



Activity - First Things First

Great Expectations is Dickens's thirteenth novel. It is also, critics have liked to think, one of his most personal tales, haunted by remembered geographies and early traumas. What characters inherit, and what they choose to forget, are matters of special, private importance in the novel. With this in mind, have a read of Pip's opening thoughts again, in the context of the following passage. In what other ways does the beginning of *Great Expectations* seem to advocate a personal point of view?

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister — Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,*" I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine — who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle — I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

"Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. "Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!"

It soon becomes clear that this story is going to be personal in a sense that has to do specifically with narrative conviction, with knowing things 'for certain'. *Great Expectations* is a



'*Bildungsroman*' – a coming-of-age story (literally, an 'education novel') – and like others of its kind, it commences with the question of individuation: who's who and what's what? Think of Herman Melville's opening imperative in *Moby-Dick* (1851) – 'Call me Ishmael' – or of a more recent example, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), whose hero appears to follow in Pip's footsteps: 'I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975'.

- What novels have you read which immediately seek to articulate a sense of individuality?
- In what ways do they measure up to the definition of *Bildungsroman* provided here?

<http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/bildung.html>

Like Melville's Ishmael and Hosseini's Amir, Dickens's Pip has a keen sense of vocation, and a vested interest in what the *Bildungsroman* can do. Dickens rarely opts for a first-person narrator, as he does here, but the exceptions to this rule are notable. *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Bleak House* (1853) both experiment with forms of first-person narration, though the protagonist of *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson, is quick to cast doubt on her own reliability ('I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages'). The mode of first-person narration had originated long before Dickens or Melville thought to try their hands at it, of course, but theirs is the work we tend to find mimicked or mocked in latter-day *Bildungsromane*. When the narrator of William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979) utters that familiar, seafaring line – 'Call me Stingo' – we just know there's going to be hell to pay; and the same might be said of Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Caulfield may have a good Dickensian name, but he is a teenager who wants nothing to do with 'all that David Copperfield kind of crap'.

- That Caulfield is bored by the idea of narrating his early life is unlikely to inspire much confidence in his readers – how well can we trust this unwilling storyteller? is he for real? – and yet the example set by Dickens's characters should not discourage us from asking the same questions of them.
- What privileges does a narrator like Pip enjoy? Can we believe everything he claims to remember?
- Have another read of the passage above. What kinds of information and turns of phrase should we suspect?