
UNIT 5 CRIME AND RESPECTABILITY

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit carefully you will be able to:

- explain the shift that occurs in Dicken's attitude to crime; and
- outline the relationship between respectability and criminality.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier unit, we saw that the "deformation" of the fairytale plot in *Great Expectations* consisted of belying the reader's assumptions that Miss Havisham is Pip's secret benefactress. At the same time we saw that the sensational revelation that Pip's gentlemanly status is based on a criminal's wealth implicates Pip and his progress no longer seems innocent. The problem of crime was a lifelong preoccupation with Dickens, and in this unit I plan to explore the complex relationship that Dickens charts in *Great Expectations* between that highly moralised category — "respectability" — and its criminalised "other".

5.2 DICKENS AND CRIME

The problem of crime was a lifelong preoccupation with Dickens's and some of the most fascinating of his early writing has to do with criminality. I cannot here enter into anything like a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the young Dickens negotiated the problem of crime, but I need to make two points because these help to throw into relief certain transformations that take place in Dicken's attitude to crime

as he moves from his early to his late phase. The first is that criminality in Dickens's early fiction is often embodied in figures who are individually fascinating — figures like Quilp — who testify to the young Dickens's interest in the dark repressed world of violence, crime and guilt but who are nevertheless projected as **aberrations**. Thus Quilp, who may be said in a very real sense to dominate the world of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is a dwarf who has very strange habits. **Second**, when criminality is related to a social milieu, this milieu is often demarcated structurally from the sphere of respectability. Thus Fagin's criminality in *Oliver Twist* is inseparable from his existence in the sordid world of slums, and while the threat that he poses to respectable society is very real, it is impossible to conceive of Fagin as part of this society. We might therefore say that in Dickens's early fiction, crime, whether it is located in the psychotic individual or in the poverty ridden landscape of the "other" London, is never allowed to infiltrate the processes of respectability.

In Dickens's later fiction, however, the relationship between criminality and respectability undergoes a major change. Far from being located in the margins of respectable society, criminality becomes integral to it. In *Little Dorrit*, for example, crime is located in the heart of official England, in the most advanced forms of its economic activity and in the behavior of its ruling elite. In *Great Expectations* this theme of criminality in respectability is taken even further.

5.3 THE RESPECTABLE AND THE CRIMINAL IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

At first glance respectability in *Great Expectations* does seem to emerge as an internally consistent social sphere whose inner sanctity is preserved by the arbitration of a legal machinery always capable of isolating criminality, and by a whole system, of signs and representations dissociating it from the everyday processes of society. The two convicts who travel with Pip during his journey to Kent compel and receive attention not because they have committed heinous offences, but because they are an "Exhibition" — "their ironed legs", their "coarse, mangy, ungainly outer surfaces", marking them off socially, culturally and even biologically from the respectable members of society. In *Great Expectations*, the effects of such penal branding are of course most visible in the figure of Magwitch. "The very grain of the man," as Pip puts it, proclaims "a Prisoner, Bondman, plain as plain could be" (pp.352-53). Moreover, Magwitch is closely associated with Australia — that "thief colony" whose dystopian cultural connotations have been detailed in Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*. Let me explain here that "dystopian" is the opposite of utopian. So dystopian would mean hellish Separated from England by a wall "14,000 miles thick", inhabited by her "excrementitious mass", "spinning forever at the outer rim of the world, in ever worsening moral darkness", Australia was, in the Victorian imagination, "a cloaca, invisible, its contents filthy and unnameable". In this sense, Magwitch is the inscrutable "other" of Victorian respectability. The 'other' then is the criminal who inhabits the dark, incomprehensible domain outside "respectability" — somebody in whose being every fantasy about crime can be contained. To Pip, Magwitch might be guilty of "I knew not of what crimes" (p.34).

Yet Magwitch's public status as a hardened criminal, capable of committing every offence is not, in fact, borne by the details of his career. These details are supplied by Magwitch himself in his long account of his early life to Pip:

"I was took up, took up, took up, to that extent I reg'larly growed up took up. This was the way it was when I was a ragged little creetur as much to be pitied as I ever see ... I got the name of being hardened. Tramping, begging, thieving, working sometimes, when I could — though that warn't as often as

you might think, till you put the question would you ha'been overready to give me work yourselves — a bit of a poacher, a bit of a labourer, a bit of a waggoner, a bit of a haymaker, a bit of a hawk, a bit of most things that don't pay and lead to trouble, I got to be a man. (p.361).

What is important here is not the seriousness of Magwitch's offences — Magwitch's offences, before he falls into the clutches of the gentlemanly Compeyson do not in fact extend beyond the occasional theft — but that Magwitch is the inevitable target of punishment. Born in the lowest stratum of society, under the constant surveillance of the law, exposed constantly to prison terms, and consequently forced into the circuits of delinquency — "Trampling, begging, thieving, working sometimes" — Magwitch's career illustrates how penal techniques in *Great Expectations* aim not at eliminating crime but in encouraging recidivism — a term that Magwitch himself seems to explain in "a mouthful of English": "In jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail" (p.360).

