UNIT 2 *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Structure

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit carefully you will, I hope, be able to understand how the two ideas prevalent in Victorian society — that of self-improvement and gentlemanliness – are intricately worked into the fabric of *Great Expectations*. This will help us to further see how the social and cultural contexts provide a more complex perspective on the text. Our aim is not just to "read" the novel and follow the plot but to "study" it in some depth. And as we had discussed in the previous unit, a working knowledge of the background helps us see the complex relationship between literature and the society from which it emerges.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, I will deal with the relationship between *Great Expectations* and two important ideas about which I hope by this time you have a working knowledge. The first of these, to recapitulate very quickly, is the idea of self-improvement which, as I have said, enjoyed enormous prestige in the booming fifties and sixties, and which was associated with the classic middle class values such as thrift, diligence and hard work. A short name for this complex of values is "Smilesian" after Samuel Smiles whose book *Self Help* was probably the most popular articulation of the ideology of self-improvement.

The other idea that will crop up repeatedly in this unit is that of "gentlemanliness" which was in many improvement stories the paradoxical reward promised to the improving hero — paradoxical, because "gentlemanliness" was essentially the embodiment of a "cultured", "liberal", "leisured", in short, of an essentially "aristocratic" lifestyle.

2.2 THE SELF-IMPROVING HERO AND THE PROBLEM OF GENTLEMANLINESS

Great Expectations has, as one of its starting points, a classic motif of improvement literature — the hero's determination to better his lot. Although Pip is exposed all the time to his dissatisfaction with his life in a backward provincial town, his desire to improve himself is projected in the novel as both understandable and admirable. Exposed always to the bullying of the likes of Pumblechook, struggling through the alphabets "as if it had been a bramble bush" (p.75) under the tutelage of a ridiculous old woman of "limited means, and unlimited infirmity" (p.74). [All the quotations that I have used here are from the Penguin edition of *Great Expectations*. The page numbers that you see in parenthesis will tell you where to find the passage , if you wish to see.] Without friends like Joe and Biddy, who cannot, in any case, help him in his quest for a better life, the young Pip's prospects are anything but inspiring. Pip himself describes his situation in the following manner:

> I used to stand about the churchyard on Sunday evenings when night was falling, comparing my own perspective with the windy marsh view, and making out some likeness between them by thinking how flat and low both were, and how on both there came in an unknown way a dark mist and then the sea. (p.135).

A glimpse of the "gentlemanly" life style

Pip expresses his instinct for self-improvement more positively in his determined quest for education as a means of improving his lot. Pip grasps every opportunity to further his education — he enlarges to Miss Havisham "upon my knowing nothing and wanting to know everything, in the hope that she might offer some help towards that desirable end" (p.123), invests all his extra money on books, and is always poring over them, "to improve myself" (p.152). Pip's pursuit of knowledge under difficulties has led at least one critic (Robin Gilmour) to see in this "essentially moral struggle" a representative pathos which justifies the use of Smiles's favourite term "self culture". The relationship between *Great Expectations* and the ideology of improvement is never reiterative, however, and one way in which we can gauge the complexity with which Dickens treats the self-improvement theme is by comparing the course of Pip's "progress" with that of *David Copperfield*.

As you probably know, Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* some ten years before he began *Great Expectations*. Do please try to read this novel. I know that *David Copperfield* is a very long novel as nineteenth century novels so often are, but I do think it would be worth your while going through it because comparisons between *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* will enter into our discussions at many points. For the time being, I am assuming that you have not yet read *David Copperfield*, and so let me to draw your attention to some details in the novel which you need to know in order to respond to the comparison that I am about to make between David and Pip. Among all of Dickens's novels, *David Copperfield* probably offers the most sympathetic depiction of the middle class work ethic and of the idea of self-improvement. Thus David's progress through the novel is predicated above all on his increasingly serious attitude to his work and the beneficial effect that this productive existence has on the growth of his inner life. Crucial therefore to David's development is the existence of a milieu that will encourage and sustain the middle class attitude to work and to self culture. In *David Copperfield* this milieu is provided by his aunt Betsy Trotwood (who begins as an eccentric, then plays the role of the fairy godmother before settling down to her role as the novel's most articulate spokesperson for middle class values), by Traddles, David's friend, and of course by Agnes the girl whom David finally marries. As you might guess the great danger that David faces (but overcomes) is the possibility that he might be led astray by the influence of the stylish, leisured, but utterly unproductive "gentlemanly" lifestyle embodied in his other friend, Steerforth.

