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## **Analysis of Autobiographical Character of the Novel Great Expectations by Charles Dickens**

### Introduction

Charles Dickens was one of the most popular English writers whose novels were known all over the world. His name was associated with realism trend in English classic literature.

The two novels, David Copperfield and Great Expectations, are considered the most autobiographical of all other works created by Charles Dickens. This paper is devoted to the analysis of autobiographical facts of Dickens' life in comparison with the life of the main hero of his novel Great Expectations, Philip Pirrip (Pip). Many critics cannot achieve a unified opinion with regard to the statement that Great Expectations is autobiographical. The current paper is to prove or disclaim this statement and to explain why it is so.

### 1. Brief Autobiography of Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens, born on the 7th of February, 1812, was considered one of the most genius English novelists of his era. He came from a middle class family whose father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the Naval Pay Office.

Charles was the second child out of eight children in the family. His family was impecunious all the time because father was not able to manage family finances appropriately. In 1824 the whole family excluding Charles found themselves imprisoned for debts (Hochman 54).

It happened when Charles was twelve, he was sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory to pay off his father's debts. As he was a dreamy and extraordinary boy who possessed outstanding talent, he considered this job pejorative and demolishing for his individuality. He was not able to forgive

his people even when he became famous and prosperous (Forster 29).

This experience made a profound effect on the impressionable child. He felt alienated and betrayed then. It was far beyond his strength to forgive the pain caused by his parents. This feeling could be traced in the novel *Great Expectations*. Many critics consider that the experience of working at the Blacking Factory was a source of his creative energy and the reason of his sympathy to plain men (Hochman 78).

He did not tell about his early working experience anybody except for his wife and his closest friend John Forster who also was his first biographer.

After his father was released, his mother, Elizabeth Dickens, insisted Charles would continue working on the factory. However, his father sent him to the school in London where he studied from 1824 to 1827. Soon he got a job of an office boy employed by an attorney (Forster 55).

In 1829, as he showed a talent for writing, he became a reporter at Doctor's Common Courts. He was quite successful in his carrier. In 1832 he was working for the House of Commons and soon began working as a reporter in the newspaper. In 1830 he met a daughter of a banker, Maria Beadnell, with whom Dickens fell in love. But they did not get on probably because her parents did not consider him a good match for their daughter. He continued working as a freelance reporter when his first story was published in 1833. In 1834 he adopted his well-known pseudonym Boz (Hochman 112).

In 1835 he met Catherine Hogarth, they became engaged and then got married in 1836. The same year his *Sketches by Boz* were published. Then *The Pickwick Papers* saw the world in 1837. Surprisingly, this work had become very popular. The same year he began *Oliver Twist* which he

finished in 1839. The Pickwick Papers were the impetus of Dickens' further successful career as a novelist. A number of works followed then: Nicholas Nickleby appeared in 1839, after Humphrey's Clock in 1840, Martin Chuzzlewit in 1844, Christmas Carol in 1844, Pictures from Italy in 1846, Dombey and Son in 1848, David Copperfield in 1850, Bleak House in 1853, Hard Times in 1854, Little Dorrit in 1857, Great Expectations in 1861 and many other works (Forster 76).

He took part in multiple public readings, was occupied with an editorial and theatrical activity. He was talented and brilliant, but emotionally insecure and difficult to live with. In 1858 Dickens separated from his wife and lived with Ellen Ternan, a young actress. Beginning from 1867 Dickens' health was worsening and he collapsed in 1869 supposedly because of a mild stroke. Then he had another stroke which killed him on the 9th of June in 1870. Charles Dickens was buried at Westminster Abbey (Hochman 214).

## 2. Brief Summary

The action of the novel Great Expectations took place in Victorian England. Seven-year-old boy named Philip Pirrip, nicknamed Pip, lived with his cruel older sister and her husband, Joe Gargery. Once he visited the cemetery where his parents were buried and encountered an escaped convict Magwitch who forced him to bring him some food and a file to get rid of irons (Dickens 624).

Pip made friendship with adopted daughter of Ms. Havisham, Estella, who lived close to him. As they lived isolated from other people, Estella needed the company to play with. Ms. Havisham was an eccentric prosperous woman who lived with Estella in a large Satis House. Ms. Havisham never

changed her wedding dress since that time when her fiancé deceived and abandoned her. Ms. Havisham was very much disappointed after this incident in her life and was expected of Estella to take a revenge on all men who would ever fall in love with her. Estella was supposed to be heartless to break men hearts. Pip, who often visited Satis House, was the first victim of Estella cold beauty. Ms. Havisham did not consider him a good match for her adopted daughter and rejected him. Pip was forced to return to the home of his brother-in-law as he services were not needed anymore. This event had broken gentle Pip's heart (Dickens 652).

