
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction : Why Background?
- 1.2 Upward Social Mobility and mid-Victorian Society
- 1.3 From Social History to the History of Form
- 1.4 *Great Expectations* and the Fairytale
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Glossary
- 1.7 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to provide background information which will, I hope, be useful for a better understanding of the novel. After reading this Unit carefully you will be able to

- appreciate why background information is relevant to the study of a text;
- outline the social and historical background of nineteenth century England;
- relate certain shared assumptions of English society in the nineteenth century to the text;
- see how *Great Expectations* emerged out of prevalent popular cultural forms, especially the fairytale.

1.1 INTRODUCTION : WHY BACKGROUND?

As a teacher at Sri Venkateswara College, Delhi, I know that the background classes tend to be the most directionless part of any set of lectures. I've often heard students complain that they can't see the point of being loaded with details about the Victorian Age or "the rise of the novel" when they find it difficult enough to get through massive nineteenth century novels like *Dombey and Son* or *Middlemarch*. I think, therefore, that the least a teacher can do before she/he proceeds to overwhelm students with the mass of details that will make up the "background", is to try to explain to herself/himself, as well as to her/his students the ways in which background information is likely to be helpful.

I think that one inclusive way in which we might think of the background to any text is to see it as the whole complex web of factors, indeed as the element in which a text gains its existence just as water is the element in which a fish lives. I think that while you'd probably agree that there would be no fish without water, and no text without the conditions that produced it, you'd still insist that the complicated conditions in which a text is produced are as difficult to grasp as water. And that really is the problem with the background, not its vagueness, but the sheer mass of

available data all of which is connected in some way or the other with the production of the text. Put another way, the challenge for the teacher is to select from the "background" those details, or combination of details that have the ability to make the text spring to life. I can promise you that background information does have this ability to animate a text — make it more relevant than it might otherwise have been.

Let me give you an example from my own experience which I hope will not be without relevance to our study of *Great Expectations*. When I was doing my M.Phil., I chose to write my term paper on a novel of Dickens called *Dombey and Son*. I did this because I was struck by what seemed to me to be dramatic differences between society as it was described in *Dombey and Son* and the world of an early novel (*Oliver Twist*), which I had read some time ago. The central problem in *Oliver Twist* was, it seemed to me, poverty, not only because the novel contained vivid descriptions of urban poverty and an angry denunciation of the New Poor Law of 1834 but also because Oliver's own story dramatised the sense of social insecurity that an unstable economy always breeds in the poor. On the other hand, *Dombey and Son* had seemed to describe a technologically advanced, economically flourishing society where most people seemed to be doing very well for themselves. Naturally I wanted to find out whether this change had something to do with changes that were taking place in England between 1837 (when Dickens began *Oliver Twist*) and 1848 when Dickens published *Dombey and Son*.

I had the good fortune to stumble on a great book by E.J.Hobsbawm called *Industry and Empire* which described the economic history of England during the nineteenth century. I still remember the excitement with which I read Hobsbawm's account of the transformation of Britain's industrial economy from the instability of the first phase of the Industrial Revolution which was based on the manufacture of a single item — textiles — to the consolidated heavy industry phase when Britain's monopoly over iron, steel and industrial technology energised its economy as never before. Moreover, Hobsbawm had argued that the most dramatic and popular symbol of the levels of speed, efficiency and organisation that Britain's new industrial economy was attaining was the railway. You will be able to appreciate how important this piece of information was to me when I tell you that the railway appears in *Dombey and Son* as a central symbol for progress, but also for some of the human problems that it caused. In fact Hobsbawm's book provided the basis for an essay that I wrote on *Dombey and Son*, where I argued that this novel marked the transition from the socially and economically unstable thirties to the prosperous and technologically advanced society of the late forties, and that while Dickens responded positively to the rising standards of living and efficiency brought about by the second or heavy industry phase of the Industrial Revolution, he also exposed the human dangers attendant on a society where the impersonal structures of gigantic industries begin to dominate the human being. So you see, background information can light up a text from within, as it were.

