

From Magwitch to Miss Havisham: Narrative Interaction and Mythic Structure in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*

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Great Expectations was initially published, not in the novel form in which it is usually read today but as a serial story, two chapters at a time, starting in 1860 in *All the Year Round*, a weekly literary magazine founded and owned by Dickens himself. The result is a story that was crafted to create moments of suspense at the end of every other chapter, keeping the reader's interest and anticipation for the next installment. It was first published in book form in 1861 in three volumes. The result is a novel with a complex story and a dynamic structure, containing a mixture of genres (Allingham), which at the time formed a way-marker for the future of novel writing.

This complexity of story, structure, and genre emerges from the combination of Dickens's original story ideas and the action upon it of the serialization process. Dickens himself was aware of the problems that could arise from the tension between the desire to create a single piece of writing and the need to prolong it over an extended period. He discussed exactly these issues in two letters to his friend and biographer John Forster. In the first, dated September 1860, he discusses the conception of the idea that was to become *Great Expectations*:

... such a very fine, new, and grotesque idea has opened upon me. . . . You shall judge as soon as I get it printed. But it opens out before *me* that I can see the whole of a serial revolving upon it, in a most singular and comic manner. . . . (Page 91)

At least part of the story had come to him as a single piece and he was already anticipating the form which the later parts of the story might take. However, in his second letter to Forster, dated April 1861, it can be seen that the propagation of this idea had come up against the

realities of the publishing process, slowing and controlling Dickens's writing.

. . . it is a pity that the third portion cannot be read all at once, because its purpose would be much more apparent; and the pity is the greater because the general turn and tone of the working out and winding up, will be away from all such things as they conventionally go. But what must be, must be. As to the planning out from week to week, nobody can imagine what the difficulty is, without trying. . . . (Page 91)

By this point, just a few months before the publication of the final installment, the frustrations of the serialization process are obviously showing, and the larger ideas within the story are pushing against the boundaries imposed by the requirements of the form and, it must be considered, the expectations of the audience. However, the comment that the “working out and winding up” will be unconventional shows that Dickens was not letting the constraints of the form stifle his creativity. It could even be argued that the fact of the serial form allowed Dickens to create a conclusion that would surprise his readers without fear that they could spoil it for themselves by turning to the end of the book.

This ending, which Dickens designed to be “away from all such things as they conventionally go,” sees Pip and Estella meeting one last time with the revelation that she is remarried and happy, and, although Pip cannot in the end be with her, he is pleased with the change in her. This, it would seem, was so far from being the usual ending of such stories that, after protests—from his publisher and, in particular for Dickens, from fellow writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton—Dickens rewrote the ending to be more hopeful and to contain at least the prospect of the two of them having some kind of future together. Again Dickens wrote to Forster about this change: