

# “MAKING MY MEANING UNDERSTOOD”: ANALYSING METAPHORS IN GREAT EXPECTATIONS

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## Abstract

The aim of this investigation is to identify and examine the metaphors found in several specific extracts of *Great Expectations*, in order to explore the significance of these tropes and thereby analyse the impact they have on the semantics of the novel as a whole. The investigation begins by focusing on the opening chapter, paying particular attention to the description of the landscape given by Pip, as well as his terrifying encounter with the escaped convict Abel Magwitch in the cemetery scene. Next, it will analyse the range of metaphors included in the ironic depiction of Wemmick's house at Walworth, as well as the later episode depicting his son's interactions with Miss Skiffins (Chapter 37). Lastly, it will explore the metaphorical rhetoric employed in the description of Miss Havisham (Chapter 8) and the fire at Satis House (Chapter 49), investigating the significance that this has for the narrative. These inferences will shed light on the tone of the extracts and corroborate the rhetorical and stylistic mastery of Dickens as a writer.

## Key words

Dickens; *Great Expectations*; metaphor; stylistics; tropes; rhetoric

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“our thoughts entangled in metaphors” (*Middlemarch*) (Eliot 2008: 79)

“By dint of straining that term out of myself several times and tapping the old gentleman on the chest to associate it with him, I at last succeeded in making my meaning understood”. (*Great Expectations*) (Dickens 2003: 293)

## Introduction

This paper examines the metaphors in six selected segments of *Great Expectations*<sup>1</sup> (1861), taken from four specific parts of the novel. It will begin with an analysis of the opening chapter, in which Pip visits the churchyard to see the graves of his parents and five brothers. Next, it will perform a detailed study of Pip's visit to Walworth, the house of Mr Wemmick (Chapter 18), in which he meets The Aged (Wemmick's father), his son, and a female friend, Miss Skiffins. Finally, it will analyse a section from the chapter introducing Miss Havisham (Chapter 8) and the fire at Satis House (Chapter 49).

In terms of the present status of this area of study, it should be acknowledged that the use of language in the works of Dickens has been explored in a general

manner (Brook, 1970: 117–165) with a focus on aspects such as idiolect, dialect and irony (Sucksmith 1970: 140–161). However, few studies have focused exclusively on the rhetorical and tropological aspects of *Great Expectations*. As a working hypothesis, we propose that the success achieved by Dickens with this novel is rooted in, and may be explained by, the exemplary treatment and use of stylistic techniques. Moreover, we propose that within the range of stylistic techniques employed, the use of metaphor plays a vital role.

Therefore, a first objective of this paper is to demonstrate that much of the success of *Great Expectations* is due to a masterful use of metaphors, and to the timely employment of rhetorical *elocutio* applied by the author for a particular semantic, rhetorical or stylistic purpose. The secondary objective of this article is to investigate this stylistic strategy with the purpose of proposing new working tools for an analysis of the text, articulating a necessary symbiosis between literature, linguistics and hermeneutics.

For the metaphor identification procedure (MIP), we will apply the method outlined by the Pragglejazz Group (2007: 3), who propose a three stage system: firstly, a detailed reading of the text in order to understand the general meaning of the metaphor; secondly, the determination of the lexical units of the text. The third stage is divided into three distinct phases: the meaning of each lexical unit must be ascertained within the given context in order to deduce what “comes before and after the lexical unit”; next, it must be determined if each lexical unit has “a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one given in the context”. It must then be determined if the lexical unit has “a more basic current-contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, [to] decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it”. The process concludes as follows: “If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical” (Pragglejazz Group, 2007: 3).

## 1. A brief summary of the narrative and a conceptualisation of metaphor

The study will begin with an outline – by no means exhaustive – of the main details of the storyline. The objective will be to illustrate certain elements of the text’s thematic dynamism. Next, it will present some notes on metaphor, with the aim of clarifying and conceptualising its significance.

*Great Expectations* is narrated by the protagonist, Pip; it begins with his childhood in the marshes of south-eastern England where he lives with his aunt and uncle. It is here that he has his terrifying and highly significant encounter with the escaped convict Abel Magwich, who forces Pip under horrific threats to bring him a blacksmith’s file from his uncle’s forge in order to remove his shackles. Later, Pip describes his visits to Satis House, where he meets and falls in love with the beautiful but disdainful Estella, the ward of Miss Havisham. This peculiar lady’s own bitter experience in love have induced her to encourage a heartless attitude in Estella, who treats Pip with utter contempt. Later, a fire at Satis House causes serious injuries to both Pip and Miss Havisham.

Pip receives an anonymous fortune and decides to leave the countryside for the city, in order to live as a gentleman. He arrives in London and ultimately discovers that Estella is the daughter of the convict Magwitch, who reappears suddenly. In London, he also encounters the clerk John Wemmick, whose house at Walworth he later visits, meeting his father and his friend Miss Skiffins.