But I must pause at this point to say to you that I went into this rather long account of *Dombey and Son*, progress and its problems, not only because I had wanted to illustrate the ways in which background material can be used in relation to the text but also because one important aspect of an economically buoyant society -- its propensity to promote upward social mobility among those who inhabit it -- will turn out to be the starting point of what I have to say on *Great Expectations*.

1.2 UPWARD SOCIAL MOBILITY AND MID-VICTORIAN SOCIETY

I hope that you will agree that one of the most obvious effects of any sustained economic boom is that it promotes upward social mobility. The huge profits made by mid-Victorian industrialists implied at least some increase in the wages of the

working classes, and gigantically complex organisations like the railways opened up the job opportunities not only for unskilled workers but also for professionally trained engineers, accountants and managers. Put another way, mid-Victorian Britain, enriched by exports to the rest of Europe and by the ruthless exploitation of colonial markets, was internally a land full of opportunities. This was the point that a self-satisfied ruling elite repeatedly made. It was Queen Victoria's Prime Minister Lord Palmerston himself, who declared in a speech that has become one of the classic documents of its time:

We have shown the example of a nation in which every class of society accepts with cheerfulness the lot which providence has assigned to it, while at the same time each individual of each class is constantly trying to raise himself in the social scale, not by violence and illegality but by the steady and energetic exertion of moral and intellectual faculties with which his creator has endowed him.

Lord Palmerston was not, of course the only person who spoke of the prospect of perpetual advancement by the steady application of one's "intellectual and moral faculties". Bagehot's idea of "removable inequalities", the more well-known Smilesian ideal of "self culture", the huge volume of "improving literature", that began appearing after the late forties, the phenomenal success of works like Smiles's *Lives of the Engineers* (1862) and Diana Mulock's *John Halifax Gentleman* (1856), all testify to the fact that in the booming fifties and sixties, the ideology of self-improvement had begun to enjoy widespread acceptance.

All this is simple enough, but I think that the interesting thing when you are analysing any system of thought or "discourse", if you like, is to prise open its internal contradictions. When we get down to discussing *Great Expectations*, I shall try to show that Dickens too was critically concerned with the internal contradictions within the discourse of self-improvement as it was officially articulated. I want at this stage only to make you aware of how classic self-improvement texts, such as the novel *John Halifax Gentleman*, seek to reconcile what were, in fact, conflicting ideologies. Thus *John Halifax* projects virtues like work, thrift, enterprise as the means of self-improvement, but the reward that it offers to its self-improving hero is a leisured, aristocratic lifestyle. Put another way, *John Halifax* (like many other improvement stories) epitomises the social compromise by which the makers of the Industrial Revolution gave up their commitment to the great entrepreneurial values and began to emulate the lifestyle of the aristocracy. Thus as its very title suggests, *John Halifax Gentleman* dramatises the emergence of "gentlemanliness" — an ideal based on a leisured lifestyle rather than on productiveness, on a liberal outlook rather than on professional commitment — as an almost universal object of desire. Perhaps you will have noticed if you've read *Great Expectations* (and by this time you really ought to have read it) that in this novel too gentlemanliness is a goal towards which many characters strive. For example, Pip himself realises soon that the only way he can win Estella's love is by transforming himself into a gentleman, and if the criminal Magwitch cannot himself hope to acquire a gentlemanly status, he seeks, at least, to produce a gentleman. But in the units that follow I will try to show that Dickens's attitude to problems like "self-improvement" or "gentlemanliness" is far more complex than that, for instance, of Diana Mulock's in *John Halifax*. My limited aim in this section was to familiarise you with the common connotations of terms like "self-improvement", "Smilesian", (after the most popular proponent of the self-improvement ideal Samuel Smiles), and "gentlemanliness" (in its nineteenth century sense) — terms which you will encounter all the time in our subsequent discussions. I hope too that you can now see the connections between a booming economy and the proliferation of "improvement plots", or between the social compromise that the captains of industry made with the aristocracy and the emergence of gentlemanliness as an important theme in *Great Expectations*.

