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## UNIT 4 *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* AND THE FAIRYTALE

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The nineteenth century has often been called the "age of realism". Yet within the so called realistic novel elements of the gothic, the romantic, the fairytale etc. could be found. Especially in Dickens, who drew upon several popular modes. After reading this Unit, you will be able to outline how the conventions of the fairytale have been worked into *Great Expectations*.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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I hope that you remember the point I had made (in Unit 1) about the formal openness of the Dickensian novel and about its ability to absorb a whole range of popular modes. I'd suggested also that one popular mode that had a great deal of relevance for *Great Expectations* was the fairytale. In this unit, I will try to show you the complex (and therefore interesting) ways in which elements from the fairytale (at various points of its evolution) get "reactivated" in *Great Expectations*.

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### 4.2 THE FAIRYTALE AS A HISTORICALLY COMPLEX MODE

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Before I go into what I have to say about the relationship between *Great Expectations* and the fairytale, I would like you to be aware of a fairly influential body of opinion that sees the fairytale like - quality of Dickens's fiction as symptomatic of its moral simplicity. For instance, Franco Moretti has argued (in his influential book on the European *bildungsroman*) that *Great Expectations* is, like many other novels that Dickens wrote, deep down a fairytale. Moretti compares this

feature of the Dickensian novel unfavourably, against the mature realism of nineteenth century European fiction, and argues that Dickens's novels are basically infantile because they are predicated on a fairytale - like division of their world into good and evil. But the only evidence that Moretti offers for arguing that fairytales are necessarily infantile is a quotation from Bruno Bettelheim:

Ambiguities must wait until a relatively firm personality has been established ... The figures in a fairytale are not ambivalent — not good and bad at the same time, as we are in reality. But since polarisation dominates the child's mind, it also dominates the fairytales .... One brother is stupid the other is clever. One sister is virtuous and industrious the other is vile and lazy .... One parent is good, the other evil.

It must be remembered, however, that Bettelheim was focusing on fairytales in their *contemporary* form, and on their ability to illustrate how a child's mind works. Understandably, therefore, Bettelheim's concern was not primarily historical : he did not take into account, for instance, that fairytales were not always part of what is now called "children's literature". Nor does he say that it was precisely during the early nineteenth century, that is, during Dickens's formative years, that fairytales were moving away from their roots in popular oral culture to children's books. Rooted in a "preliterate peoples way of thinking", fairytales in the eighteenth and even the early nineteenth century, often represented, as Robert Darnton and more recently Herman Rebel have shown, the ways in which "the poor and not so poor continue to speak to each other and to subvert official efforts at replacing popular speech with the rote learning of catechisms and approved texts." Such stories derived their power from the sombreness of their atmosphere, their discontinuous prose, their occasionally brutal language, and above all, from the way that they use the magical elements inherent within fairytales as the means not of providing simplified moral resolutions, but of confronting their readers with disconcerting paradoxes and desperate choices. Rebel shows that when the Grimms began to prepare the vast body of fairytales for publication, they systematically edited out material unsuitable for children on the assumption that it was not "the tales' authenticity but the pleasure that they brought that would allow them to function as works of instruction." Incorporated within the moral economy of respectability, the printed fairytale began increasingly to acquire the pleasant atmosphere and the simplified morality that we associate with it today.

I hope that you can see how the historical complexity that Rebel's essay brings to bear on the fairytale shows up the reductiveness of analyses (such as Moretti's) that treat the fairytale-like quality of the Dickensian novel as expressive of an infantile imagination that can work only by dividing the world into good and bad. On the contrary, poised at a critical point of its evolution when Dickens first encountered it, the fairytale mode opened for England's greatest popular writer the novelistic possibilities inherent in its past and in its future. It enabled him to appropriate the disjunctive force of its original form, and at the same time to replicate perhaps, but also to "deform" — a term that I will explain in greater detail soon — the simple bipolar (good-bad) structure that it was beginning to acquire. I will try to show later that the story of Pip's expectations replicates in order to subvert the conventional novelisations of the fairytale plots, and that the binary worldview that the fairytale plot sustains is, in *Great Expectations*, shown to epitomise not just a childish mode of cognition, but also the way that official society seeks to preserve its own sanctity.