Pip later discovers that the fortune he received was from Abel Magwitch – given in gratitude for the kindness Pip had showed him – and not from Miss Havisham, as he had assumed. Pip works as a clerk and a partner in a small business, becoming a sort of industrious gentleman. The end of the novel brings the protagonist back to Satis House, to his point of origin and the epicentre of the narrative action. He meets Estella again, whose own life has been difficult: separated from her abusive husband, she is later widowed.<sup>2</sup>

The plot is constructed on the foundations of a precise network of tropes, of which metaphors are a vital part, developing a narrative environment remarkable for its depth of tone and mood. Metaphors “provide a mapping across two concepts, one of which contains features that are mapped onto corresponding features of the other concept” (Adamson 2019: 54). The great classical philosopher Aristotle defined the concept of metaphor in chapters 21 and 22 of his *Poetics*, as “the application of an alien name by transference” (Aristotle 1902: 77). The elaboration of this figure of speech “implies an eye for resemblances” (Aristotle 1902: 87). Aristotle also approached the subject in Book 3 of *Rhetoric*, where he establishes that the metaphor “conveys knowledge speedily, in the most complete manner” (Aristotle 1823: 400). The etymology of this trope has its roots in the Greek language, deriving from the preposition *meta* (μετά, outside or beyond) and the verb *pherein* (φέρειν, to carry, transfer). In this way, metaphor signifies a transference of meaning. Through metaphor, a linguistic reality acquires a new meaning.

Hillis Miller (1958: 249) investigates what he terms the “concreteness and symbolic intensity” of the metaphors employed throughout *Great Expectations*, as well as of the images and similes that appear in the text. According to Pilar Hidalgo (1985: 40), *Great Expectations* is “the most well-constructed of Dickens’ novels”. Similarly, critics such as Grahame Smith (1996: 160) have confirmed that the novel “is near perfect formally”. Smith concludes that *Great Expectations* marks the beginning of a new paradigm in Dickens’s writing, going as far as to define it as a new form of literature. He explains that the work “left critics in the quandary of lacking the tools to analyse”. The work demands a “figural reading” (Brooks 1980: 517), since Charles Dickens applies metaphors in a conscious way. Consequently, the rhetorical and stylistic effect of the novel as a whole arguably has its roots in the employment of this narrative device.

## 2. The harsh challenges of life: “in that universal struggle”

The first metaphor to appear in the novel is the following adverbial of manner, “I give Pirrip as my father’s family name, on the authority of his tombstone” (3). Specifically, the metaphor is rooted in the noun “authority”<sup>3</sup>, which attributes the

power of influence or thought on the gravestone of his parents, from which Pip learned all he knew about his immediate family.

The second metaphor to appear is found in the following relative clause “-who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle-” (3). Here Dickens employs a general reflection on the hardships of human existence in order also to allude to the particular difficulties that the protagonist is destined to encounter in his life. Pip is an orphan and the emphasis on his evolution over the course of the novel places it within the category of a *bildungsroman*. This metaphor appears towards the end of the second paragraph, specifically in the lexical units “get a living” and “struggle”. It refers specifically to the protagonist’s five brothers, who all died very young. Pip, the narrator-protagonist, finds himself in the cemetery and makes the aforementioned allusion in reference to their five small gravestones<sup>4</sup>. The image conceptualises life as a battle, associating his family life from the outset with a semantics of suffering and toil. These hermeneutics also invite allusion to the work of Charles Darwin – a contemporary of Dickens –, particularly Chapter 3 of *On the Origin of Species*, which is entitled “Struggle for Existence” (Darwin 1859: 60–79).

The name of the protagonist, Pip, is a palindrome – as is his family name, Pirrip. We may therefore conclude with Eagleton that “Pip can make real progress only by journeying back to his point of origin” (2013: 162). Both his full name and the familiar abbreviation, which he claims to have given himself, have the same significance. The name ‘Pip’ matches the diminutive physical appearance of the boy; its ability to be read backwards is a graphic symbol his life journey which the narrative recounts. It is a sort of narrative analepsis, a re-discovery of the protagonist’s past and the search for his origins, beginning with a scene at the graveside of his parents and deceased siblings. Peter Brooks (2000: 37) has described “the problematic of reading which the novel thematizes from its opening page, we could say that Pip [is] continuously returning towards origins [...]”. In this sense, Vincent Newey (2016: 180) refers to “the core movement of the book”. Essentially, the “novel begins with a kind of ending (the graves of Pip’s parents in the churchyard) and ends with a new beginning, as a much chastened Pip and Estella step forth to start their lives afresh” (Eagleton 2013: 163).

