

Spring 2014

The Name of the Game: Great Expectations in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Daniel '15, "The Name of the Game: Great Expectations in Dickens' *Great Expectations*" (2014). 2014 Spring Semester. Paper 4.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2014/4>

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Junior

The Name of the Game:

Great Expectations in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Charles Dickens' seminal classic *Great Expectations* has received widespread acclaim from many critics, including George Bernard Shaw and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Shaw, for instance, has lauded *Great Expectations* as Dickens' "most compactly perfect book" (qtd. in Trotter vii), while Swinburne has gone so far as to call it his "last great work ... the defects [of which] are as nearly imperceptible as spots on the sun or shadow on a sunlit sea" (qtd. in Trotter vii). Such praise sets the bar high for *Great Expectations*, inducing readers to expect of the novel great things, as it were. As it so happens, critics and the novel's characters are not the only ones who construct and perpetuate such extraordinary promises. Indeed, in *Great Expectations*, Dickens himself employs an array of tactics, most notably character names, to set up such expectations. Throughout the work, names are used to communicate subliminal messages to the reader regarding aspects of the story which may not be immediately obvious. Specifically, in the cases of Mr. Jaggers and Estella, Dickens uses names to describe characters' personalities, convey ulterior meanings, and color the plot with symbolism. Thus, names play an integral role in the story, ingeniously implanting ideas into the mind of the reader which serve to foreshadow the events to come.

In no character, perhaps, is the role of names in describing personality more pronounced than in Mr. Jaggers. Jaggers, like his name, is complex and multifaceted, though the extent to which this is true cannot be fully appreciated until the end of the novel. Nonetheless, first impressions are undeniably important and, although Pip's, and thus the reader's, first encounter with him is brief and unappreciated at the time, the second, and first official, meeting is

decidedly formative. During this interaction, Jaggers, who, curiously, goes unnamed throughout the majority of it, rakes Mr. Wopsle and his knowledge of legal proceedings over the coals after he biasedly recounts the story of murder trial that he read about in the newspaper. By introducing him first in a physical and social capacity without disclosing his name, Dickens succeeds in creating an atmosphere which the name, when introduced, then strengthens and perpetuates. By introducing Jaggers as “a strange gentleman ... [with] an expression of contempt of his face ... [who] bit the side of a great forefinger” (133), Dickens succeeds in casting him in a dark and somewhat violent light which, combined with his brutal treatment of Mr. Wopsle and further description as standing “with his head on one side and himself on one side, in a bullying and interrogative manner” (134), solidifies the reader’s impression that he is a force not to be reckoned with. Then, when he is finally identified as Mr. Jaggers, the imminent lawyer from London, the orthographical similarity to “jagged,” with its rough and sharp connotation, seems to match the hitherto suggested character traits. Consequently, the character and his keen, coarse, and unsociable demeanor are forever intertwined and inseparable in the mind of the reader and an expectation of similar behavior is established.

Yet this superficial generalization hardly does justice to the intricacy of Jaggers’ personality, and his name, again complementing his character in its complexity, offers another meaning to fill the void. Throughout the story, as more of Jaggers’ enigmatic character is slowly revealed, the reader becomes conscious of a previously unknown soft center beneath his hard outer shell. When Pip deduces that Jaggers’ housekeeper, Molly, is Estella’s mother, and that Jaggers facilitated Miss Havisham’s adoption of Estella after her mother was accused of murder, and then gave the mother a job after she was acquitted, both the reader and Pip receive a privileged view of the tell-tale heart which Jaggers usually keeps hidden from the rest of the

world. This hidden aspect of Jagers' character is embodied in an obscure reference which his name makes to "a coarse, dark sugar, especially that made of the sap of East Indian palm trees" ("Jaggery"), known as jaggery. Not only does this allusion bolster the gritty aspect of his temperament suggested earlier, as well as add a distinctly exotic and removed element to his character, but it also gives a symbolic note of sweetness to his disposition which helps to explain these acts of kindness. Furthermore, the multiple meanings of Jagers' name help to augment and heighten the ambiguity already present in his behavior, resulting in a thrillingly complex character whose name speaks volumes before he even says a word.