Pip proceeded to live and work at Joe's house; he also took lessons from Biddy, who helped the family to keep the household. Biddy fell in love with Pip who continued to dream about Estella. Someone injured his sister by striking her to the back of the head. Biddy helped to take care of Mrs. Joe. (Dickens 671).

One of those days Pip was visited by a stranger who informed him that an anonymous benefactor wanted to transform Pip into a gentleman. Pip assumed that it was Ms. Havisham who wanted to help him. Soon it appeared that it was Magwitch, the escaped convict Pip helped long ago. Pip moved to London and entrusted his financial affairs to Mr. Jaggers, the stranger who brought good news for him. Soon it appeared that Magwitch was Estella's father. He was killed when intended to run out of the country. After some time Pip met divorced Estella and they reunited (Dickens 706).

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

The novel *Great Expectations* belongs to the late works of Dickens. It was

written in 1861 near the end of his life and this masterpiece is often considered one of his best works. The name of the novel tells the reader that it was written by a mature man who went through the largest part of his life. The plot of the novel is noticeable and expresses Dickens' genius better than his previous novels. Many of the events of Dickens' early life were mirrored in this novel.

The author described the life of Pip, a young fellow who lived with his relatives but an incident changed his life. A distinctive feature of Dickens' works is a special manner of narration. He described any event like if he took part in it, unlike his friend Thackeray, who was able to represent the event from the observer's point of view.

The scene of Great Expectations was in England of Victorian times. It was the time when Industrial Revolution was spinning up which led to great social changes. Seeking for new opportunities and financial success people moved from rural areas to cities and they were depended on the circumstances of birth to a lesser extent. Those events can be clearly traced both in life of Dickens and Pip's life. Meanwhile, English aristocratic circles attempted to defend their positions. Under stiffness and snobbery poor morals were hidden. The manners of ladies and gentlemen were conservative and Dickens characterized the country as "marsh" because English society rejected to accept new order.

Dickens described Pip's move from country laborer to gentlemen, the way he passed himself being a son of a clerk who became famous writer whose talent was appreciated in his lifetime. He showed the reader sudden switch from one social extreme to another. Interestingly, the novel Great

Expectations where the main hero yearned for social advancement and wealth was written out of economic necessity. The novel reflected prevalent tendency in English literature of nineteenth century which consisted in describing personal growth and development. Pip's transition from boyhood to adulthood reflected molding of Dickens' personality. When writing Great Expectations he concerned the issues of self-discovery and maturation. Thus, the two important themes can be traced through the novel: achieving wealth through realization of ambition and humanization process; and the effect of social environment in the process of self-development of an individual.

The name of the novel, Great Expectations, is connected with the author's aspirations of better life which were linked to wealth and recognition in his mind. However, when he achieved success in society he felt emptiness because his position in society did not match his aspirations. The end of the novel was expected to be tragic, but Dickens decided to write happy end because he wanted to comply with his readers' anticipation.

The name of the main personage sounds a little bit childish and defenseless, just like Pip himself appeared before the reader. The moments of such helplessness and destituteness could be easily found in the autobiography of Dickens as well.

Many scholars considered that Pip's temper reminds of Dickens'. Young man was described by Dickens as amiable, weak, aspiring and inefficient, just like Dickens at the young age. Besides, shortly before Great Expectations Great Expectations is read with the feeling of the author's presence in the book. He described the main character with unsurpassed realism so the reader

unconsciously often associated Pip with Dickens. The manner of portraying Pip enlightened Dickens' boyhood and young age period.

The novel is often referred as one of the most autobiographical Dickens' masterpieces together with David Copperfield and some other novels.

#### 4. Comparison of Dickens' Autobiography and Life of Pip

There is a need to examine autobiographical facts of Dickens' life and the life of Pip narrated in the novel in order to understand whether Great

Expectations is autobiographical. First coincidence that jumped to the eye, both Dickens and Pip were commoners. Both Dickens and Pip had unhappy childhood: Dickens had to work his family debts out and Pip who lived with his rude manlike older sister Mrs. Joe. Pip described his sister as follows: “

She was not a good-looking woman, my sister; and I had a general impression that she must have made Joe Gargery marry her by hand My sister, Mrs. Joe, with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap” (Dickens 625). Some critics compare Dickens older sister with Mrs. Joe. It is quite possible that Dickens' older sister was intended to be a prototype of Mrs. Joe.