The following metaphor stresses the sad fate of Pip’s unfortunate brothers. It describes how he derived his understanding of the manner in which they were born by his only clue – the appearance of the little tombstones. In so doing, it emphasises their brief lives in a darkly comic manner: “To five little stone lozenges [...] 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” (3). The metaphor is based on the predicate “born on their backs”.<sup>5</sup>

Pip, as narrator, confirms his perception of life as a harsh struggle against inevitable obstacles from the opening passages of the novel. Love and support from his immediate family is conspicuous only by its absence, as Pip is reduced to imagining the appearance and character of his parents by the “shape of the letters” (3) on their tombstones.<sup>6</sup> Other novels by Dickens present similar reflec-

tions on the harsh experiences of Victorian life that was a reality for many. *Hard Times*, for example, includes references to tough, monotonous work set amid the industrial, polluted backdrop of Coketown (Dickens 1994: 19). Another example is the insalubriousness of the city streets, as illustrated in Chapter 23 of *Middlemarch*, when Fred goes to the horse fair and describes the streets of Houndsley as “unsanitary” (Eliot 2008: 243), and later falls ill.

The novel depicts the universal drama of life’s struggle; it reflects Victorian society with all its complications through the personal experiences and concerns of the narrator-protagonist. This is the opening scene of *Great Expectations*. Therefore, the first key element to appear in the novel is essentially a search for origins, for belonging. This is the primary concern of the narrator-protagonist, and this is what is implied by his visit to this inhospitable place, this *locus eremus* where the opening action occurs. Pip himself mentions the idea of “the identity of things” (3) which first began to solidify and take shape for him on that oppressive afternoon.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the primary thematic thread is teleological, since we are first introduced to Pip as he begins an inquiry into causality – in the Aristotelian sense – into the cause for his own existence; his roots, his ancestry. This is what concerns Pip from the outset and throughout the narrative and by extension, what concerns Dickens as he orchestrates the content of the novel.

### **3. The protagonist comes face to face with a convict: “the small bundle of shivers”**

Two metaphors appear in allusion to the natural scenery at the beginning of the novel, as Pip describes the marsh<sup>8</sup> country<sup>9</sup> that surrounds him. The river and the sea are presented metaphorically as “the low leaden line beyond” and “the distant savage lair” respectively: “[was the marshes; and] that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the win was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip” (3–4). The adjective “savage”, which appears twice, and the noun phrases “low leaden line” and “bundle of shivers” – the latter neatly depicting Pip’s terrified and vulnerable state – contribute to the development of an atmosphere of fear and dread. The self-consciousness of the protagonist is also emphasised in this passage, his terror building until eventually he begins to cry, as denoted by the syntactic and stylistic evolution of the polysyndeton and highlighted by the phrase “bundle of shivers” (4). A stylistic technique that enhances the effect of these metaphors is the positioning of the attributes and polysyndeton, demonstrative of the character’s self-consciousness, terrified in equal measure by his imagination and his experiences in this scene. The events are presented as a recollection of past occurrences: the verbs are in the simple past. We may therefore deduce that the description of the natural scenery is deeply tied with the inner state of the narrator, its presentation modulated by his own perspective.

A rhetorical technique that is particularly evident in this fragment is meiosis, for example when the child perceives the marshes as nothing more than “a long black horizontal line”, while “the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and

dense black lines intermixed". Within this desolate, linear landscape, the only two shapes standing upright are the lighthouse and the gallows. Dickens applies this strategy here to reinforce the sense of terror and uncertainty that Pip is experiencing as he runs from the shackled man. Aware of nothing but his own fear, the immense elements surrounding him are diminished to mere lines. In this way, the child's sense of alarm becomes tangible through an emphasis of the dark, foreboding colours of black and red. The unity of Dickens' aesthetic and rhetorical approaches is apparent in many of these devices. As a result, that which is objectively immense (the marshland and the sky) pales to insignificance in Pip's subjective perception at this traumatic time. His attention (in addition to being focused on the escaped prisoner) is drawn to the beacon (a symbol of guidance, direction and light amidst the surrounding blackness) and the gallows, which brings to the foreground a semantics of death and tragedy with which the terrifying man has threatened him.

These metaphors are followed by an abrupt exclamation: "Hold your noise! cried a terrible voice, [...] Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!" (4). The words introduce the second character to appear in the novel: the convict Abel Magwitch, recently escaped from a prison ship. The prisoner has "a great iron in his leg" (4), and his general appearance terrifies Pip. Magwitch refers to Pip metaphorically as "devil" and threatens to kill him, employing a second metaphor. The metaphors lie in the verb "Hold" which is applied to the noun "noise", in the appellation "devil" and the verbal phrase "cut your throat". Magwitch appears like a giant to the young Pip. His threatening command, the first instance of direct speech in the novel, intensifies the protagonist's feelings of fear and terror. It appears as an abrupt intervention consisting of two commands, which serves to heighten the sense of shock and surprise. This grammatical device emphasises the size and fierce appearance of this hyperbolic character in comparison with the diminutive Pip.

