

Great expectations and the color purple



“ My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening.”

Such captivating and expressive descriptions are continuously used throughout one of the most well-known and loved classics of the 19th century and it was none other than Charles Dickens who was attributed for such a powerful and pensive story - Great Expectations. Published in 1861, Great Expectations was 14th in a long line of remarkable books written by Dickens. However, the book's popularity is often ascribed to its autobiographic qualities; many of the events from Dickens' early life are mirrored in Great Expectations.

Written in Victorian England, Great Expectations was set during the Industrial Revolution; a time when England saw the biggest social changes yet.

London, the country's capital, was the destination for all those seeking economic opportunity. It was crowded, polluted and filthy - industry had taken over. The rigid divisions between social classes remained as huge as ever; upper class citizens were of the elite few - the rest of the population were industrious labourers.

Great Expectations include many aspects of the Industrial Revolution and through the book's narrator and protagonist, Pip, we are able to identify these conditions, thus creating more understanding for the reader about the novel's social context. The opening chapter is set in the countryside (in Southeast England - the region in which Dickens grew up.) The scene is set in the most accurate and intricate detail. The vivid descriptions used allow the reader to achieve a specific, pictorial image and because the language used is so complex, we can already deduce that this scene was of great

significant to the narrator, Pip, due to the fact that years later (when he is telling the story), he can still remember the finest of details.

“...the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates,” The scene that the first chapter is set in is portrayed as a solemn, secluded and subdued setting; Dickens creates a bitter and dismal landscape. The river is described as a ‘ low, leaden line’; by using this metaphor (assuming the reader understands the connotations such a phrase has), a stronger image of a lifeless, heavy, grey river is created.

Words like ‘ raw’ and ‘ bleak’ contribute to making the setting appear drearier. The sentence that contains the description of the scene is an example of a long, complex sentence; it is very descriptive, containing many phrases and clauses. Long, complex sentences are frequently used during Great Expectations; the advance of using long, complex sentences is that they help improve the sentence structure. However, the indepth detail that Dickens uses is not entirely responsible for gaining the readers’ interest in Great Expectations; in fact, it is the central character which is largely accountable for the interest that is created in the first chapter of the book.

Philip Pirrip, (known as ‘ Pip’ throughout his childhood) is used by Dickens as a narrative device in Great Expectations. He tells a story of an event that took place when he was a young child. Dickens uses this technique because this can enable him to incorporate humour into the first chapter and this is achieved because the older Pip can look more objectively at his actions as a child. The narrator continuously mocks the fact that he acted so childishly.

He shows amusement towards his naivety and criticises the way he reacted in the situation:" But now I was frightened again and ran home without stopping.

" Because Pip shows mirth towards his foolish actions, this also allows the reader to. The narrator frequently exaggerates his fear and this contributes to Pip's innocent image:" I pleaded in terror...

"...to keep myself from crying" Instead of the audience sympathising with Pip, we, as readers, mock him for his naivety. We can not only see Pip's fear through his actions, but also through his descriptions.

The stereotyped description of the convict portrays him as a dangerous and fearful man. Pip could sense the peculiarity of this man and one of the reasons was because during the 1800s all gentlemen wore hats and the fact that this man wasn't, became apparent to Pip. In Pip's mind this convict was no gentleman. He explains that this man is in a very terrible state and he even goes to imply that he is not human:"...

glared and growled..." These verbs have connotations with animal actions and the effect that the usage of this dehumanisation has is that the reader construes that Pip is so petrified that he is not thinking clearly.

Pip is clearly intimidated by the convict; he feels he is powerless compared to the "fearful man". When the convict turns Pip upside down in hope of finding food or money in his pockets, a sense of bewilderment comes over Pip. The convict again tried to scare Pip by tilting him back off the edge of a tombstone. Pip broodingly describes the tombstone as "my tombstone"; by

using the pronoun ' my' we can deduce that Pip feels this area was his territory and the convict had invaded this space.

Every time the convict makes a demand he tilts Pip again. The effect that the repetition of the phrase ' He tilted me again.' has is that it emphasises Pip's powerlessness. Pip reacts in an act of desperation by clinging onto the convict.

As the chapter progresses an increasing amount of sympathy is created towards the convict, thus making the young Pip appear even more immature. We learn that the convict attempts to appear frightful and fearsome on the outside, when really, he's the one that's scared, he's in the one that's nervous and he's the one that's in need of an escape. Dickens' purposeful technique of role-reverse is used very gradually and therefore very effectively. Ironically, from sympathising with Pip, the young orphaned boy, our sympathy goes out to the convict, a grown man in desperate hope of just staying alive. The convict (who, in the first chapter, remains nameless) occasionally shows concern for the welfare of Pip and when he realises he is doing so, he tries to cover up the fact that he is not as fearful as he's making out:" Who'd d'ye live with - supposin' you're kindly let to live, which I han't made up my mind about?" The convict can not show his true identity and therefore covers up his contrasting compassionate side by telling Pip he may not let him to live.

The reader can now begin to understand that this man is so wretched that he has to rely on acting like a fiend just to get the necessities that he needs in

order to survive. In the penultimate paragraph of the chapter, Pip describes the convict again in a very different way than he did the first time:” ...

he hugged his shuddering body in both his arms – clasping himself, as if to hold himself together and limped ...” This strikes a melancholy image and the reason why it is so effective is because the reader has just witnessed a huge change in the character of the convict.