We can then read in Dickens's account of Magwitch's early life an indictment of a penal system that is unenlightened and unimaginative; but as Michel Foucault has argued, the official encouragement of large scale recidivism has in fact, at least two uses. By isolating the delinquent, holding him/her up as an "Exhibition", symbolically summing up in his/her pathologised figure all forms of illegalities, official society can claim to have displaced criminality as a whole to the realm of the degraded "other", and at the same time leave in the shade those illegalities that it wishes to tolerate. (For example, Pip tolerates, and indeed participates in the shady activities of Jagers and Wemmick, but the legally sanctioned system of distinguishing signs enables him to separate himself "genetically" from the convicts in the coach and indeed from the criminal underworld as a whole). Again by perpetuating "a closed milieu of delinquency", official society can pressurise it, place it under surveillance, penetrate it, constantly use it for its own purposes.

In *Great Expectations* the process by which criminality is legally identified and segregated, itself involves the use and the exploitation of the criminal milieu. To be sure the law is *publically* constituted as a strictly objective system of arbitration the accused is given certain rights, he/she is convicted only by trial in court, and arguments are evaluated in court according to whether or not they adhere, in Jagers's phrase, "to the strict line of fact" (p.351). Yet in practice Jagers's own spectacular successes in court depend not only on his ability to manipulate, repress, confuse facts, but even more crucially on his access to Newgate that is, to the biggest prison in London. Newgate is, in Wemmick's phrase, the "next thing" (p.249) to Jagers's office and Jagers himself, as Pip tells Estella, "has the reputation of being more in secrets of that dismal place than any man in London" (p.289). It is not merely that Jagers can make enormous and effective use of "Newgate intelligence" in court. More crucially, it is precisely by penetrating the criminal milieu, by exploiting the precarious situation of the individual delinquent, alternatively bribing and threatening him/her, that Jagers can use a whole range of illegalities to fight a case while keeping himself on the right side of the law.

"Well Mas'r Jagers", returned Mike, in the voice of a sufferer, "arter a great deal deal o'trouble I've found one, sir, as might do."

"What is he prepared to swear?"

"Well Mas'r Jagers", said Mike wiping his nose on his fur cap this time, "in a general way anythink."

Mister Jagers suddenly became most irate. "Now, I warned you before", throwing his forefinger at his terrified client, "that if you ever presumed to talk in that way here, I'd make an example of you. You infernal scoundrel, how dare you tell me that ... Now be careful. In what station of life is this man?"

Mike looked at his cap, and looked at the floor, and looked at the ceiling, and looked at the clerk, and even looked at me, before beginning to reply in a nervous manner, "We've dressed him like —" when my guardian blustered out:

"What? You WILL will you ..."

After some helpless casting about, Mike brightened up and began again:

"He's dressed like a respectable pieman, A sort of pastry cook...".

"Take him past that window and let me see him."

The window indicated, was the office window. We all three went to it, behind the wire blind, and presently saw the client go by in an accidental manner, with a murderous looking individual.

Jaggers's methods of fighting a case; his actual success in court suggest that criminality, far from being a solid, easily identifiable mass of activities that exists outside respectable society is, in fact, something that is far more ambiguous — something that constantly circulates through the fine underground channels that connect Newgate to the High Court. In *Great Expectations* the most palpable symbol of this constant traffic between criminality and respectability is the wealth that is generated in the criminal milieu but recycled back into respectable society.

5.4 CRIMINAL WEALTH AND RESPECTABILITY

Jaggers himself does not even attempt to conceal the criminal origins of his wealth. The starting point of Jaggers's career as a lawyer is his successful defence of a murderer, and the most noticeable objects in Jaggers's office are the villainous looking casts, made to the likeness of two hardened offenders who have been in Wemmick's words, "Famous clients of ours that got us a world of credit" (p.223). In fact Jaggers's criminal clients fetch him not only credit but also money. Wemmick stops at the individual cells at Newgate not only to gather intelligence or locate appropriate witnesses, but also to negotiate "fees".

With Wemmick the acquisition of criminal property — especially the property of prisoners condemned to death — has become so routine that it is made to appear as part of his cheery practicality.

While he was putting up the other cast and coming down from the chair, the thought crossed my mind that all his personal jewellery was derived from like sources. As he had shown no diffidence on the subject, I ventured on the liberty of asking him the question when he stood before me, dusting his hands.

"Oh yes", he returned, "these are all gifts of that kind. One brings another you see, that's the way of it. I always take 'em. They're curiosities. And they're property. They may not be worth much, but, after all, they're property and portable — my guiding star always is, "Get hold of portable property".

