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## UNIT 3 IMPROVEMENT OR DISINTEGRATION?

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this Unit is to acquaint you with the ethos of "improvement" and to help you understand how *Great Expectations* highlights the contradictions within the ideal of "improvement" and gentility. After reading this Unit carefully, you will be able to explain how *Great Expectations* can be seen as a *bildungsroman*.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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I have been concerned so far with the sociological problems to which Dickens exposes the self improvement paradigm in *Great Expectations*, and how the self-helping individual is incorporated within the genteel ethos and with the ways in which this throws into doubt the desirability of "improvement" itself. But I feel that *Great Expectations* is more than a middle class indictment of (the predominantly aristocratic) notion of gentility. In fact it loosens the basic coordinates — the underlying epistemology — of what Peter Brooks calls "the progressive educative plot". More specifically I am going to try to show that if the traditional improvement plot is integrative in its orientation — aiming at the final integration of the hero's powers, *Great Expectations* projects the hero above all in terms of his "self-consciousness" his increasing awareness of the violent, often irreconcilable contradictions inherent to his situation.

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### 3.2 "THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATIVE PLOT" AND SELF INTEGRATION

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The "progressive educative plot" is oriented above all towards the completion of the hero's education, so that in improvement literature the hero's final assimilation within

"good society" coincides with his acquisition of an integrated sense of self. At the simplest level this process is represented as linear, infallible, something that can be made to work itself out with the inevitability of objective science. Thus in Smiles's *Self Help* the practice of a few time tested virtues is shown to lead step by step to both success and what Betsy Trotwood calls "character". "What some men are," Samuel Smiles declared with the naïve confidence characteristic of many nineteenth century theories of progress, "all may without difficulty be. Employ the same means and the same results will follow".

The integrative orientation of self-improvement takes a more complex form in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. Unlike Smiles's representation of Watt's career, for instance, the story of Mill's inner growth is based on a rupture – a psychological crisis in mid-life which forces him to review the values to which he had so far adhered. Nevertheless Mill's crisis never forces him to question the validity of self culture itself. On the contrary, from the vantage point of confident maturity (which point of view, incidentally determines the entire tone of the autobiography), Mill is able to perceive his crisis as "one of the successive phases" in the development of a mind "that was always pressing forward". In this sense Mill's crisis emerges as something that provides "complements and correctives" to the one-sided absorption in the life of the intellect, and enables him to join the cultivation of feelings with "intellectual culture". Joining and balance are, in fact, as Martin Warner points out, watchwords in an autobiography which conceptualises self-development as something where certain qualities can be added and complemented by others. Put another way, the cause and effect method of *Self Help* is replaced in Mill's *Autobiography* by what Warner calls the method of the "desiderated balance." This means that whereas in *Self-Help* "improvement" is a simple chain of related qualities, Mill's *Autobiography* brings together different and even opposite qualities in its projection of the fully rounded "balanced" consciousness. But in both cases, self culture is conceptualised as something that is successive, categorisable in additive terms, and leading to an integrated sense of self.

I went into this comparative analysis of *Self Help* and Mill's *Autobiography* because these two classic examples of nineteenth century improvement literature may be said to exemplify the two strands of progress — "outer" and "inner" — that came together in the English *bildungsroman* of the nineteenth century. More specifically, in the mainstream English *bildungsroman*, the hero is exposed to the kind of inner turmoil and subsequent emotional growth that is characteristic of Mill's *Autobiography*, but this process is also shown to be simultaneous with, and closely related to the kind of social advancement plotted in Smiles's parables. In *David Copperfield*, for example, David is made to confront a whole series of dangers and traumas but these are all along conceived of as aspects of his education — events whose underlying function is to contribute to David's all round development: to his acquisition on the one hand, of a completed, integrated sense of self, and on the other, of a comfortable, adjusted and productive relationship with society.

I will now try to show you how different Dickens's method had become as he moved from *David Copperfield* to *Great Expectations*.