The narrator offers a vivid description of the fearsome figure who confronts Pip "A man [...] who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin" (4). This depiction of the convict emphasises his animal-like qualities, particularly through the verb "growl". Pip's nervous state is reflected in the text by way of a polysyndeton, which presents a sequence of action verbs one after the other, culminating in the convict's physical assault on the protagonist. The animalisation of the convict is further established when he demands that Pip bring him "a file" and "wittles", adding: "Or I'll have your heart an' liver out" (5). This idea is reiterated twice on the following page, metaphorically referring to parts of Pip's body in a threatening declaration of the convict's violent nature.

As well as himself, Magwitch claims, there is another man concealed nearby who is even more fearsome than he is: "in comparison with which young man I am an Angel" (6). The metaphor contained in the noun "Angel" serves as a point of comparison, emphasising the wicked nature of the antagonist and contrasting implicitly with the youthful innocence of Pip. The convict continues to scare Pip, telling him that his friend would "creep his way to him and tear him open" (6) if Pip were in any way to deviate from his orders. The metaphor contained in

the verb “tear” further heightens the sense of terror and malevolence, intended to frighten the young boy by means of a macabre and powerfully violent image.

Further on, towards the end of the opening chapter, we read: “[...] he hugged his shuddering body in both his arms [...] I saw him go [...] as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in” (6–7). Impelled by his childish imagination, the narrator gives a metaphorical description of the convict’s departure, imagining him dodging the hands of the deceased that reach out from their graves to pull him in. The young boy, consumed with fear, reflects on the scene by means of a hyperbole. Pip views the fugitive as being so evil and persecuted that even the dead are hunting him.

At the end of the chapter, the narrator writes “The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then [...]; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed” (7). Here he describes the landscape, consisting of the marshes, the river and the sky, through a series of reductive metaphors that convey the broad scenery as nothing more than a mass of lines. Pip describes his speedy flight back to the house where he lives with his aunt and uncle, a blacksmith. The landscape is presented through the lens of his terrified state of mind, while its depiction as a series of lines is also suggestive of his rapid movement to a place of relative safety.

In this final section of the chapter, another metaphor accentuates the atmosphere of fear, while a glimmer of hope and positivity peers through the desolate, foreboding landscape: “On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered – like an unhooped cask upon a pole – an ugly thing when you were near it; the other, a gibbet with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate” (7). The two images that stand out amid the bleak landscape are the beacon and the gibbet. One is evocative of guidance, light and hope; the other is a threatening symbol of crime and punishment. The metaphor, which draws the two contrasting images together – the only two vertical objects on a landscape reduced to horizontal lines – heightens the sense of disorientation and terror which Pip is experiencing.

References to the convict and his desperate circumstances enhances the realism of the text, since it accurately reflects the judicial system at the time, whereby convicted criminals were exiled to the colonies on prison boats. The presentation of Magwitch reflects the aesthetics of realism (Shires, 2005: 65–66) or “the realist aesthetic of Victorian fiction” (Kucich 2005: 218). In the words of Henry James, “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life” (James 2003: 377). The above passage is also indicative of the psychological complexity that Dickens achieves in his writing throughout the novel. The author generates here an atmosphere of desolation, anxiety and panic. “Death, crime and human misery converge in this adroitly set-up symbolism”, as Terry Eagleton (2013: 159) confirms.

#### 4. A visit to Mr Wemmick in Walworth: “A pilgrimage to the Castle”

Chapter 37 (the eighteenth chapter of the second part) sees Pip return to Wemmick’s house in Walworth. He is greeted by Wemmick’s father - known as the Aged - while Wemmick returns shortly afterwards with his friend Miss Skiffins. Pip takes the opportunity to talk to Wemmick about his friend Herbert Pocket, and later the four enjoy tea and toast together at the fireside. The description of the house, located in Walworth, is articulated through five metaphorical signifiers at the beginning of the episode: “a pilgrimage”, “the Castle”, “the battlements”, “the Union Jack” and “the drawbridge” (292). Pip’s visit to the house is presented in hyperbolic tones as “a pilgrimage to the Castle” (292); similarly, the comparison of the house to a castle denotes a transposition of meaning with exaggerated undertones. This characterization is completed through the references to the flag and to the drawbridge: “I found the Union Jack flying and the drawbridge up” (292). Wemmick’s arrival once again brings the focus to the physical aspects of the building in a parodic manner. Pip alludes to “the moat” (294) from the hyperbolic perspective of Wemmick’s father: “we might have shaken hands across it with the greatest ease” (294). Wemmick solemnly salutes from the far side of the little ditch, which his father takes great delight in raising “the drawbridge” (294) for his son to cross over. These images are repeated shortly afterwards: “the flag had been struck” (296), “as if the moat were thirty feet wide by as many Deep”. The hyperbolic act of firing guns (“the gun has been fired” (296)) further emphasises the parodical nature of Wemmick’s house as a mock-fortress. This rhetoric is implemented with other lexical elements, for example “to see how the island looked” (295), wherein the house is alluded to through the metaphor “island”.