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#### 4.3 "REALISM" AND THE FAIRYTALE

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Let me begin by exploring the ways in which elements from the older, darker, "folk" form of the fairytale enter into and affect *Great Expectations*, and especially the pivotal scenes involving Satis House and their weird owner.

If you've read the Satis House scenes carefully you will agree that these scenes retain the sombre atmosphere and all the disconcerting force that Rebel associates with the fairytale in its original form. What is more the Satis House scenes are described almost entirely from the point of view of Pip who is at this stage a poor labouring boy. We might thus say that Dickens brings into the domain of the novel a mode of representing the elite that is inextricably implicated in a plebian point of view. If you keep this in mind you will perhaps agree that the truly interesting problem is not the childlikeness or otherwise of the fairytale mode that Dickens uses of the Satis House scenes, but its relationship to a mode of novel that was through the 1860s being associated with the educated classes of what one contemporary described as a "scientific and somewhat sceptical age". For the lack of a more precise term we might describe this method as "realism" and one of its tenets was that it self-consciously rejected what the *Westminster Review* (one of the most important organs of educated opinion) described as "the marvels which had delighted our cruder ancestors".

I have no doubt that by now you have reached a stage in your development as a student of literature where you can deal with the following proposition: that realism is not an unmediated expression of the "real" or an extension of "truth" or "nature", but a certain mode of artistic ordering (or artistic construction of you like). As Roland Barthes argues in his well known analysis of Balzac's description of the wealthy *de Lanty* mansion, the "effect" of reality is an illusion created by the surreptitious orchestration of "connotations" (or the additional bits of meaning that cling to the author's language over and above what it literally states). Now let me quote the relevant passage from Barthes. It is a difficult passage and I will try to help you along as you read it by interpolating explanations within square brackets. Don't give up grappling with it, because this passage has wide-ranging applicability:

The fleeting citation, this surreptitious and discontinuous way of stating themes, ... create together the *allure* of connotation; the seems [roughly, the *system*, of additional meanings concealed beneath the regular meaning of words] seem to appear to float freely, to form a galaxy of trifling data in which we read no order of importance: the narrative technique is impressionistic: it breaks up the signifier [that is it breaks up the word from something that signifies a single simple meaning] into particles of verbal matter [connotations] which makes sense by only coalescing .... The touch must be light as though it were not worth remembering, and yet appearing again another guise, it must already be a memory; the readerly [or the realistic] is an effect based on operations of solidarity [the readerly sticks]; but the more that this solidarity is renewed, the more intelligible (it) becomes .... The (ideological) goal of this technique is naturalising meaning [that is to say rather than acknowledge that the novel's reality is an effect based on the orchestration of words and their connotations, this technique pretends that words are a transparency that reveal an preexisting reality] .... This naturalisation is possible only because the significant data released — or summoned — in a homeopathic rhythm are borne along by a purportedly "natural" medium language: connotation is concealed beneath the regular sound of sentences, "wealth" [Barthes is referring to Balzac's description of the splendid *de Lanty* mansion] beneath the utterly natural syntax [subject adverbial object] which says that a party is given in a mansion which is located in a particular neighbourhood.

Barthes's insistence on the constructedness of novelistic "truth" has been the subject of extended and critical commentary. What interests me, however, is not whether or not reality in the novel is purely an "effect" but the suggestion that realism is formally implicated in what it seeks to describe. Let me elaborate a bit on this by

turning to the following passage from *Mansfield Park* which like most of Jane Austen's writing exemplifies perfectly the methods of domestic realism.

To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than of her children, but very indulgent to the latter when it did not put her to inconvenience, guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister.

Now, it is clear, of course, that Jane Austen's attitude to the person she is describing is extremely critical. But I hope that you will agree that Jane Austen wouldn't dream of disrupting the system of connotations which produces this internally integrated, directly experienced "authentic" picture of the domestic world of the gentry in the late eighteenth century, in order to articulate her criticism. For example, Austen would never have an angel descend from heaven, walk into *Mansfield Park* and point out to Lady Bertram that she leads a lazy, parasitic life, because by doing this she would destroy forever the effect of the natural that she has built word by word.

Moreover you'd agree, wouldn't you, that the signs — for example Lady Bertram's lazy posture, the quality of the embroidery that she is working at and her attitude towards her children, the dresses she might wear or the way she speaks — that go into the making of Lady Bertram's image — have to preserve a certain degree of consistency. For as Barthes insists, the sense of reality is created when connotations concealed beneath the simple meaning of words, supplement each other and, come together in "operations of solidarity".