Portrayed as daunting and nasty villain on entrance, the convict’s contrasting portrayal is one of a pitiful and weak man on exit. The content of the chapter is not as significant as its moral. Pip was so quick to judge that convict on his image. Pip, (as do we, today) lived in a society where people aren’t judged on the content of their character but they are judged by their appearance. It can make us jump to false conclusions and we can make uninformed assumptions. How a person chooses to portray themselves is not necessarily who they are on the inside and no matter how well we think we know a person, we might not know them at all.

It’s not just classics like Great Expectations which rely predominantly on their protagonists to gain the interest of the readers; Alice Walker, author of ‘A Color Purple’, uses a similar strategy to Charles Dickens. The Color Purple was set in America during the early 20th century, in a family that was derived from the African-American slaves of the 1800s. The book features a fourteen-year-old female teenager called Celie. Celie’s family life was substantially different from the average, modern, nuclear family, therefore certain behaviour that would be considered atrocious today was acceptable because it was tradition.

The book consists of 90 personal letters written by Celie. The majority of the letters are all addressed to God - we can already deduce that this girl is most likely an introvert. She results to privately talking to God because she's shut off from the rest of society. The fact that she turns to God, shows us that she doesn't have anybody else to turn to." You better not never tell nobody but God.

It'd kill your mammy." The opening sentence of *The Colour Purple* is very significant in setting the scene and putting the situation into context. The quote was one said by her step-father; the reader can understand the significance of this quote simply because Celie remembered it and more importantly wrote it down. She recognises the fact that she can't talk to anybody and this is one of the main reasons why she results in writing to God. Celie will often be considered dysfunctional, reclusive and naive, however the character of Celie is a lot more complex beneath the surface.

By reading the first letter that she writes, we can tell she is only semi-literate because the writing is ungrammatical, simplistic and written phonetically:"... never git used to it. And now I feels sick.

.."

The effect that the spelling and grammatical mistakes have is that the reader can attain a sense of Celie's character; the phonetically written words can enable us to imagine how she spoke. We can also achieve a strong sense of Celie's innocence in the first letter alone. She has but a limited understanding of her surroundings because she is so secluded from the rest of the world.

She, presumably, has grown up in this family without questioning her step-father's actions and taking that the way he acted was the norm. However, she's in fear of physical abuse, completely oblivious to the fact that she is being sexually and emotionally abused as well. Her innocence and naivety is constantly put across to the reader throughout the first few letters." I am I have always been a good girl.

May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me." The strikethrough of the first two words shows that Celie no longer believes she is a ' good girl' and this is because she is receiving this ' punishment'. She doesn't understand what is happening and this is stated in the latter part of quote. Her step-father is takes advantage of Celie because he is a dominating, powerful, and violent figure. This exploitation of power is demonstrated not only by the raping of Celie, but also by the absence of any emotion or understanding towards her.

(Fully aware that he hurts Celie, he continues to persist.) However, its not just Celie that the father acts so appallingly to, it's her mother also. (In a society like this, it would always be the male that would be the abuser and the women would be abused.)There are implications at the end of the first letter that Celie is pregnant. However our assumption (that the step-father has impregnated Celie), is confirmed in the second letter, when Celie gives birth. The pregnancy came as a surprise to Celie:".

.. you could have knock me over with a feather." This phrase has connotations with complete shock; (the bewilderment that Celie experienced was so immense that you could have knocked her over with feather.) Also

during the letter, she explains that her mother dies during child birth. Celie describes her mother dieing ' screaming and cussing'.

A contrast is made to this disturbing imagery when the reader sees the father being portrayed kindly and lovingly:" He set there by the bed holding her hand an cryin, talking bout don't leave me, don't go." The contrasting portrayals of the step-father enable the reader to achieve a more balanced view of him. During the first letter he was seen to be the violent dominating abuser, he now appears to be more affectionate and shows love towards his wife. The reader now has two possible perspectives in which they can see the step-father, which means he has broader character and isn't just what we assumed he was to begin with. The third paragraph is split into four short sentences, each on different lines.

This contrast in sentence structure shows the significance the content this paragraph has. The last two lines summarise the third paragraph:" He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods.

Kill this one too, if he can." We learn two noteworthy things in this paragraph. Firstly, Celie's baby is dead and she thinks her step-father killed it. Secondly, she's pregnant again.

These two lines portray Celie more astutely, it comes across that she is more alert and more watchful. She realises her step-father's vindictiveness and shows determination that history won't repeat itself this time. This vindictiveness that is created in the third and fourth paragraphs contributes to the demonisation of her step-father. The third letter tells us that Celie's step-father once again took her baby.

(This means the time lapse between the first and third letter must be about, or over, 2 years.) The relationship between Celie and her step-father has diminished further: "He act like he can't stand me no more. Say I'm evil an always up to no good." The way he has began to treat Celie could be a reaction to the mother's death; he has rejected his step-daughter probably because she was the daughter of his wife and he is trying to eradicate any memory of her.

It is also during the third letter when she begins to show fear not only for herself, but also for her little sister. We can expect that Celie has matured during the time when she wrote the last two letters, however the fact that Celie is looking beyond her own life and looking out for the safety of her sister's, confirms that Celie is no longer as naive as we first assumed. She's been through what she thinks her sister might, and this would be the main reason for wanting to protect her sister from her step-father.