The description of Miss Skiffins, which begins with the complement “of a wooden appearance” and a reference to her outfit through the simile “like a boy’s kite” (294) adds two new metaphors to the discourse (“wooden” and “kite”) with the objective of light-heartedly but ironically characterizing Wemmick’s friend. The fact that her dress “made her figure very like a boy’s kite”, while her gown was “a little too decidedly orange” and her gloves “a little too intensely green” creates the literal image of a woman who is eager to appear elegant and fashionable, albeit - in the narrator’s opinion - with mixed results. The description of her clothes suggests the narrator finds her appearance slightly amusing. Besides, the fact that the subsequent sentence begins with the adversative conjunction (“But”) reveals the narrative perspective to be full of irony: “But she seemed to be a good sort of fellow [...]” (294).

Later, when Pip takes the opportunity to discuss his intention to help Herbert Pocket, he alludes to the guidance he had gained “in my first rawness and ignorance from his society” (295). Here, the noun “rawness” is the implicit image, synonymous with “ignorance” and inexperience. It points to the protagonist’s initial unfamiliarity with social customs and the accepted behaviour befitting a gentleman. Pip alludes metaphorically to his earlier ignorance as “rawness”, where he benefitted in his inexperience by “his society”. He later employs the noun “rays” as an analogy for the help he wishes to give his friend Herbert in return: “I wished my own good fortune to reflect some rays upon him [Herbert], and



therefore I sought advice from Wemmick's experience and knowledge of men and affairs". The conversation regarding Herbert ends with the metaphor "You hit the nail on the head" (296) which transfers the sense of "nail" and "head" (the two metaphors) to create an expression and an image of exactitude, perspicacity and correctness.

The first dialogue between the Aged and Pip reveals the extent of the old man's deafness, a fact that he himself verbalises twice in direct speech: "I am hard of hearing, sir" (293) where the adjective "hard" is the figure of speech employed to indicate his condition. Later, the elder Wemmick busily begins toasting bread at the fire: "[...] that excellent old gentleman was so intent upon it that he seemed to me in some danger of melting his eyes" (296). The narrator comically depicts the danger inherent in this activity through the employment of the metaphor "melting" applied to "his eyes". Pip goes on to describe how "The Aged prepared such a haystack of buttered toast, that I could scarcely see him over it [...]" (296). Through the trope "haystack", he indicates the huge quantity of toast that Wemmick's father has made. Rather than simply saying "plenty of toast" or "many pieces of toast", he employs a hyperbole, which reinforces the exaggerated nature of the episode in Wemmick's fortified home, wherein all elements take on a comically exaggerated appearance. The afternoon meal is completed by "a jorum of tea" (296) prepared by Miss Skiffins, the positive attributes of which are enhanced by the metaphor consisting of the verb "excited" in this context: "that the pig in the back premises became strongly excited, and repeatedly expressed his desire to participate in the entertainment" (296).

After the meal, the narrator describes the greasy appearance of the participants, adding, "the Aged especially, might have passed for some clean old chief of a savage tribe, just oiled" (297). Here the phrase "savage tribe" is another implicit image applied to the group consisting of Wemmick, his father and their two guests. The irony<sup>10</sup> is completed by the comparison of the old man and his family with an exotic group or community.

The meal is followed by the newspaper-reading scene which is initiated by John Wemmick, who says "Now Aged Parent, tip us the paper" (297) and gives instructions to Pip on how to react. In this atmosphere of mock reverence, Wemmick's father is asked to read the newspaper aloud, using the verb "tip", a metaphor with two possible interpretations (as giving something that is extra, or revealing valuable information); the Aged is the delighted focus of this well-intentioned parody. Wemmick reads the newspaper while his son, aware that this is one of his father's few remaining enjoyments ("for he isn't capable of many pleasures", 297), tells Pip that if they pay attention "he'll be as happy as a King" (297). He tells his father "We are all attention", emphasising the apparent interest of all present in his father's broadcast. In this case, in order to indicate the happiness of the elderly gentleman in his new role, Dickens employs the noun "King" metaphorically. As he reads, his son has to take care to ensure that the Aged does not catch himself or the newspaper alight on fire next to him. This is expressed in the narrative through the following analogy: "he required as much watching as a powder-mill" (297). The inference is that the old man (so engrossed in reading the news aloud) is unconscious of his proximity to the fireplace. The risk of setting himself alight

being so great, he required as much care and attention as if here were in danger of imminent explosion. Every time he or the newspaper comes close to the fireplace, his son patiently protects him, indicated through the metaphor and hyperbole contained in the phrase “many rescues” (297).

These extracts and fragments demonstrate the humour contained in the novel, providing the narrative mode of comedy to complement the tones of melodrama and romance. It confirms the outstanding stylistic *varietas* of which Dickens is capable, and which is so skilfully employed in the narrative of *Great Expectations*.