Jagers, though, is not the only figure in *Great Expectations* whose name conveys deeper meanings in his or her character; Estella is an exceptional example of one whose name is brimming with significance, not the least of which is symbolic in nature. The most obvious, and heretofore only, connotation of the name Estella comes from its Latin meaning, "star." In the context of the novel, Estella is, in a very real sense, the star of Pip's life, having become his sole romantic obsession since their initial meeting as children. This comparison is also particularly appropriate since it touches on the unattainable nature of Pip's desires for her, with the social disparity between them being mirrored by the physical vacuum of space. The extent of the symbolism, however, far surpasses any social or physical limitations, often venturing into purely symbolic and even supernatural realms. For instance, the presence of stars help to entwine the characters of Estella and Biddy, as they both play a romantic interests in Pip's mind. During his conversation with Biddy following his sister's death, in which hints of a potential romantic dimension to their relationship are made, stars seem to figure both observationally and judgmentally, not unlike Estella herself. Shortly before his departure for London, Biddy's inquiry as to whether Pip will return to visit Joe is said to have taken place as she "look[ed] at

[him] under the stars with a clear and honest eye” (Dickens 284). While this alone seems rather inconsequential, it is surely no coincidence that this very same conversation comes up again in conjunction with a none-too-subtle reference to stars. When Pip is captured and held hostage by Orlick, not only does this conversation, to which it had been speculated that Orlick was listening, resurface, but stars are used by Orlick to depict the freedom of which he has no intention of granting him. Orlick, who has snapped after years of feeling overshadowed by Pip and kidnapped him with the intention of murdering him, toys with his captive by saying, “I’ll let you go. I’ll let you go to the moon, I’ll let you go to the stars. All in good time” (424). Not only does this have the doubly effective result of invoking both the thought of Estella and her unattainability, but it also hearkens back to the same conversation in which Orlick claimed that Pip turned the object of desires, Biddy, against him. Accordingly, a tie, which Orlick infers to the reader, is made between Biddy and Estella through the use of stars as a surrogate for the latter, thus confusing Pip’s romantic thoughts even more and establishing Estella’s omnipresent nature.

Estella’s symbols, though, much like her character, reach much further than they at first appear. Upon careful examination of the text, it becomes apparent to the reader that stars, and thus Estella herself, pervade many key aspects of the plot. Most notably, during the climactic escape attempt on the river with none other than Estella’s father, the convict, stars light the escapees’ course. In a picturesque move on Dickens’ part, the scene is described thusly: “The night was as dark by this time as it would be until morning; and what light we had, seemed to come more from the river than the sky, as the oars in their dipping struck at a few reflected stars” (439). From this, it is evident that the stars function in both a practical and symbolic sense as the escapees guiding light in their quest for a freedom which, like Estella, proves to be unattainable.

This sense of impossibility may, symbolically, also shed a little bit of light on the perhaps otherwise ambiguously revised ending of *Great Expectations*. Shortly before Pip and Estella's chance final meeting at the remnants of Satis House, Pip observes that "a cold silvery mist had veiled the afternoon, and the moon was not yet up to scatter it. But, the stars were shining beyond the mist, and the moon was coming, and the evening was not dark" (482). Based on the expectations set forth by previous invocations of Estella's symbol, this foreshadowing of the impending convergence of their paths seems to imply that "the shadow of no parting" (484) will mark the end of their tempestuous relationship. Yet the use of the word "shadow" seems to differ from the appearance of stars, in which capacity they have offered light, not dark, demonstrating a noteworthy change in their appearance. Nonetheless, perhaps this ambiguity is appropriate, as it matches the expectation of conflict caused by Estella's presence during the rest of the novel.

Thus, it is remarkably clear that, throughout *Great Expectations*, Dickens uses the names of his characters to communicate meaning, both pertaining to themselves and the story as a whole. Names carry with them various allusions, references, and symbols, all of which help to characterize their owners, foreshadow events in the plot, and make connections among different aspects of the story. Therefore, names possess substantial significance and create great expectations to which characters attempt, with varying degrees of success, to live up. As a result, *Great Expectations* does, in a way, deal with its own critical expectations by placing them, through names, on the characters themselves. And that, in the end, is the name of the game.

Works Cited

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