Pip's quest for self-improvement is far more complicated than David's and of course part of Pip's difficulties can be understood in terms of his individual shortcomings. But what seems to me to be interesting is not so much Pip's subjective failures as the absence, in the world of *Great Expectations*, of situations and milieus where the Smilesian parable can work itself out. I hope that you can see that there is room here for an interesting comparison with *David Copperfield*. In the earlier novel as I have already suggested, the stable middle class world of Betsy Trotwood, Traddles and Agnes had provided a context conducive to the full development of David's productive faculties; and if the leisured, upper class lifestyle of Steerforth had exercised a dangerous influence on David, the whole business of the novel had been to marginalise and overcome that danger. What was marginal in *David Copperfield* moves to the very centre in *Great Expectations*. The world of *Great Expectations* has no place for Betsy Trotwood or Tommy Traddles and improvement implies emulating the arrogant genteel behaviour embodied in Miss Havisham and Estella. (Can you see here an example of the complexity of the relationship between the text and the social background? What you had learned in the earlier unit about the cultural domination of the aristocracy over the social life of the nation now appears in *Great Expectations* not as a passing detail but as a determining element in the making of the plot of the novel.)

To go on, the absence in *Great Expectations* of an enabling milieu for the development of middle class virtues has major implications for the whole problem of self improvement, because in a world hegemonised by predominantly upper class notions about what constitutes the good life, the urge for improvement is constantly mediated by the language of class. Accordingly if Pip's exposure to Satis House arouses in him the desire for a better life it also exposes him to the full blast of upper class arrogance.

> "He calls the knaves jacks, this boy!", said Estella with disdain before our first game was out. "And what coarse hands he has! and what thick boots!"
>
> I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious and I caught it. (p.90)

Hopelessly, and given the hegemonic influence of gentility, inevitably implicated in genteel aspirations, incapable of attaining a distinctive Smilesian identity, Pip cannot confront upper class arrogance with the confident (and idealised) dignity of say *John Halifax* (Remember, the novel I referred to earlier?). On the contrary, the realities of class relations constantly expose the self-improving hero to the "smart without a name" (p.92). And the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties, far from imparting moral and logical coherence to Pip's development, leads only to a total loss of direction.

> What I wanted who can say? How can I say when I never knew? (pp. 135-6).

2.3 THE SELF-IMPROVING HERO AND THE PROBLEM OF HIS PAST

Humiliation is not the only danger that confronts the self-improving hero in *Great Expectations*. After the sensational reversal in his fortunes, Pip does succeed in repressing the most humiliating experiences of his childhood, but his elevation to the status of a gentleman raises problems of another kind.

> "Since your change of fortune and prospects, you have have changed your companions," said Estella. "Naturally," said I.
> "And necessarily," she added, in a haughty tone; "what was fit company for you once, would be quite unfit for you now." (p.258).

In its haughty exclusiveness, Estella's tone belongs specifically to the genteel ethos. At the same time Estella's insistence about the incompatibility between the upwardly mobile hero's past and his improved situation in fact makes explicit what seems to me to be one of the central repressed presuppositions even in the most overtly Smilesian versions of improvement literature. There is no disjunction between the point of view of John Halifax and that of his creator when at the end of the novel the former responds to the world of the poor (in which his past is deeply implicated) with a mixture of apprehension and moral self-righteousness. Again in *David Copperfield* Dickens is able to sustain the smooth trajectory of David's progress only by depriving the socially awkward aspects of his past of any claim that they might have on him, by protecting him from the embarrassment of an encounter with say, Mealy Potatoes. (You would know if you've even begun to read *David Copperfield* that Mealy Potatoes is an uncared for street urchin who works with David when, during a nightmarish but brief period, David is taken off school and made to work in a blackening factory. David runs away from the blackening factory to his aunt Betsy Trotwood where he is rehabilitated into the respectable world. Once this happens

David's past is completely erased, it is never allowed to resurface again.) In other words, one way in which *David Copperfield* (and indeed the conventional "improvement" novel as a whole) is able to preserve inviolate the hero's progress is by silencing the world of his past, by denying it the right to interact with and to possibly qualify his final success. In *Great Expectations*, on the hand, at least one character refuses to play by the rules of the conventional improvement novel. When the "gentlemanly" Pip comes face to face with the tailor's boy in his home town and effects "a serene and unconscious" attitude towards him, the result is disaster