### 5. John Wemmick and Miss Skiffins: “I observed a slow and gradual elongation of Mr. Wemmick’s mouth”

The next part of the chapter describes Pip in a “shadowy corner” listening to Wemmick’s father read aloud. Wemmick and Miss Skiffins sit together, the narrator revealing “I observed a slow and gradual elongation of Mr. Wemmick’s mouth”. The metaphor “elongation” brings a heightened sense of irony to the scene. The sentence continues: “powerfully suggestive of his slowly and gradual stealing his arm round Miss Skiffins’s waist” (297). Dickens presents the young Mr Wemmick slowly attempting to embrace Miss Skiffins, while she calmly removes his arm, “as if it were an article of dress” (298). The comparison is drawn between Wemmick’s arm and a piece of clothing, given the disinterested manner with which she removes it. This metaphor also denotes the custom of the young man to pass his hand around the waist of Miss Skiffins, as indicated by the adverb “mechanically” (298), referred to Miss Skiffins and her removal of his arm from around her waist. Pip describes one aspect of the scene in particular with great emphasis and hyperbole: “Miss Skiffins’s composure while she did this was one of the most remarkable sights I have ever seen” (298). In keeping with the hyperbole-logic that permeates the episode in Wemmick’s fortress home in Walworth, the magnitude of the metaphor “sight” also conveys a sense of considerable amplification.

Wemmick is shown as an insistent young man, who attempts his embraces time and again, while the narrator reveals “[i]nstantly Miss Skiffins stopped it with the neatness of a placid boxer, took off that girdle or cestus as before, and laid it on the table” (298). The metaphor depicting her as a “boxer” not only heightens the sense of insistence in Wemmick’s advances, but also the consistent and resolute responses that Miss Skiffins brings to them each time. The metaphor of the “girdle or cestus” is significant. *Cestus* is a polysemic noun; it not only evokes the gloves that were worn by the boxers of ancient Rome, but also the belt traditionally worn by a bride on her wedding day: the term, derived from Latin, was used in this sense until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Rosenberg 1999: 225). In this way, the phrase implies sexual appetite while at the same time reflecting the self-restraint and virtue displayed by Miss Skiffins. The image also contains mythological significance, since Aphrodite was generally depicted as wearing a magic girdle, interpreted as a symbol of her capacity to incite desire in men (Rosenberg 1999: 225). The semantics of the “cestus” as a symbol of virtue continues in the following sentence,

wherein the table also takes on a metaphorical significance: “Taking the table to represent the path of virtue” (298), through his repeated attempts to embrace Miss Skiffins, “Wemmick’s arm was straying from the path of virtue [...]” (298).

Dickens paints a picture of an attractive woman, her virtue equal to her charms. Her friend John Wemmick, meanwhile, is portrayed satirically; both from the perspective of the narrator and that of Miss Skiffins. The images also complement the sense of parody in the scene as a whole, in which metaphors and hyperbole enhance the depiction of the Aged Wemmick and his son at their “castle” in Walworth.

The scene confirms the masterful skill Dickens shows in the use of language; the sense of comedy and hyperbole serve to construct “the exuberant parody” as G. L. Brook (1970: 44) described it in *The Language of Dickens*. The encounter is a source of great pleasure to the narrator-protagonist Pip, who reveals as much in saying that he had “passed a pleasant evening” (298). We might well interpret this as a signal from Dickens himself about the amusement and aesthetic pleasure to be derived from this chapter, not only for the main character, but also for the readership of the literary work. These examples reveal “Dickens’ humour”, as his friend and biographer John Forster (1928: 56) observed in his biography of the author.

## 6. Miss Havisham: “Broken”

Miss Havisham’s Satis House is presented through the synecdoche “that lady’s roof” (55) and qualified by way of the metaphor “dismal”, suggestive of its being depressing, dark and unwelcoming. This tone is reinforced when Pip, upon entering, observes “the passages were all dark, and that she had left a candle burning there [...], and still it was all dark, and only the candle lighted us” (56–57). The reiteration of the adjective “dark” and the noun “candle” emphasise the sombre atmosphere of Miss Havisham’s house.

The narrator goes on to describe the woman herself, her appearance and her clothing. A monochromatic colour scheme predominates, emphasised by the repetition of the adjective “white” (57), while the figurative language and description of fine materials “satins, and lace, and silks” reinforce the semantics of refinement and purity. Through an emphatic use of conjunctions in the form of a polysyndeton, the text develops a tangible sense of accumulation, which is at the same time chaotic. Her shoes, her veil, even her hair is white. The flowers in her hair, premodified by the adjective “bridal” (57), her jewellery, premodified by the adjective “bright”, and the other details of her outfit and environment reveal her to be in full bridal array. However, as the adversative turn contained in the conjunction “but” indicates, Miss Havisham is an old woman at this point in the narrative: “but her hair was white”. Stranger still, “She had not quite finished dressing” (57) and various adornments (“some lace for her bosom...her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a Prayer-Book”) were “all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass” (57). The verb “heaped” is a metaphor with hyperbolic tone; its effect is to magnify the parts of Miss Havisham’s bridal costume that have not

yet been put on, in order to stress the aged bride's state as being *in media res*. Never having completed the marriage ceremony, the immediate implication is that she was abandoned in some way by her prospective husband soon before the wedding. The language is literal, without much recourse to figurative or ornate semantics. As a result, the effect intended by the writer is achieved directly in the mind of the reader.

