



## **Activity - Grave Reading**

The narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye* has an attitude problem – that much is clear – but the reason Holden Caulfield skims over his ‘lousy childhood’ is partly because he hopes to spare his family: ‘my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece’, he jokes, ‘if I told anything pretty personal about them’. First-person narration is a delicate business, both for those (like Caulfield) who have their families’ nerves to think of, and for those (like Dickens’s characters) who also begin their stories by paying their respects. Pip and Copperfield are considerate boys, and it is their care for honest storytelling, perhaps, which encourages them to divulge their morbid curiosities: a fascination with gravestones. What, we might wonder, can be learned from such monuments? Have a read of the following descriptions; the first is from *David Copperfield*, and the second, as we’ve already seen, from *Great Expectations*. Why do gravestones seem to matter? What stories do they tell?

I was born at Blunderstone, in Suffolk, or “thereby”, as they say in Scotland. I was a posthumous child. My father’s eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months, when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me, even now, in the reflection that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlor was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were — almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes — bolted and locked against it.

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.

These passages share a common ground, and one word, in particular, supports the connection: Copperfield and Pip characterise their graveyard encounters as ‘childish’ pursuits. To use that belittling word, perhaps, demonstrates that the boys have grown up and put their macabre antics behind them; who, after all, uses the word ‘childish’ apart from those who have forgotten what it is to be or think like a child? And yet the word also points to a formative discovery. The reason Copperfield’s ‘associations’ with his father’s gravestone now seem ‘childish’ to him is because he can see that his first thoughts about the stone were



motivated by a belief that it could feel: to leave it 'alone there in the dark' while he was sitting indoors by the fire was almost, to young Copperfield's mind, an act of cruelty. Only a child, he seems to say, would pity a 'white grave-stone'.

The same habit of thought surfaces in Pip's memory, though in his case the implications of an (over)active imagination are more profound. It's not that young Pip felt any compassion for the tombstones, but rather that he assumed (childishly) that the inscription on them bore a 'likeness' to his deceased parents: 'the shape of the letters on my father's [stone], gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair'. Pip has since discovered, of course, that the shapes of letters do *not* bear any relation to the thing they signify. This is a difficult idea, and an aspect of language we tend to take for granted. To illustrate the point, let's imagine a scenario. Imagine, for the sake of argument, you have never seen or tasted an apple; you have no information about apples; you have never heard one dropping from a tree or into a basket. Apples do not exist for you. Someone shows you the following letters on a page: 'a p p l e'. This is a word, you're told, and it stands for a particular object. The person speaks the word – 'apple' – so now you know what the letters sound like. On the basis of this verbal information (the appearance of the word on the page, the sound of the spoken word), can you imagine what the object is like? The answer, of course, has to be 'no'. There is nothing you can gather from the shape or sound of the letters ('apple') which would enable you to determine the facts as such – that the object in question is a spherical, crunchy thing, pleasant to eat, and which comes in red or green (or brown, perhaps, if you've dropped it). There is no *essential* connection between the word itself – 'apple' – and the juicy fruit to which the word refers. Indeed, you could say the relationship between a word and the thing it signifies is *arbitrary*: there's no discernible connection. Can you think of any exceptions to this rule? Is the relationship of a word to the thing it signifies always 'arbitrary'? To find out more about this tricky theory, check out the 'signs' section of the following link:

<http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>

Pip was 'unreasonable' to think that some dark, flowery letters on a gravestone would disclose the image of his parents. But we might wonder how 'childish' this sort of reading really is. The clue lies in Pip's name. Dickens's character begins his story by explaining his name as a type of shorthand: 'Pip' is just easier to say than 'Philip Pirrip'. As Peter Brooks has shown, however, the hero's nickname is also a species of wordplay. 'Pip' is a palindrome (literally, a 'running back again'), which means that it reads the same, backwards as forwards, just as 'mum', 'level' and 'kayak' do. '[W]hen you reach the end of the name "Pip," Brooks writes, 'you can return backward, and it is just the same: a repetitive text without variation or point of fixity, a return that leads to an unarrested shuttling back and forth'. Brooks reads 'Pip' as an indication of how the plot is going to develop, but the name also alerts us, perhaps, to the possibilities of reading in a 'childish' or more playful fashion. There's more to the word 'Pip' than meets the eye, inasmuch as it also functions as onomatopoeia. In much the same way that Pip once believed a gravestone's inscription would reveal something about his parents' identities, we can see, by the same token, that the look and sound of his name might have things to tell us about his character:



- Isn't it reasonable to assume that a 'Pip' would be small, harmless, easy to miss?
- What a 'Pip' will grow into is another matter, of course, and maybe that's why we feel encouraged to read on... Can you think of any other fictional character whose name imparts something about his or her personality?
- What expectations do we have of a man called Abel Magwitch?
- Is Pip's 'childish' experience of reading so very different from the experience we are likely to have if we look for puns and tricks of sound?