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### 3.3 GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND THE INTEGRATIVE METHOD

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How does *Great Expectations* relate to the integrative method of the traditional *bildungsroman*? One good entry point into this problem is to turn our attention to Dickens's treatment of Miss Havisham — that crucial agent in the story of Pip's "progress". Like Betsy Trotwood, Miss Havisham's *function* is that of a

fairy godmother figures who ensure, (in the latter case supposedly ensures), the hero's entry into the world of culture and education, constitutes a violation of the classic Smilesean paradigm, which, as I am sure you will agree, is predicated on a strictly logical and material relationship between the hero's merit and his ultimate success. Yet, we could logically argue, couldn't we, that *David Copperfield* seems to reenact the middle class idea of improvement at the level of a wish-fulfilment fantasy, not only because the change that Betsy Trotwood brings about in David's life is a sort of magical reward for David's real desire to improve his lot; but also because she emerges as the novel's major spokesperson for the bourgeois virtues. Moreover, Betsy Trotwood's relationship with the fairytale is limited to her *function* as a magical donor. As an *individual* she is, despite her eccentricities, naturalised (especially after she ensures David's entry into the enlightened world of the middle class). What this does, I think, is to blunt the potentially disjunctive and traumatic implications of the sudden and absolute change that she brings about in David's fortunes. Instead the aura of homely familiarity that surrounds her makes David's entry into the respectable middle class world a smooth, easily negotiable process.

In *Great Expectations*, on the other hand, the fantastic is much more than a function of the plot. On the contrary, as in the grim folk tales we talked about in the first unit, the fantastic mode becomes a key element in what we might call a strategy of defamiliarisation: it distorts the figure of Miss Havisham herself, it creates around Satis House a weird atmosphere, and in the process makes Pip's first experience of the gentlemanly life strange and disconcerting. Thus Miss Havisham and the atmosphere that surrounds her, far from offering Pip an unambiguously desirable vision of the "good society", in fact provoke him, force on his consciousness the contradictory nature of the world of Satis House; arouse in him the first stirrings of the desire to emulate the cultured, refined, "fine" lifestyle, but at the same time profoundly disconcert him, leaving him not with a clear sense of purpose, but in a "disturbed and unthankful state" (p.101).

Do please read the long last sentence carefully again, because it leads up to the point that will turn out to be the crucial one in this unit. The point is this: situations in *Great Expectations* are organised not with the intention of affirming the hero's growth but of *testing* it. Incidents far from being milestones that chart the "seemly" step by step course of the hero's progress, are intentionally rendered extraordinary, forcing Pip to interact with people under unusual and unexpected conditions, provoking him. This method of composition impinges on a second major problem — that of characterisation. More specifically, I think that if in the conventional *bildungsroman*, the hero's character emerges out of a basically integrative process, (so that the experience to which he is exposed, even when painful, imparts solidity and stability to his final image) Pip is made to perceive the relationships into which he enters, or the social worlds through which he traverses as fundamentally, painfully contradictory. This means that Pip's experiences in general, far from adding up to an integrated sense of self, become in fact subjects of his introspection or in Bakhtin's terms, of his "self consciousness". We might thus say that it is Pip's painful grappling with the contradictions to which he is so relentlessly exposed, rather than any steady inner development of the self, that constitutes what Pip calls "the innermost life of my life" (p.247).

In *Great Expectations* Dickens uses a whole range of techniques to expose Pip to the burden of his introspection, his "self consciousness" — his sense of the contradictoriness of his situation. But it is above all how Dickens uses the "disclosure" on which the whole plot of *Great Expectations* depends, that he is able to create the conditions that can sustain the most ruthless dismantling of Pip's sense of self. But what do I mean by "disclosure"? In fact I've borrowed the term from the French critic Roland Barthes. According to Barthes the disclosure in the "realistic" novel, finally sorts out the unaccounted for problems within the story, but by doing

this it also enables the novel to naturalise its projection of an integrated, "completed" sense of reality.