> Suddenly the knees of Trabb's boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road, and crying to the populace, "Hold me I'm so frightened!" feigned to be in a paroxyism of terror and contrition, occasioned by the dignity of my appearance ....
>
> I had not gone much further down the street as the post office, when I again beheld Trabb's boy shooting round by a back way. This time he was entirely changed. He wore his blue bag in the manner of my greatcoat, and was strutting along the pavement towards me in the opposite side of the street, attended by a company of delighted young friends to whom he from time to time exclaimed, with a wave of his hand, "Don't know yah!" Words cannot state the amount of aggravation and injury wreaked upon me by Trabb's boy, when, passing abreast of me, he pulled up his shirt collar, twined up his side hair, stuck an arm akimbo, and smirked extravagantly by wriggling his elbows and his body, and saying to his attendants "Don't know yah, don't know yah, upon m soul don't know yah!"(p.267).

In this parodic reenactment of Estella's pronouncement, the codes of gentility are dragged, as it were, to the streets. From the point of view of the excluded majority — of those who inhabit the streets — these codes appear to be a system of ridiculous posturings, and Pip's attempt to wipe out the memory of his old acquaintances from his consciousness, far from being natural and necessary as Pip and Estella would have it, is shown to involve the crassest kind of snobbery.

It is not, however, with Trabb's boy but with Joe that Pip's early life is most deeply implicated and a measure of the complexity with which Dickens treats the improvement theme in *Great Expectations* is that, unlike his delineation of the David Pegotty relationship (Pegotty is David's nurse whose plebian identity is conveniently subsumed within the *bonhomie* which always envelops her relationship with David), he makes it impossible for Pip to bring his relationship with Joe in consonance with the requirements of gentility. Joe's response to the young Pip we know has always been affectionate as well as egalitarian. Thus, unlike Mrs. Joe, Pumblechook, Wopsle and indeed everybody who inhabits the world of Pip's childhood, it does not even occur to Joe to use the authority of his age to bully Pip. On the contrary, Joe and Pip are, in Joe's words, "ever the best of friends" and in Pip's "equals" (pp. 78-80). The sense of equality with his interlocutor is, in fact, a basic precondition for the free flow of Joe's conversation. Confronted with the rigidly hierarchised social world of the upper classes, Joe's conversation dries up: he is literally struck dumb.

> "Oh!" she said to Joe, "You are the husband of the sister of this boy?"
> I could hardly have imagined dear old Joe looking so unlike himself or so like some extraordinary bird; standing as he did, speechless with his tuft of feathers ruffled, and his mouth open as if he wanted a worm.

> "You are the husband," repeated Miss Havisham,"of the sister of this boy?"
> It was very aggravating, but throughout the interview Joe persisted in addressing Me instead of Miss Havisham. (p.128).

Joe's utter incapacity to relate to the conventions of gentility raises major problems for Pip after he becomes a gentleman. It is not only that Joe is a reminder of Pip's lowly past, or that Pip often feels guilty for having to avoid Joe. What is more important is that each of Joe's encounters with Pip, are, in their unobtrusive way, critical and disconcerting. By his very uncomprehending presence — his inability to understand the hierarchising conventions of genteel society — Joe disrupts the smooth flow of genteel discourse, introduces confusions within its conventions of social interaction, breaks up the hierarchies without which the gentleman would lose his distinct identity.

> So, I presented Joe to Herbert, who held out his hand; but Joe backed from it, and held on to the bird's nest.
> "Your servant sir," said Joe, "which I hope as you and Pip" - here his eyes fell on the Avenger, who was putting some toast on the table, and so plainly denoted an intention to make that young gentleman one of the family, that I frowned it down and confused him even more - "I meantersay, you two gentlemen — which I hope you get your elths in this close spot? For the present may be a werry good inn, according to London opinion," said Joe confidentially "...but I wouldn't keep a pig in it myself — not in case I wish him to fatten wholesome and to eat with a meller flavour on him" (p.243)

The confusion into which Joe throws the conventions of gentility suggests the limits of those conventions, and more specifically their incapacity to accommodate the easy, affectionate, egalitarianism with which Joe relates to people. Significantly it is the unlettered Joe rather than Pip who recognises this:

