

Dramatic symmetry in great expectations

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In the 1861 novel *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens tells the story of a poor English boy named Pip who faces a number of complicated situations and characters on his way to becoming a gentleman. Dickens' writing style, while indicative of the time period, is notable for its use of dramatic symmetry. Dickens consistently draws parallels between characters and major events throughout the book to enhance their importance.

Most of the parallels, particularly between characters, are developed over the full course of the novel. For example, when Pip is young his attention is fixed firmly on Estella. As he grows, he acknowledges the intensity of his love might not be a good thing, going as far as to say, "I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be." Later in the book, Pip is a grown man and has resolved to marry Biddy, proposing by a letter which ends with "...if you can tell me you will go through the world with me, you will surely make it a better world for me..." Pip's deepest desire is to be with Estella, but as an adult he understands it is in everyone's interest for him to marry Biddy (at least until he finds out she and Joe are to be married). The dramatic symmetry between Estella and Biddy highlights how Pip's perspective has changed over time.

Two convicts that disturb Pip's life offer another instance of dramatic symmetry. Magwitch sets Pip's journey on its way. Later, Compeyson's appearance leads to Magwitch's death and Pip is forced to decide what to do with his life. Both men force Pip down a specific path.

Pip and Estella unknowingly mimic the relationship between Miss Havisham, a disabled, haggard woman, and Compeyson, the convict who left her at the altar. Pip can see that Miss Havisham has influenced Estella “...to wreak Miss Havisham’s revenge on men...” so that Miss Havisham can feel better after her brutal rejection. Meanwhile, Pip is also carrying out Magwitch’s misplaced ideology. Magwitch is proud of “ the gentleman what I made!” and enthralled with the idea of Pip’s transformation. It’s clear, however, that Magwitch is disconnected from reality when he makes comments like, “ I’ve come to the old country ‘ fur’ to see my gentleman spend his money like a gentleman.” Neither Pip nor Estella truly want to live their guardians’ lives, but they have little choice in the matter.

Dickens draws another parallel between Pip and Magwitch (Pip’s secret benefactor) when Pip decides to become a secret benefactor to his friend Herbert. Pip describes the lengths he goes to keep his identity secret: “...secret articles were signed of which Herbert was the subject, and I paid [Wemmick] half of my five hundred pounds down...” It’s this secrecy that gives Herbert the confidence to act on his dreams of pursuing a partnership and ultimately become a successful man.

Dickens’ use of dramatic symmetry makes characters, events, and circumstances more poignant. As events are mirrored throughout the novel, the reader is able to see history repeating itself and understand the importance of recognizing and breaking that cycle.