

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*. Remorse, Confession, Absolution and Penitence.

Júnia de Castro Magalhães Alves

It is very difficult to point out where, exactly, the complexity and greatness of a book lies. The portrayal of the characters, their psychological growth and reaction, the painting of the setting, the movement of the plot, the atmosphere, the tone and the thematic development are all important items, and each of them, separately, contributes to the concretization of the whole.

Great Expectations is a remarkable novel, and also very touching: it makes the reader think and suffer, and it helps him to comprehend the meaning of love and friendship, and the madness of passion. It praises simplicity and accuses snobbery, and causes the reader to understand that being is superior to having.

Although many different and important issues emerge from the reading of the book, it is my purpose to concentrate this work on its tone, which reflects the pains caused by remorse, the value of confession and the necessity of rebirth through absolution and penitence.

Pip, the very dear hero of *Great Expectations*, is as imperfect and sinful as some of the other characters that we despise. He is proud and disdainful: "It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home" (page 134, chapter 14 - Pip's attitude towards Joe and Biddy); "... I continued at heart to hate my trade and to be ashamed of home." (page 152, chapter 17). He is also ungrateful and snobbish "Let me confess exactly, with what feelings I looked forward to Joe's coming... As the time approached I should have liked to run away..." (pages 240-241, chapter 27). His attitude towards Provis, his benefactor, is as ungrateful as that towards Joe and Biddy: "The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast." (page 337, chapter 39). He is as much of an opportunist as some of Miss Havisham's greedy relatives, but we do sympathize with him, and want him to be happy and successful. And why?

The answer to this question is not simple and direct. How-

ever, it may be connected with the tone of the book. Pip has sinned like the others, but unlike them he has formally repented; and the story he tells emerges from his sense of being guilty, from the remorse he feels towards faithful Joe, and also towards his equally devoted friend Biddy: "I live in a state of chronic uneasiness respecting my behaviour to Joe. My conscience was not by any means comfortable about Biddy." (page 291, chapter 34). Our hero makes huge blunders, he suffers because of them, he is miserable, but has no strength to react against them. The novel is then not only Pip's story, but also his confession, and we, the readers, listen to him attentively, accept and understand his weaknesses and forgive him in the same way that Joe and Biddy have forgiven him. Pip's life is a series of lessons learned the hard way, and he, as well as the reader, comprehends, thanks to Joe Gargery, that simplicity may conceal the highest understanding and wisdom. Joe is his redeeming force, and Magwitch the reality that leads him to understand the deep meaning of gratitude and generosity. Pip grows mature through delusion, he learns to tell what is right from what is wrong; and once wiser than before, he dedicates himself to the task of his confession. His remorse and self-recrimination cause him to become a better person than he was at the beginning, and they keep the reader's sympathy towards him throughout the novel.

However, the tone of the book is not only a reflection of Pip's remorse, but of Miss Havisham's and Estella's as well. We are sorry for the old lady because she had been misled and mistreated by her half-brother, Arthur, and by Compeyson, but she cannot be totally forgiven, either by the writer (who kills her in the story) or by the reader. Pip, the victim of her cold revenge, is the only one who seems to be able to wholly sublimate his feelings, and to accept Miss Havisham's crime as determined by hard suffering. Miss Havisham attains Pip's forgiveness through remorse, repentance and confession: "... the spectral figure of Miss Havisham, her hand still covering her heart, seemed all resolved into a ghastly stare of pity and remorse" (page 378, chapter 45), and she tells him: "My name is on the first leaf. If you can ever write under my name, 'I forgive her' — though ever so long after my broken heart is dust — pray do it." (page 410, chapter 49). She is willing to offer Pip whatever he asks, as an act of penitence: "Can I only serve you, Pip, by serving your friend?" (page 409, chapter 49), but her burning body is like an enormous candle or a redeeming torch.

Dickens is less hard on Estella, and this is probably for

Pip's sake, who would suffer even more than Estella, herself, with whatever mischieves that might befall her. The proud and cold young lady is mistreated by her husband, and her suffering causes her to realize her faults, to repent and to confess: "There was a long hard time when I kept far from me, the remembrance of what, I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth." (page 492, chapter 59). 'But you said to me', returned Estella, very earnestly, 'God bless you, God forgive you!'" (page 492, chapter 59). Pip's love for Estella is so deep and strong that he forgave her long before her undergoing her suffering, repentance and confession, but only then, we, the readers, feel that Estella's absolution has really taken place.

Pip's penitence acquires different aspects, and is developed through three different stages. Firstly he suffers from burning, as he tries to save Miss Havisham from the fire: "My hands had been dressed twice or thrice in the night, and again in the morning. My left arm was a good deal burned to the elbow and, less severely, as high as the shoulder, it was very painful, but the flames had set in that direction..." (page 416, chapter 50). Secondly, Pip is almost killed by Orlick, who tells him when our hero asks him to let him go: "I'll let you go. I'll let you go to the moon, I'll let you go to the stars." (page 435, chapter 53). And finally, he falls so deeply ill, that he loses his reason, and is reborn, thanks to Joe's cares and forgiveness: "I opened my eyes in the night, and I saw in the great chair at the bedside, Joe... I sank back on my pillow ... and tenderly upon me was the face of Joe." (page 472, chapter 57). This is, of course, a symbolic rebirth, and Pip feels thankful for having been ill.

The tone of the novel is an extraordinary aid for Dickens to develop his serious theme, and to teach his moral lesson. It deepens the psychological portrayal of the character, influences the setting, increases the tension and reality of the plot, thickens and darkens the atmosphere, and gratifies the reader's sense of justice and religion, as he is once more told that "to err is human" and "to repent is divine".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Charles Dickens — Great Expectations. The Penguin English Library - edited by Anguish - Bungay, Suffolk - 1974