assume from this that they may not be very close as he does not know much about his parents. His sister, Miss Joe Gargery, may be held responsible for the lack of information he has about them.

Furthermore, Pip appears to be very nave. The reader becomes aware of this when Magwitch tells Pip that he has the company of another dangerous man. Even though the reader can tell that this is not true, Pip seems to believe otherwise. By making Pip's character nave, the reader feels sympathetic towards him and does not want him harmed. When Pip is being threatened by Magwitch, he tries his best to maintain his bravery and struggles to stop himself from crying. We can see this when it says 'Partly, to keep myself upon it; partly, to keep myself from crying.' This creates the impression that Pip is trying to keep his dignity and courage as he does not want to appear weak.

In the first chapter, Magwitch is portrayed as a frightening and threatening character. Dickens has shown this by describing Magwitch's physical appearance in certain ways. His clothing has been carefully selected to

resemble his character's attributes. The reader is given several descriptions that suggest Magwitch is an escaped convict. This is illustrated where it says 'A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg.' From this the reader can also see a relationship between the colours used and the atmosphere and setting. Also, there are several other details showing that Magwitch may have escaped from jail.

The reader can see this when Dickens says that he had 'broken shoes, smothered in mud and had been torn by briars'. From this it becomes apparent that he may be on the run as he is described as very untidy and bedraggled. Another point which makes the reader believe he is an escaped convict is when he turns Pip upside-down to see if he has any food. This may be considered as stealing and it is something that a criminal would do. It also resembles the way in which Magwitch has turned Pip's life upside-down although he may not know this at this point. Additionally, it says that Magwitch eats the bread (found in Pip's pockets) 'ravenously' which also implies that he may be hungry again suggesting he may be on the run. Magwitch speaks in non-standard English for example, 'Or a eel!' This creates the impression that he may not have been educated. and it contrasts with the way Pip is speaking. Magwitch's speech is written phonetically. Dickens has done this to show his accent and his class position in society. This additionally shows that he may not have been well educated.

Throughout the chapter Magwitch appears to be a terrifying character. From the moment he is first introduced into the novel, he is very aggressive towards Pip. We first see him threatening Pip when he says, 'Keep still you

little devil, or I'll cut your throat!' Dickens has done this early in the chapter so that the reader will know he is going to be intimidating throughout. Magwitch uses lots of imperatives when speaking to Pip. By doing this it emphasises Magwitch's position of power and it shows he may have been in jail as it is likely that this is the way he would have been spoken to there.

When it says, ' So that his eyes looked powerfully down into mine, and mine looked helplessly up into his' this represents the more dominant character and the victim and makes a contrast between them both. Moreover, Magwitch often uses physical contact to demonstrate the strength and control he has over Pip. We can see this for example when he tilts Pip, ' And tilted me back as far as he could hold me; so that his eyes looked most powerfully down into mine, and mine looked most helplessly into his'. He frequently makes Pip feel unsafe and insecure for instance when he tells Pip he is not alone. He describes another dangerous man who he says is with him. He illustrates in detail how this man would hurt Pip however Magwitch says that he is preventing him from doing so. This makes Pip think he needs Magwitch as he is keeping him from harm and by doing this it makes Pip feel as though he owes Magwitch. This means that when Magwitch asks for food and a file (to remove the iron from his leg) Pip feels obliged to do so.

Even though Magwitch appears as a very violent character, the reader does not completely dislike him. Dickens has cleverly used many ways of doing this. When asking Pip to get food and a file for him, we notice he has a speech impediment. He refers to victuals as ' wittles' showing he uses a w instead of a v. Dickens has made him speak in this way as it makes him

seem less intimidating than expected. Magwitch asks where Pip's mother is. When Pip replies with 'There, Sir', Magwitch makes a short run. This creates the impression that Magwitch is afraid of being seen by an adult again suggesting that he has escaped from jail. But this also makes him seem like he is scared, again, making him appear less threatening.

The first chapter of the novel is set in an isolated churchyard on a 'memorable raw afternoon'. By describing it in this way the reader imagines it is just going dark and it makes them inquisitive as to why a young child would be there at this time. He firstly breaks down the setting gradually. This is effective as it makes the reader feel as though they are there. The graveyard is said to be 'overgrown with nettles' which gives the impression that nobody goes there as it would be well-groomed if they did. It also appears as a very lonely place, resembling the way Pip is feeling.

We can see pathetic fallacy used where it says, 'the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea.' It appears as if the sea and wind are rushing away from the savage lair, representing again what is or may be happening to Pip. The surrounding marshes are referred to as a series of horizontal lines. The word 'line' is repeated several times to stress the importance of it. Dickens has used very negative adjectives and colours to describe the lines for example red and black which we usually think of as dangerous and fearful. This is effective as it makes the reader aware of the danger Pip is in. Furthermore, Pip mentions the gibbets. Dickens has done this so that the reader can see that Magwitch has a great impact on him and made him feel very insecure. However, what Pip does not know is that

Magwitch, being a convict, is probably also afraid of them and by focusing on it, we begin to understand this.

As the book was written a long time ago, the language is very old-fashioned. We can see this when words and phrases such as 'gibbet' and 'Pray don't do it, Sir' which are not often used in the modern day. Dickens uses a variety of sentences such as multicausal sentences along with some simpler sentences which change the pace of the novel. This has a great impact on the reader as the longer, more detailed sentences help them to comprehend with what is going on with the characters and feel as though they are part of the story. However, the simpler sentences for example, 'Hold your noise!' surprise the reader and help them to understand a feeling of panic which the characters may be feeling.

Dickens has done this so the reader can empathise with characters feelings and emotions. Alliteration is used to slow down the pace of the novel, 'Low leaden line'. This contrasts with the shorter, faster sentences, helping to create fear and panic in the reader for instance, 'Hold Your Noise!' Pip's name has been cleverly selected as it suggests something that starts off small and progresses into something very big and successful. Use of the third person, 'The small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip,' helps to show that Pip is now older again and is telling the story retrospectively. Certain aspects of the language help us to identify the personality of the characters. For example, the polite language Pip uses makes reader think that he is a kind, young boy. On the other hand, Magwitch is quite the opposite.

In conclusion, I believe the opening chapter of the novel is very effective . It makes the reader able to feel as though they are a part of the story by using several different techniques such as descriptive settings and unique language. His characters are very memorable and he uses interesting language keeping the reader interested in the story and to understand the feelings and thoughts of the two protagonists.