As he familiarises himself with this strange new environment, Pip begins to notice that there has evidently been a change in colour brought on by the passage of time, metaphorically symbolising a loss of purity and vigour: "But I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre and was faded and yellow" (57–58). Later, the metaphor of degeneration represented by fading of white to yellow<sup>11</sup> is reinforced as Pip "saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged" (60). The narrator-protagonist reasserts this aspect when he reflects on the pervasive decay and the faded colours, evident in both the external objects and the body itself of the old woman. It is a decay that seems both physical and psychological at the same time: "this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud" (60). Later, Pip refers to Miss Havisham through the metaphor "corpse-like" (60) and to the "frillings and trimmings" (note the alliteration phonemic parallelisms) of her costume as "earthy paper" (60). Pip emphasises the wraithlike appearance of Miss Havisham through the following metaphor: "I knew nothing then of the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, [...] she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust" (60). The image also serves to suggest a strong contrast between the two female characters in the house, between the youthfulness of Estella and the luminosity implied by her very name; and the fading pallor of Miss Havisham who – according to this series of metaphors – would immediately turn to dust if she were exposed to natural light.

The bride is later presented through the metaphors "withered" and "faded" and the simile "like the flowers", figurative language suggestive of the growth and decay of nature: "I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes" (58). The reiteration of "brightness" – used here to emphasise its almost complete lack – enhances the atmosphere of deterioration, further stressed by the application of the adjective "sunken" applied to Miss Havisham's eyes. The reference to the old woman's figure gives rise to another metaphor that emphasises her decrepitude: "had shrunk to skin and bone" (58). The use of the past perfect tense further stresses the sense of the passage of time. In the conversation that Miss Havisham begins soon after Pip arrives ("What do I touch?" "Your heart"), the imagery of suffering and loss is particularly evident, through the adjective: "Broken!" (58). The passage of time is indicated through the double image of the two clocks that have stopped at the same time: "saw that her watch had stopped at twenty minutes to nine, and that a clock in the room had stopped at twenty minutes to nine" (58). These two metaphors are later reinforced when

Pip reflects while playing cards with Estella: “It was then I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago” (60). In the final part of the novel, before the outbreak of fire at Satis House, Miss Havisham once again evokes the theme of frozen time: “you know what time the clocks keep here” (400).

The atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty – even of shock – is reflected in Pip’s inability to ‘play’ on command in such a strange setting, despite Miss Havisham commanding him to do so: repeatedly: “play, play, play!” (59): “But I felt myself so unequal to the performance that I gave it up, [...] No, ma’am, I am very sorry for you, and very sorry I can’t play just now” (59). It is significant that the name Havisham suggests “to have is a sham. The desire to possess is empty” (Eagleton, 2013: 162). Besides its literal meaning, this verbal dexterity has metaphorical significance suggestive of dominion and control; the strong influence that Miss Havisham has over Estella and Pip, as if they were toys intended only for her amusement.

When Miss Havisham orders Pip to call for Estella, he describes the young girl’s appearance in the corridor, to which he applies two metaphorical adjectives, “dark” and “mysterious” in the following context: “To stand in the dark in a mysterious passage of an unknown house” (59). Estella’s arrival also contains metaphorical elements based on the etymological derivation of her name (*stella* being Latin for star). She appears in the dark corridor holding a candle<sup>12</sup>, which is presented through the simile “like a star”: “But she answered at last, and her light came along the dark passage like a star” (59). Miss Havisham tells the children to play cards together; when Estella shows reluctance, the old lady encourages her by applying the metaphor of ‘breaking his heart’, a form of prolepsis that foreshadows the events of the narrative and the *denouement* of the text: “You can break his heart” (60).

Pip’s description of Miss Havisham and her house (given from the perspective of his adult self, recounting what he remembers having seen as a child) generates an atmosphere of mystery. It contrasts a semantics of darkness and degeneration with the youthful beauty of young Estella and the innocence of Pip himself. In this way, Dickens generates a new narrative mode of gothic symbolism and imagery in his writing. This creative approach, alongside the aspects analysed above, demonstrates the writer’s extraordinary creative ability. It reflects the third characteristic of fiction as theorised by Walter Bersant, that “should alone be sufficient to give it a place among the noblest forms of Art, is that, like Poetry, Painting, and Music” (Bersant 1884: 15), specifically “[t]his power is the very highest gift of the poet” (Bersant 1884: 16).