The disclosure, then, is the revelation in the light of which everything falls into place. It is something that gives moral and logical coherence to the whole story. From a perspective that is concerned with the hero, the discovery is constituted as the point when the "wandering" hero finally "arrives". So what would you say is the disclosure in *Great Expectations*? Surely Pip's discovery at the end of Book 2 that his gentlemanly status has all along been sustained by a criminal's money. But what does this disclosure do? Far from closing the story of Pip's growth, it exposes him to a great crisis — makes it impossible for him to either belong to gentlemanly society or to go back to the provincial world of his past. It assaults his very sense of selfhood. What is more, by locating the disclosure at the end of the second part of the novel, Dickens can leave for himself the entire third part in which to carry out a sustained analysis of the "improving" consciousness. Especially at the point of its maximum vulnerability.

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### 3.4 IMPROVEMENT OR DISINTEGRATION?: A CLOSER LOOK AT BOOK 3 OF *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

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If you've read Book 3 of *Great Expectations* carefully, you've probably been struck by the feverish atmosphere in which it is enveloped: by the sheer number of sensational incidents that seem to clutter it. Yet all this probably seemed to you particularly meaningless if you were reading from the point of view of plot, because of course the secret on which the whole plot turns is, as we saw earlier, disclosed at the end of Book 2. Yet if we turn our attention from plot to the problem of characterisation, Book 3 begins to make a lot of sense because more than any other portion of the novel, Book 3 provides the ground where the integrative method of the conventional *bildungsroman* can be systematically dismantled.

Everything in the third part of the novel — the long, exhausting and seemingly purposeless journeys that Pip is so relentlessly made to undertake, the whirlwind pace at which he is hurled from one traumatic experience to another, all aim at depriving rather than offering Pip the "comfort of civilization" — the sense of belonging to a wider community that critic Franco Moretti identifies as the underlying essence of the English *bildungsroman*. Instead of arriving at a comfortable relationship with society, Pip's situation is characterised by an overwhelming sense of homelessness; instead of integrating his powers Pip finds himself pushed to the very brink of extinction.

It is the evocation of Pip's homelessness that gives an underlying significance to the long and seemingly unconnected sequence of events that begins with Estella's announcement of her impending marriage to the stupid and brutish Drummle and ends with Pip's restless night at the Hummums. Deeply distressed by Estella's decision, Pip decides to walk back all the way from Kent to London, on the assumption that "I could do nothing half so good to myself as tire myself out" (p.379). He reaches home long after midnight, physically and mentally exhausted only to receive a mysterious note at the gate. The note is from Wemmick and it instructs Pip: "PLEASE READ THIS HERE" and "DON'T GO HOME" (p.379). As an element in a suspense plot, Wemmick's note is totally unnecessary: the danger against which Wemmick warns Pip turns out to be a contrived one, and Wemmick's intervention makes no difference at all to either Magwitch's or Pip's fate. But by preventing the exhausted Pip from entering his own home, Wemmick's injunction becomes an integral aspect of Pip's self-consciousness. As he lies awake in the oppressive inn where he is forced to spend the night, Wemmick's note "plaits" itself around Pip's

consciousness as "a bodily pain would have" (p.380) until it is transformed from a simple fact to a "vast shadowy verb"(p.380) which expresses the central reality about Pip's present existence.

## Improvement or Disintegration?

Even when I thought of Estella, and how we parted that day for ever, and when I recalled all the circumstances of our parting, and all her looks and tones, and the action of her fingers while she knitted — even then I was pursuing here, there and everywhere the caution 'Don't go home'. When at last I dozed, in sheer exhaustion of mind and body, it became a vast shadowy verb which I had to conjugate. Imperative mood present tense: Do not thou go home, — potentially : I may not, cannot go home, and I might not, could not, would not and should not go home; until I felt I was going distracted, and rolled over on the pillow. (p.381)