> "Us two being now alone, sir," began Joe.
> "Joe", I interrupted pettishly, "how can you call me, sir?"
> Joe looked at me for a single instant with something faintly like reproach. Utterly preposterous as his cravat was, and as his collars were, I was conscious of a sort of dignity in that look. (pp244-5)

A past characterised by shared suffering, solidarity, easy spontaneous communication, makes Joe's mode of addressing Pip jarring, unfamiliar, unthinkable. But it is precisely at this jarring moment, which exposes itself as a raw nerve within Pip's comfortably adjusted relationship with gentlemanly society, that the world of Pip's past is made to enter into a critical contextualising relationship with his improving career — revealing it not simply as "progress" but also as something that is capable of destroying the deepest and most undemanding of personal relationships.

2.4 GENTLEMANLINESS AND LOVE

I tried to show in the earlier section how the conventions of gentility tend to be antagonistic to the informal, affectionate egalitarianism that underlies Joe's relationship with Pip. I want now to focus on the Pip-Estella relationships and to look at the genteel world from the inside, to judge whether or not it can, on its own terms, provide a context for the free development of the qualities that Pip associates with it before he embarks on his quest for gentlemanliness.

I hope that by this time you have read the text and will therefcre agree that Pip's aspiration for the gentlemanly world expresses not simply his snobbishness, but also his desire for a world of fine feelings and rich emotions. As a provincial boy Pip has no doubt about the imaginative richness of the world of gentlefolk.

> Whenever I watched the vessels standing out to the sea with their white sails spread, I somehow thought of Miss Havisham and Estella; and whenever the light struck aslant, far off, upon a cloud or sail or green hillside or water line it was just the same — Miss Havisham, Estella, and the strange house and the strange life appeared to have something to do with everything that was picturesque.-(p.137).

Pip never really loses faith in this romantic vision. Late in the novel Pip reacts to Estella's impending marriage with the stupid and brutish Drummle, with an anguish that is not only alien to the measured formality of gentlemanly behaviour but also expresses the intensity with which Pip had hoped that an emotionally rich relationship with Estella would constitute the culminating point of his quest for improvement.

> You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have read, since I first came here, the rough common boy whose poor heart you wounded even then. You have been in every prospect I have ever seen since — on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light, in the darkness, in the woods, in the sea, in the streets. You have been the embodiment of every graceful fancy that my mind has ever become acquainted with. (p.378).

The coldness with which Estella responds to Pip's impassioned outburst can be understood at one level, in terms of her personal upbringing. Brought up to wreak Miss Havisham's revenge on the male sex, Estella has been trained from childhood to steer clear of any deep emotional involvement. At the same time, however, it is impossible not to see the coincidence between Estella's personal predilections and the attitudes generated by the world that she inhabits. Estella's position as a lady, the deference that she constantly receives, envelops her in an atmosphere of "completeness and superiority" (p.58). Accordingly Estella's discourse is "undiscussable" (p.85), "authoritative" in Bakhtin's (I hope that you remember him), sense of the term. It is hard edged, complete in itself, incapable of registering another's voice, or of allowing other voices to enter into it. It does not allow other voices to create contradictions within it, animate it, and is incapable, in other words, of entering into the fertilising processes of interaction. Estella does not herself hesitiate to confess as much:

> It seems," said Estella very calmly, "that there are sentiments, fancies — I don't know what you call them — which I am not able to comprehend. When you say that you love me I know what you mean as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there. I don't care for what you say at all". (p.376).

What is important here is not Estella's shortcomings or even that they are symptomatic of the genteel world as a whole but that Estella's immunity to "sentiments, fancies" is an indispensable precondition of the beauty, the poise, the elegance that had first attracted Pip to her, and to the gentlemanly world. Estella's very name brings together the idea of glittering brilliance with that of cold aloofness in an interdependent relationship, and Pip is always aware of the "air of

inaccessibility that her beauty gave her" (p.260). We might, in fact, go further and argue that in his depiction of the Pip-Estella relationship, Dickens seems to be hitting at the very roots of the genteel mystique. One important reason for the mid-Victorian English person's continuing fascination with the aristocracy was the air of romance that seemed to surround the aristocrats. "The aristocracy" says the social historian Geoffery Best, "was irresistably fascinating to a historically and hierarchically minded society, because its members seemed to be heroic. They were supposed to be handsome, love more passionately, and behave more impressively than lesser bred mortals." And in a first hand account of Count D'Orcy's manners and demeanour, a contemporary lists some of the qualities that made the refined gentleman seem romantic and superior.