Another coincidence concerned Dickens' early experience connected with prison. Both the life of Dickens and Pip included similar episodes: Dickens' father and the whole family were imprisoned for debts; Pip was forced to help a runaway convict (Forster 25).

Like Dickens, Pip was also forced to work at the job he hated and considered himself too good for the surroundings he encountered. Dickens was deeply



wounded by his early working experience which made an impact on further life of the writer. When sent to work at an early age, Charles Dickens felt betrayed. He considered unfair that he was to be responsible for the mistakes of his parents. Interestingly, he proceeded to be the only hope for the whole family during his lifetime. The work at the factory in the childhood had left an impression in Dickens' soul and this was the reason why he felt compassion for commoners. Many of his works described the life of orphans because he felt separated from his family. The feeling of being abandoned went through many of his novels (Forster 72).

Both Dickens and Pip went through unhappy personal relationships. When being a young man Dickens fell in love with Maria Beadnell whose parents did not consider him a good match for her. Like Dickens, Pip fell in love with Estella, an adopted daughter of Ms. Havisham. Ms. Havisham was disappointed with men and dreamed that Estella would take a revenge on men for her. Ms. Havisham's fiancé used her to attain his purposes and refused to marry her in the day supposed for wedding. Both the parents of Ms. Beadnell and Ms. Havisham rejected Dickens and Pip because they socially did not match (Hochman 53).

One of the autobiographical moments of Great Expectations was connected with Wemmick, a law clerk, which reminded of Dickens' work experience as an office clerk. Wemmick was one of the most appealing figures of the novel. Dickens described him in a vivid manner due to his experience and put his heart in this personage (Forster 54).

The whole life of Dickens as well as the life of Pip was a way from the lowest to the highest level of society. The difference was in the way how this

prosperity was reached: Dickens developed his unique talent; Pip was rewarded by the convict for his kind heart. Just like Pip, Dickens achieved material success at the young age, he was twenty-five when his first works were published and his talent was appreciated (Forster 78).

#### 5. Contrasting Dickens' Life and Life of Pip

There are several differences in lives of the author and the main character of the novel despite of many coincidences that took place. The main difference is that Dickens made his way through developing his outstanding talent. On the contrary, Pip had become a gentleman by chance. However, belonging to high society made happy neither Dickens nor Pip because the moral was perverse there. Gentlemen of high society led dissipated life. They were occupied with trivial things aiming at spending as much money as they could. As well as Dickens, Pip found himself in high society, but it did not make him happy as he anticipated. Both of them were disappointed.

Coincidence between lives of Dickens and Pip took place mainly in their boyhood and youth. After Dickens was rejected by parents of Maria Beadnell, as well as Pip was rejected by Ms. Havisham, he was successfully married to Catherine Hogarth. He lived almost all his life with his wife until he met Ellen Ternan in his middle age. As he was quite difficult to live with, he separated from his wife and often visited Ms. Ternan. Despite Dickens was considered a master of realism, he had vulnerable temper and was prone to idealize the world to please his readers. Maybe this was the reason why he decided to bring the fates of Pip and Estella at the end of the novel. The concept of happy end became popular long ago not to disappoint the readers. As

Dickens' life was full of unpleasant moments, especially in the childhood, he attempted to idealize the world when being in middle age to reduce his pain as he was not able to forgive his parents for psychological harm they caused depriving him of unclouded childhood. Dickens' aspiration of better life can be traced in the novel. Like a child, he hoped for better future and he attained his goal.

## **Conclusion**

Taking into account all said above, *Great Expectations* was not recognized autobiographical in vain. The protagonist of the story, Pip, was a person who was associated with Dickens. Dickens had a talent to eccentrically interweave autobiographical facts with fiction. The two main ideas were touched upon the story: an aspiration of prosperity through personal development and the influence of social environment on one's personal development. Undoubtedly, many coincidences with Dickens' life point at autobiographical character of the novel. However, the most clearly this tendency was traced when Dickens described the life of Pip in the boyhood. Dickens transferred his childish emotional experience to paper to show his readers what he felt and to share his pain with readers. He put a part of his heart into other personages of *Great Expectations* as well. The novel is considered a masterpiece of English classic literature and it is indeed worth reading.

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