In Pip's nightmarish encounter with Orlick, which follows soon after, Dickens's destabilising project implicates Pip's sense of self itself. (If you don't have this particular episode in your head go back to the text and read it before you proceed further.) In one of the earliest reviews of *Great Expectations*, Mrs. Oliphant a contemporary writer angrily complained that the Orlick affair constituted "the most arbitrary and causeless stoppage in the story", and at one level she was perfectly right. Like Wemmick's warning, the Orlick episode adds nothing to the plot, and it may be read simply as a sensational diversion. As an aspect of Dickens's overall strategy of destabilisation, however, the Pip-Orlick encounter is an almost perfect piece of artistic construction. Every detail leading up to Pip's entrapment, every element in the atmosphere that envelops the sluice house where Pip is imprisoned, pushes Pip's quest for improvement to the point of complete collapse. The circumstances leading up to Pip's capture expose him to the appalling possibility of dying without the benefit of a last explanation, of leaving behind for posterity, an image of himself bereft of the last vestiges of integrity. In these circumstances, Pip perceives his impending death not just as physical dissolution, but as the culminating point of a whole process of disintegration, expressive of the essential reality that underlies "a blind and thankless life" (p.410). If you have gone through the Orlick portion carefully you will remember that a recurring motif throughout the Pip-Orlick encounter is "the sluggish, stifling" (p.433) smoke that emanates from the lime kiln in the neighbourhood of the sluicelhouse where Pip is trapped. Orlick intends to dispose off Pip's corpse in the lime kiln : "I won't have a rag of you, I won't have a bone of you left on earth. I'll put your body in the kiln — and let people suppose what they may of you, they shall never know nothing" (p.436). The prospect of disappearing without a trace, of being "changed" (p.438) into the utterly insubstantial lime kiln smoke brings the story of Pip's maturation to the edge of nothingness.

If there is anything that gives a semblance of purpose to Pip's "lost" life it is ironically his transgressive resolution to help his criminal benefactor evade the law. Moreover in Herbert, Pip has a friend capable of responding not only to his deepest problems but also to the inner integrity of his decision to help Magwitch. However when Herbert leaves for the West Indies Pip feels "that my last anchor was loosening" (p.470). Bereft of everything that might have imparted stability to his sense of self, it is impossible for Pip to think in the balancing additive terms characteristic of the improving mind. Instead Pip's mental condition is best expressed in the delirium that overtakes him:

Whether I was really down in Garden-Court in the dead of night, groping about for the boat that was supposed to be there; whether I had two or three times come to myself on the staircase with great terror, not knowing how I had got out of bed; whether I had found myself lighting the lamp, possessed by the idea that he was coming up the stairs, and the lights were blown out; whether I had been inexpressibly harrassed by the distracted talking,

laughing and groaning, of someone ... whether there had been a closed iron furnace in a dark corner of the room, and a voice had called out over and over again that Miss Havisham was consuming within it; these things I tried to settle with myself and get into some order, as I lay that morning in bed. But the vapour of lime kiln would come between me and them, disordering them all .... (pp. 470-71).

Of course Pip's delirious state is abnormal and temporary, the consequence of serious illness. But at a deeper level, Pip's illness not only suggests his profoundly disturbed mental state but also approximates a compositional method that underlies the entire third part of *Great Expectations*. Within this compositional method (as in Pip's delirium), time does not move in its ordinary, everyday, "realistic" pace: instead it is organised as "crisis time", hurtling Pip, at a feverish pace, from one extreme situation to another. Again Pip's imagined journeys at "the head of stairs, running down stairs", approximate the breakdown of the habitable, comfortable interiors that had enveloped Pip in the second part of the novel. It also gives way in the third part, to the restless journeys, one night stopovers at oppressive inns, murderous appointments. In this sense, Dickens's delineation of Pip's delirium may be read as paradigmatic of a compositional method that aims not at integration but at "disordering".

It is true of course that in the concluding pages of *Great Expectations*, Dickens makes a last-minute attempt to rehabilitate Pip and to integrate his life to the unostentatious, productive middle class world. Indeed in Pip's resurrection we might see one more instance of the process by which official ideologies are both criticised and incorporated in the Dickensian text, but for one, obviously disturbing fact. The money that buys Herbert's partnership at Clarriker's firm, and secures for Pip his stable Smilesian identity — "I work pretty hard for a sufficient living, and therefore — yes I do well." (p.492) and indeed, enables Dickens to set into motion the whole process by which the values of the traditional *bildungsroman* can be partially retrieved, is, in fact, the same tainted money that had precipitated the crisis in Pip's life in the first place.