> Count D'Orcy was a brilliant leader of the dandy class — strikingly handsome, of a splendid physique, a commanding appearance, an admirable horseman of the *Haute Ecole* school. When he appeared in the perfection of dress ... with the expression of self confidence and self complacency which the sense of superiority gives, he was observed by all .... What sentiment such an appearance might excite I cannot pretend to say, but at the same time the effect produced was unmistakable, they stared at him, as at a superior being.

But I hope that you will agree, keeping in mind the arguments that I have been offering, that in Dickens the "perfection of dress" and the capacity to love more passionately are revealed not as complementary but as contradictory categories, so that in *Great Expectations* the very qualities that go into the making of the genteel mystique become the means of their own demystification.

Note the portrait in the background and see the connection made between the notion of gentlemanliness and love

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Did you follow the argument in this unit? Let me quickly recapitulate the main points so that you can check out whether you've missed anything or not. I would suggest too that in case you come up against something in this summing up that you are not sure of, go back to the unit and check the relevant portion.

My first point in this unit was that *Great Expectations* makes the whole process of self-improvement problematic because unlike *David Copperfield* it does not provide the social context or milieu where the improving process might work itself out. Consequently, Pip's genuine desire to improve his lot comes up inevitably against the full blast of upper class arrogance. I had argued also that the conventional improvement plot is further problematised in *Great Expectations* because this novel violates a central (if repressed convention) essential for the smooth unfolding of the improvement plot: the repression of the hero's humble past after he becomes a gentleman. By contrast Dickens makes it impossible for Pip to reconcile the demands of gentlemanliness with the claims of his past. I hope that you followed the ways in which the human implications of this problem are worked out through the delineation of the Pip–Joe relationship. Finally in this unit we looked at the world of gentlefolk and its capacity to generate the fine feelings and rich emotions that Pip associates with it. At this level, we focussed on a particular relationship. Can you tell me what it was?

2.6 GLOSSARY

Betsy Trotwood David's aunt in *David Copperfield*

Tommy Traddles David's friend

Agnes The person David marries after the death of his first wife.

Mealy Potatoes A street urchin whom David got to know while working in the bottling factory.

Parody humourous imitation of serious writing.

Hierarchy organization of persons or things arranged into higher or lower ranks, classes, grades.

Dialogical like a dialogue

Haute Ecole A certain sophisticated style of horsemanship.

Ideology a system of ideas that influences the views of the believer at every level.

Predicated based on

Hegemonised From the word hegemony which means the ability to ensure large scale confirmity to certain ideas without the application of force.

Mediated	Refracted
Inviolate	in its pure state.
Bonhomie	Good cheer, fellow feeling.
Subsumed	absorbed
Egalitarian	An attitude that is based on the belief that all men and women are equal
Interlocutor	The person spoken to.
Contextualising	To bring a problem in relation to the larger surrounding Problems.
Predilections	Special likings/preferences.
Demystification	To expose the methods by which certain people or institutions seek to disguise their real intentions by clothing these in appealing qualities.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1) Have you finished reading *David Copperfield*? If you have, try and compare David's progress with that of Pip. Do please add ideas of your own which you have not encountered in these units. May I also take this opportunity to add a few lines about the kind of answers that I would appreciate from someone who has been working with these units? I would probably feel happy and flattered to read an answer that uses the information given here accurately and appropriately. But the answer that I would *respect* would have to be one where the reader has taken into account what is given here, thought about it, used parts of it, but made whatever he or she has found useful here as part of his or her *distinctive* way of thinking. In other words what I am asking you to do is to use these units to generate your own thinking.

2) You will have gathered some ideas about Joe in the course of going through Unit 2. Supplement these with a close reading of the text and then attempt a three page answer on the significance of Joe *in Great Expectations*. By the way, by "close reading" I don't mean that you have to reread the whole text every time you sit down to write an answer. What I'm asking you to do is to focus only on the parts related to Joe, mark these out in your text, and have the text before you when get to work on your answer.

3) How do you respond to the Pip-Estella relationship? Again make use of your text while you write your answer.

4) In what way does Dickens complicate the conventional improvement plot? Think about this carefully and write a detailed five page answer.