It is the consensus of signs — for example, a certain internal consistency between the social class to which a character belongs, the kind of dress that she wears, and the way that she speaks — that the fairytale mode seeks to disrupt. It frees the signifier from the need to replicate "life as it is"; and by disregarding the requirements of "lifelikeness" which give to realistic representations of upper class homes both their authenticity and their internal homogeneity, it creates in Satis House a site where the attributes of an elegant lifestyle can be tensely juxtaposed against death, decay and madness. "The rich materials" — "satins, lace and silk" — in which Miss Havisham is dressed; the bridal flowers in her dress, the jewels that lie sparkling on her table suggest the resplendent celebrations of the rich and the cultured. But adds Pip, "everything that ought to have been white was white long ago, and had lost its lustre and was faded and yellow and the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, had no brightness but the brightness of her sunken eyes" (p.87).

In Dickens's novelisation of the fairytale then signs lose their stability: far from "fixing" reality in black and white terms, signifiers in the Satis House scenes carry within themselves the possibility of their own reversal (for example, as we just saw a signifier such as Miss Havisham's wedding dress suggests both celebration and decay). The effect of this is that it becomes impossible for Pip (and for the reader) to take the superiority of the gentlefolk for granted. Miss Havisham's bridal clothes are also like her "grave clothes" (p.90), and Miss Havisham's birthday, wedding day, and dying day all come together when, during the course of a grotesque birthday ritual, Miss Havisham imagines her corpse laid out where her wedding feast should have taken place:

"When the ruin is complete", she said with a ghastly look, "and when they lay me dead, in my bride's dress in my bride's table — which shall be done, and will be the finished curse upon him — so much the better if it is done on this day." (p.117).

In *Great Expectations* the fairytale mode breaks "the homeopathic rhythm" by which the system of secondary (connotative) meanings are brought together to constitute the "real". It renders as strange and alien what domestic realism would seek to represent as familiar and internally integrated. Retaining the subversive charge and the painful ambiguities inherent in its original form, the fairytale mode in *Great Expectations* enables us to see the world of the elite from a new plebian point of view, and it does so only because it breaks free from the hegemony of the ways in which those with access to power and education represent that world.

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#### 4.4 "DEFORMING" THE CONVENTIONAL FAIRYTALE

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What makes Dickens's relationship with the fairytale mode truly interesting is his access to both the "folk" form of the fairytale, as well as to the morally simpler, more formulaic plot pattern that it was acquiring through the nineteenth century. Unlike a novel like *Oliver Twist* which uses devices from the conventional fairytale to provide simplified moral solutions to the problems raised by other aspects of the novel, *Great Expectations* absorbs the conventional fairytale plot, not in order to replicate its simple oppositional paradigm but in order to "deform" it. The Russian Formalists (the group of critics who first developed the idea of "deformation") thought of deformation as variations that individual authors brought about in certain well-known plot patterns in order to achieve their distinctive effect. But I think that it was Bakhtin who gave the term its larger resonance when he argued that the most effective forms of deformation were "based on certain displacements and recombinations of semantic values [such that] a transfer of ideological values occurs." In *Great Expectations* the process of deformation — when we understand it in Bakhtin's extended sense — involves a head-on assault on the very structure of expectations formalised in the conventional fairytale plot.

One way in which we can respond to the complexity that underlies the relationship between the conventional fairytale plot and *Great Expectations* is by turning once again to the figure of Miss Havisham — this time to her function as the supposed fairy godmother in the fairytale-like plot of Pip's expectations. As the benign agent who supposedly ensures Pip's elevation to "good" society, Miss Havisham is obviously and genealogically connected to the innumerable fairy godmother/father figures who appear in Dickens's early novels. At the same time it is equally obvious that Miss Havisham, in all her weirdness, is not a simple reincarnation of Betsy Trotwood, for example.

This ambiguity lies at the heart of Dickens's conceptualisation of Miss Havisham, rendering her in Pip's eyes, as both fairy godmother and witch. When Pip visits Satis House for the first time after the great change in his fortunes, Miss Havisham's crutch — a symbol of her deformity — becomes at the same time a signifier of her benign magical powers, and Miss Havisham in her role as fairy godmother is juxtaposed against her rotting wedding cake in a configuration pregnant with the tension of its own contradictions:

"This is a gay figure, Pip", said she, making her crutch stick play around me, as if she the fairy godmother who had changed me, were bestowing the finishing gift — and so I left my fairy godmother, with both her hands on her crutch stick, standing in the midst of the dimly lighted room beside the rotting bridecake that was hidden in cobwebs. (pp.183-84).