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### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, I have been concerned above all with Dickens's use in *Great Expectations* of a compositional method which aims at loosening the coordinates that sustained the integrative orientation of the improvement plot. I have tried to show you first of all how the classic nineteenth century *bildungsroman* may be said to synthesise the process of inner and outer growth as it is articulated in extra novelistic texts like *Self Help* and Mill's *Autobiography*. We have then seen how Dickens uses various devices such as expressive modes of the fairytale that make Pip's first experience of gentility a disconcerting experience, or a disclosure that precipitates rather than resolves the crisis. Finally we focussed on the third part of the novel with its restless journey, one night stop overs at inhospitable inns and delirious illnesses all of which embody a compositional method that aims not at integration but at disordering.

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### 3.6 GLOSSARY

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- Ethos** the characteristic spirit of a people or an institution — or distinctive features of a particular culture or group.
- Bildungsroman** a novel whose theme is the growth and development of the hero — literally, education novel.

		Improvement or Disintegration?
<b>Paradigm</b>	pattern, example	
<b>Roland Barthes</b>	author of <i>S/Z</i>	
<b>Denouement</b>	the solution of a plot in a story.	
<b>Sarrasin</b>	A novella by the French writer Balzac.	
<b>Plenitude</b>	fullness, completeness	
<b>Franco Moretti</b>	author of <i>The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman In European Culture</i> (1987)	
<b>Dissolution</b>	Disintegration	
<b>Transgressive</b>	breaking a law, command or duty.	
<b>Coordinates</b>	the elements whose interrelationship makes up the system of thought	
<b>Epistemology</b>	the internal method by which any system of thought Works.	
<b>Irreconcilable</b>	Utterly contradictory.	
<b>Infallible</b>	something that never fails.	
<b>Disjunctive</b>	Disruptive — oriented towards breaking up.	
<b>Additive</b>	A method that is based on arriving at the whole by simply adding up the different parts.	

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### 3.7 QUESTIONS.

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- 1) I think that if you've read these units as well as the text carefully you should be in a position to attempt a full length answer on *Great Expectations* as a *bildungsroman*. May I take this opportunity to suggest how you can use this material provided here in order to build your answer? Of course you need not abide by the plan I provide below. In fact as I said in the previous unit the answer that I would most value would be one that takes into account what I say but also shows evidence that you have been thinking on your own about the problem.

I would begin any answer on *Great Expectations* as a *bildungsroman* by discussing why the improvement plot that underlies the *bildungsroman* would have particular relevance to the 1850s and 60s, but also how there were certain internal contradictions within the popular improvement plots. Within the introduction itself I would also try to delineate the integrative method of the classic nineteenth century *bildungsroman* by referring not only to *David Copperfield* but also to *Self Help* and Mill's *Autobiography*.

Having laid out the basic framework within which the English *bildungsroman* articulated itself, I would go on to use material from Unit 2 to show how *Great Expectations* exposes deep rooted human problems within a pattern of

"improvement" that has gentlemanliness as its ultimate aim. Similarly I would draw on material from unit 3 to show how by precipitating the disclosure at the end of the second part of the book, Dickens lays the ground for the working out of a compositional method that is aimed not at integration but at disordering.

I would conclude my answer by suggesting that this destabilisation of the improvement plot symptomises a bigger problem: the unsustainability of self improvement in a society where progress is, in fact, inseparable from everything that is its opposite. (I will take up this problem in greater detail in Unit 5).

- 2) "Part 3 of *Great Expectations* is the least relevant section of *Great Expectations*." Would you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
- 3) A great deal of what I have said in Unit 3 is adapted from the second and fourth chapters of a book that Bakhtin (remember him?) wrote called *The Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. *Dostoyevsky's Poetics* is one of the great books of literary criticism and its applicability goes way beyond what I have done with it. Can you read at least the two chapters I mentioned of Bakhtin's book (it is easily available) and make a summary of its main points?