1.3 FROM SOCIAL HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF FORM

In response to a question from the newspaper *Novy Mir*, the great Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin wrote: "Literature is an inseparable part of culture....It must not be severed from the rest of culture nor, as is frequently done, can it be correlated to socio-economic factors, as it were behind culture's back". Bakhtin's words are important because they make a distinction between the social and political factors that may get reflected in a novel, and the whole mass of other novels, poems, fairytales, forms of visual entertainment that determine how a novelist constructs his/her plots, scenes or characters. That is why I propose, in this section, to follow Bakhtin and shift my focus in this section from the social history which *Great Expectations* may be said to negotiate to the cultural field crisscrossed with many forms and fragments of forms within which Dickens found his feet as writer. (Of course here, as in the earlier section, I will be selective, and pick only on those strands from the relevant cultural field that have a direct bearing on *Great Expectations*).

Before I get into the problem of the relationship between Dickens's writing and the cultural field out of which it grew, let me ask you a question. You'll have to read a novel (any novel) of Jane Austen in order to answer my question. (In case you haven't and let me confess to you in strict confidence that I hadn't either until quite late in my life) no problem: spend five or six days reading *Mansfield Park* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Then ask yourself whether these novels differ in some fundamental sense from *Great Expectations*? Perhaps you can begin to answer this question by taking into account one of the most noticeable things about a Jane Austen novel: that it works almost entirely within the network of the upper and middle class homes which provides it with both its subject as well as its readership. In fact, a novel like *Mansfield Park* may be seen as an almost classical product of what the German critic and philosopher Habermas called the "bourgeois public sphere". Habermas argued that the eighteenth century English novel embodied the need of the emerging middle class to discuss its domestic life in public as you can see in the novels of Jane Austen. This meant that a novel like *Mansfield Park* would have a certain internal integrity in relation not only to its content but also to its method. You'd never find Jane Austen drawing on the expressive resources of "lower" forms such as the fairytales to make her effects. For example wouldn't a character like Miss Havisham seem terribly out-of-place in *Mansfield Park*?

By contrast the Dickensian novel came out of the far more chaotic popular print market of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: a cultural domain that encourages not the autonomous development of forms, but their constant intermixing. If I were to pick one event that may be said to have brought into existence the print market in which Dickens's writing developed it would surely be the painter Hogarth's momentous decision to break free from the compulsion of producing single, unrepeatable paintings commissioned and consumed by a single aristocratic patron. Instead Hogarth decided to employ the technique of engraving to produce multiple copies of a series of six prints that he entitled "The Harlot's Progress" and to sell each set to the general public for six guineas. By undertaking to produce multiple copies of a picture series that would not so much be created as "Invented, Painted, Engraved, and Published" by him, Hogarth initiated what the German critic Walter Benjamin was to call many years later "the age of mechanical reproduction" in the arts. Benjamin's landmark essay makes many brilliant points, and it is impossible for me to go into all of them, but one idea of Benjamin's that is directly relevant to us is that of "reactivation". Benjamin argues that the mechanical reproduction of any work of art smashes its "aura", its fixed unique existence in an art gallery or the art owner's house and enables the consumer (of the reproduced print) to meet it in his or her environment. This transference across social space,

Benjamin argues, results in the "reactivation" of the work of art. In its adaptation to its new environment and in its interaction with the forms of expression prevalent in that environment it gets reactivated. You could, if you looked around you, find many examples of the sort of "reactivation" that Benjamin was talking about. For example, think of how melodies from forgotten Bombay films get "reactivated" in the jingles that accompany television advertisements. In Hogarth's case, the implications of this sort of "reactivation" were far in excess of what he might have anticipated when he produced the Harlot series. The transformation of the Hogarthian art work from a unique object to a cultural commodity resulted not only in the proliferation of cheaper and cheaper reprints, but also of the adaptation of Hogarth's ideas, themes and characters in melodramas, pantomimes and, through the first decades of the nineteenth century, in novels.