The ambiguity with which Dickens represents the figure of Miss Havisham influences our anticipation of Pip's future. At one level Pip's assumption that Miss

Havisham is his fairy godmother prompts Pip (and us) to read his future with the "eyes of the genre" (that is, from the point of view of the conventional fairytale) that Miss Havisham apparently sets into motion. Assuming that Miss Havisham is his secret benefactor, Pip speculates:

She had adopted Estella and she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths ablazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin — in short do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance and marry the Princess. (p.253).



The Rose and the Lily.

Designed and etched by George Cruikshank

The important thing here is not Pip's mistake, but that it recreates the fairytale plots of Dickens's early novels arousing in us expectations of a "solution" that will, on the one hand, manage, resolve or repress the problematic nature of Pip's relationship with Miss Havisham; and, on the other, create in *Great Expectations* the simple bipolar world of *Oliver Twist* where an idealised realm inhabited by Miss Havisham and Estella can be split off structurally from the sordidness of the real world. It is this binary world view that serves as the shared ground, "the common knowledge" against which the story of Pip's actual career is made to "sound". In this sense the series of revelations that link Miss Havisham to the criminal Compeyson, and bind both Pip and Estella inextricably to the sordid almost sub-human figure of Magwitch, make the act of deforming the conventional fairytale plot simultaneous with the smashing of the basic moral boundary by which Pip (and indeed the larger gentlemanly society of which he is a part) preserves his/its sanctity.

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## 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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I do very much that hope this unit opened up for you some new ways of looking at popular forms such as the fairytales. Popular forms as you saw in this unit don't exist outside of history: they too are subject to change. In this Unit, we have seen how *Great Expectations* intersects with the fairytale at a point when it was being uprooted from the grim world of the European peasantry and becoming incorporated within the economy of children's literature. This meant that *Great Expectations* could absorb and at the same time transform both the grim, disconcerting atmosphere of the traditional folk tale, and the simple bipolar (good/bad) structure that it was beginning to acquire. As we have seen in this Unit, this is exactly what *Great Expectations* does. It appropriates the grim atmosphere of the traditional fairytale as well as its magical elements to make Pip's first exposure to gentility a strange and difficult experience. On the other hand, we have discussed how *Great Expectations* replicates the plot of the pleasanter, children's version of the fairytale only in order to "deform" it. Do you think that you can recapitulate how Dickens goes about doing this? If you can't, look up the relevant portion.

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## 4.6 GLOSSARY

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<b>Grimms</b>	Two brothers from Germany who were among the first to collect folk tales, leave out from these the harsh elements, and then print them as pleasant stories for children.
<b>Interpolate</b>	to put in
<b>Impressionistic</b>	based on impressions rather than on knowledge
<b>Coalescing</b>	growing together or writing so as to form one group or mass
<b>Balzac</b>	One of the greatest French novelists of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century.
<b>Semiotic</b>	the study of signs in general especially as they are related To language
<b>Signifier</b>	A sign (for example the word in a language).
<b>Signified</b>	The meaning that is conventionally attached to a sign.
<b>Semantic</b>	meaning in language.
<b>Conceptualize</b>	to form a general idea or understanding of something
<b>Bipolar</b>	having two poles.
<b>Preiterate</b>	People who have not yet had the chance to gain education.
<b>Catechisms</b>	moral lessons (usually lessons from the Bible).
<b>Reductiveness</b>	The inability to take into account the full significance of a situation.

<b>Juxtaposed</b>	set up against.
<b>Domestic realism</b>	A form of novel writing that offers closely observed accounts of what goes on inside families.
<b>Subvert</b>	undermine
<b>Genealogically</b>	related by genes

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Write a note on Herman Rebel's historical analysis of the fairytale.
- 2) Summarise in your own words Barthes's analysis of realism. Look up the relevant section if necessary.
- 3) Define "the reality effect", "deformation".
- 4) Write a full length answer on the importance of the fairytale mode in *Great Expectations*.