What is important about Dickens's representation of Wemmick's transactions is not their extraordinariness but their ordinariness. The very fowl that Wemmick serves to Pip for dinner may have been acquired from a convict, but the signs of Wemmick's links with the criminal world coexist with — indeed are a constituent part of — the happy, almost idyllic ambience that envelops Wemmick's Walworth home:

The interval between that time and supper, Wemmick devoted to showing me his collection of curiosities. They were mostly of a felonious character; comprising the pen with which a celebrated

forgery had been committed, a distinguished razor or two — and several manuscript confessions — They were agreeably dispersed among small specimens of China and glass, various neat trifles made by the proprietor of the museum, and some tobacco-stoppers carved by the Aged.(pp.231-32.).

Wemmick's museum renders familiar and everyday what would be normally unmentionable in respectable discourse, and in the process makes visible the countless ties that in fact bind respectable society to its criminalised "other". Indeed Wemmick's remarkable museum may be seen as a microcosmic representation of the great world outside, for just as murderous razors coexist with lovingly preserved tobacco stoppers carved by Wemmick's father in Wemmick's museum, Magwitch's money provides the material basis not only for Pip's life as a gentleman but also for the more positive qualities that Pip and Herbert develop after they join Clariker's firm. It is to Pip's great credit that he refuses to enjoy the benefits of Magwitch's wealth after he becomes aware of the identity of his real benefactor. But Pip's refusal can only be symbolic, for everything significant in Pip's life — his education, his acquisition of culture, values, friends, in short his "improvement", even in its most positive sense — is tied up inextricably with Magwitch's money. In the final analysis, it is this bringing together of the gentleman and the criminal, and at a more general level refinement and corruption, the fairy godmother and the witch, which expresses Dickens's radical skepticism with official assertions about the possibility of "self-improvement" and indeed about "progress" in a class ridden, internally divided society.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

If I were asked what I was doing in this Unit, I would say that I was exploring the *thematic* implications of the sensational disclosure that the novel makes at the level of the plot. The connections between criminality and respectability that the plot suggests, when it reveals that Magwitch rather than Miss Havisham is Pip's secret benefactor, is reinforced at the thematic level by the activities of the lawyer Jaggers. Thus Jaggers represents a legal system which is overtly dedicated to the business of segregating, by a strictly objective system, the criminal from the respectable. Moreover we also saw that this rooting out of criminality is reinforced by a whole system of branding that projects the criminal as the easily recognisable "other" of respectability. Yet this displacement of all forms of illegality on the pathologised figure of the branded criminal also serves to keep in the shade away from public scrutiny the innumerable transactions that go on all the time between the respectable and the criminal world. Can you remember how this is shown in the novel?

5.6 GLOSSARY

Recidivism	The tendency of those released from prison to get back to delinquency and thus be imprisoned again.
Michel Foucault	Author of <i>Discipline and Punish</i> .
Pathologized	Disease ridden
Delinquency	The life of a vagabond.

Microcosmic	A situation where the largest social or cultural tendencies are reflected in a mimaturised symbol or scene.
Psychotic	Crazy
Aberrations	Deviations from the "normal"
Dystopian	The opposite of Utopian.
Surveillance	To subject to constant monitoring

5.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) What would you say were the major changes that occur in Dickens's attitude to crime as he moves from his early to his later phase?
- 2) Write a note on the significance of Jaggers and Wemmick in *Great Expectations* taking into account material not just from this unit but also from the text.
- 3) "One of the achievements of *Great Expectations* is that refuses to demarcate the processes of respectability from those of criminality". Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
- 4) What in your opinion is the significance of Wemmick's museum?

5.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

I want to make it clear at the outset that this reading list is not meant in any sense to intimidate you. It is not mandatory that you read every book or article included in this list. But at some stage of your development you may want to get back to *Great Expectations*, Dickens, and novel theory. If you do, perhaps this reading list will serve you as a basic guide. Also you might look at some of the titles here if you want to supplement your reading of *Great Expectations* and of the units included here.

WORKS ON GREAT EXPECTATIONS

- Peter Brooks, *Reading for Plot : Design and Intention in Narrative*, 1970.
R. Glamour, "Dickens and the Self-Help Idea" in *The Victorian and Social Protest: A symposium*, 1973.
F.R. and Q.D.Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 1970.
J.Lucas, *The Melancholy Man*, 1970
G.Smith, *Dickens, Money and Society*, 1967.
G.Thurley, *The Dickens Myth*, 1976.
S.Conor, *Charles Dickens* 1985.
J.Brown, *Novelist in The Market Place*, 1982.
D.Van Ghent, *The English Novel*, 1953.
John Carey, *The Violent Efigy*, 1973.
K.Flint, *Dickens*, 1986.
Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Buildingsroman in European Culture* 1987.