You are probably wondering by now what this long discussion about Hogarth, Benjamin and "mechanical reproduction" has to do with the question about the differences between Jane Austen and Dickens that I asked you. I would like to say in my defence that the history of reproductions and adaptations across a very wide range of genres that Hogarth's prints themselves experienced, tells us a great deal not only about the print market in which Dickens found his feet as a writer, but also, ultimately about the forms of the Dickensian novel itself. More specifically, unlike the relatively autonomous, middle-class public sphere within which Jane Austen's novels had developed, Dickens's novels came out of a cultural field that encouraged the constant traffic of representational methods, plot patterns, themes, modes of organisation across a wide range of genres and media. Dickens's own emergence into the domain of letters as the script writer of a book of city sketches by Cruickshank, shows the sort of interaction that went on all the time in the popular print market of the early nineteenth century, and although by *Pickwick Papers* the Dickensian novel had established itself as a cultural commodity in its own right, the conditions of its evolution gave to the Dickensian novel a certain formal open-endedness. This meant that while Dickens's novels could never achieve the sustained focus on the internal world of the middle and upper classes that gave to Austen's novels their formal integrity, they were capable of constantly absorbing expressive modes, techniques of characterisation, principles of plot construction that had originated in various extra-novelistic modes such as Cruickshank's sketches of London or the radical political satire that appeared in the pages of *Punch*.

1.4 GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND THE FAIRYTALE

Dickens gained a great deal from his interaction with a very wide range of popular forms, but in this section I will focus only on Dickens's relationship with the fairytale because, as we shall see later, expressive resources that had germinated in the fairytale become "reactivated" in very interesting ways in *Great Expectations*. Dickens's relationship with the fairytale was complex as well as reason interesting. This was because Dickens encountered this form at that critical point of its evolution when it was losing its roots in the harsh preliterate peasant culture, being drawn into the vortex of print entertainment. In this process, it was becoming reconstituted, on the one hand, as the pleasant children's stories familiar to us today, and on the other hand, as the supernatural tales of terror that appeared among other gory stories in the "penny dreadfuls". Dickens was of course very familiar with the pleasant fairytales, disseminated, as they were in England by translated versions of the Grimms's compilation and by Cruickshank's illustrations. In fact, fragments of this kind of fairytale are visible all over Dickens's early fiction — in the fairy godmothers and the evil ogres, the faithful beasts and the gloomy castles, but above all in a plot pattern which underlines novels such as *Oliver Twist*, and which depends on magical

interventions of a fairy godmother or father to sort out real difficulties. (I will try to show later how this plot pattern is replicated in *Great Expectations* only to be "deformed"). On the other hand, if you read a semi-autobiographical piece called the "Nurse's Story", you will see how Mary, who worked in the Dickens household regaled the young Charles with tales of supernatural terror, very different from the kind of children's stories that we have been talking about. I think that Mary typified the *plebian consciousness* that sustained and disseminated the nightmarish, macabre elements inherent in the original "folk" form of fairytale. Put another way, Mary's stories, despite their sensationalism, may be seen as the conduit which carried to the young Dickens certain key elements of the older form of the fairytale: the sombreness of their atmosphere, their discontinuous prose, their occasionally brutal language, but above all, their use of magical elements as the means not of providing simplified moral resolutions, but of confronting their characters and readers with disconcerting paradoxes and desperate choices. We shall see later just how important the reactivation of this latter version of the fairytale was to the Satis House scenes in *Great Expectations*.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Let me pause here, for awhile and summarise the main points I have made so far. I hope, first of all, I have managed to convince you that it is worth your while getting to know the historical background of any text. You always have the chance of finding something here that will illuminate the text. For example, I found in E.J. Hobsbawm's *Industry and Empire* the key to many of the problems that I wanted to deal with in my term paper on *Dombey and Son*.

Hobsbawm's book may in fact be said to provide the backdrop for Dickens's later novels as a whole – and I have tried to show how the economic boom that Hobsbawm delineates generated a sort of upward social mobility with which *Great Expectations* is concerned. I've suggested however, that inherent in official assertions of progress was the contradiction in Smilesian virtue – that were the means of self-improvement and the leisured class existence that was very often its goal. I've also suggested that this contradiction was to have great significance for *Great Expectations*. In this unit I've also been concerned with a second kind of history – the history of the print market where Dickens found his feet as a writer. Here I've argued that the print market that the late eighteenth century painter Hogarth, above all, may be said to have brought to maturity encouraged not formal autonomy but the constant interaction between the expressive modes of disparate genres. This meant that the Dickensian novel was always capable of absorbing within its relatively loose structure the expressive modes of various extraliterary genres. I've concluded this unit by suggesting that one such extra-novelistic mode that was important at many levels to the making of *Great Expectations* was the fairytale.

1.6 GLOSSARY

- Middlemarch** One of great novels in the English language. It was written by George Eliot. I mentioned it only because like most 19th century English novels it was nearly 900 pages long.
- New Poor Law 1834** a law enacted in 1834 to deal with the problem of paupers. It became unpopular with the poor and writer like Dickens because it stipulated that the poor could get relief only in prison-like work houses.

Industrial Revolution	a series of technical developments through the late 18 th and 19 th centuries which industrialised the British economy.
Lord Palmerston	Queen Victoria's prime minister
Walter Bagehot	Political scientist, literary critic and a prolific contributor to the highbrow Victorian periodicals.
Self Help	Samuel Smiles's most popular book. It provides a simple scheme for self improvement.
Novy Mir	A Soviet Paper
Mikhail Bakhtin	<i>Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics</i> (1984)
Habermas	<i>The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere</i> (1980)
Hogarth	One of England's greatest painters. He revolutionised painting by moving away from mythological subjects and depicting contemporary street scenes, or the social life of both the rich and poor.
Guinea	former British gold coin, worth one pound one shilling.
Walter Benjamin	The essay referred to, i.e., 'The Work of Art in the Age Of Mechanical Reproduction' appears in his book <i>Illuminations</i> (1969)
Punch	a satirical and during its initial years, a radical periodical. Many nineteenth century writers like Dickens and Thackeray were closely associated with it.
'Penny dreadfuls'	a piece of cheap, sensational fiction, especially a novel or novelette in magazine form or paperback, characterised by violent episodes and maudlin sentiment.
Plebian	belonging to the common people; common, vulgar, coarse.

1.7 QUESTIONS

I think that I need to preface this section on questions with some explanation about what my intentions are. Please don't make the mistake of assuming that any of these questions are likely to appear in the examinations. Rather they are meant to help you to revise what we do in each unit, and also to draw your attention to certain points in the units which are important, but which you might have missed. I do hope, however, that as you gain mastery over each unit you will gradually grow in confidence and be able to handle the sort of questions that you are likely encounter in the examinations. Keeping the intentions behind these questions in mind. Please try to answer the following, looking up the relevant portions in this unit whenever you are in doubt.

Great Expectations

- 1) In what way did the "second" or "heavy industry" phase of the Industrial Revolution change the "condition of England"? If you had to find out more about this subject, what book would you read?
- 2) What would you say was the most important point of difference between the world of *Oliver Twist* and that of *Great Expectations*?
- 3) Write a few lines about "gentlemanliness" as it was understood in the nineteenth century.
- 4) Explain the following terms: "middle class public sphere", "reactivation", "mechanical reproduction". Can you think of some examples of reactivation from the cultural field around you apart from what I have already given?
- 5) Would you say that the relationship between *Great Expectations* and the fairy tale was a complex rather than a simple one? Think over this question carefully, and in your answer, bring as much of the material that you have covered so far to bear on it as you can.
- 6) While writing this unit I have referred to the works of three great writers on history and culture: E.J. Hobsbawm, Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin. Can you recapitulate the arguments that I have cited from their works? If any of these arguments interest you move to the last Unit and locate the book from which these arguments have been taken. Also try to carry in your mind some idea of the kinds of problems that would be likely to interest these writers so that if you come across some related problem you can go the library and look at the catalogue for a book by Benjamin or Bakhtin which might deal with that problem. I can promise you that if you can overcome the initial difficulty of reading these writers they are likely to offer the most incisive insights that you are going to get on the relevant problem. Make a habit of remembering the names of writers whose citations seem interesting to you. I think that this is one basic way that you can find your way through the vast, often uncharted, universe of books.