## 7. Satis House in flames: “The nooks of ruin”

At the beginning of Chapter 49 (the tenth chapter of the third part), the description of the area around Rochester cathedral foreshadows the central events of the chapter through a lexical field of sadness, silence and deterioration. The light of day is fading. There is a notable *contradictio in terminis* (oxymoron) in the

expression “the quiet echoing courts” (395). The narrator-protagonist alludes to the “nooks of ruin” (395) and applies a metaphor with regard to the silent walls, drawing a comparison between them and the tombs of monks (“the strong walls [...] were almost as silent as the old monks in their graves”). The bells ring out in melancholy tones: “The cathedral chimes had at once a sadder and a more remote sound to me”, while the sound of the organ takes on a funereal tone: “the swell of the old organ was borne to my ears like funeral music” (395) and the wintry trees are described, bereft of leaves: “in the bare high trees of the priory garden”. The rooks add to this sense of blackness and despair. Entering Satis House, Pip reflects on “the wrecked fortunes of that house” (395). He describes the aged Miss Havisham sitting in a “ragged chair” (395) and finds a seat for himself in “another of the ragged chairs” (395). The adjective “ragged” is repeated twice at this point, appearing again later towards the end of the chapter (400–401), once again premodifying the chair. Shortly afterwards, the narrator alludes to “the blighted room” (397) and “the desolate house” (398), employing adjectives that contain a considerable amount of metaphorical impact.

The first thing that Miss Havisham says to Pip is “Is it real?” (395). This demonstrates from the outset of the scene her extreme detachment from reality. This is heightened by the use of the pronoun “it” to refer to Pip; it suggests she may even be speaking to herself rather than to Pip directly, whom she suspects may be an illusion or hallucination of hers. Later, she tells Pip, “I am not all stone”, showing metaphorically (“stone”) her wish to convince him of her goodness, in spite of her cruel treatment of the protagonist and of Estella. Later, she begs his forgiveness, adding, “though ever so long after my broken heart is dust – pray do it!” (398) acknowledging the impact of her actions and pointing to her own death through the metaphor of her heart turning to dust. Miss Havisham even falls to her knees in front of Pip, an action that Pip imagined her repeating often “when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole” (398). Here a contrast is developed between then and now, between the image of her broken heart turning to dust and this earlier time recalled to Pip, by means of the adverbial temporal clause and the metaphor of the adjectives “fresh” and “whole”. It is at this moment that the old woman recognises and acknowledges her responsibility, exclaiming, “What have I done!” (398–400). The phrase is repeated eight times in the chapter, and implied *ad infinitum* through the expression “And so again, twenty, fifty times over” (399). Meanwhile, Pip summarises Miss Havisham’s life of “seclusion” (399), reiterating the metaphors “her punishment”, “her profound unfitness”, “the vanity of sorrow which had become a master mania”, “the vanity of penitence, the vanity of remorse, the vanity of unworthiness, and other monstrous vanities”(399). He then mentions all the suffering that the embittered old woman had caused in Estella. Miss Havisham herself admits, “I stole her heart away, and put ice in its place”, applying the metaphors of a stolen heart and of ice. Pip’s response extends the metaphor, adding “Better [...] to have left her a natural heart, even to be bruised or broken” (399), a phrase that gains particular emphasis by the alliteration of the plosive voiced phoneme.

After enquiring about Estella’s family, and how she first came to live at Satis House, Pip leaves Miss Havisham to take a final walk around the grounds and

garden. He notes in the fading light of evening the decrepitude of the entire scene, reflected in the text through a language of decay and ruin: “the dying light”, “the wilderness of casks”, “the rain of years had fallen since, rotting them in many places” (401), and “I made my way to the ruined garden”. Pip exclaims “So cold, so lonely, so dreary all!” observing the “mournfulness of the place and time” (401). After a repetition of his spectral vision of Miss Havisham hanging by her neck from a beam in the old brewery, Pip decides to return to see the old woman to make sure she “was as safe and well as I had left her”. The range of metaphors highlights the ruin and decay of Satis House, as well as the passage of time since the first part of the novel. Pip develops another set of metaphors that offer a premonition of Miss Havisham’s outcome. He describes feeling an “impression”, “under the beam shuddering from head to foot”, “a fancy”, “the great terror of this illusion”, “an indescribable awe” (401). Once again the metaphor of “the ragged chair” (401) appears. Then Pip describes the horrific scene of the fire: “I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high” (402). The metaphorical depiction of the old woman through the lexical unit “shrieking” and the description of the fire as “a whirl” heighten the sense of drama in the scene.

The references to the insects and the servants emphasise the hyperbolic effect, adding to the atmosphere of panic and disorder through the metaphors “disturbed” and “breathless”: “the disturbed beetles and spiders running away over the floor, and the servants coming in with breathless cries at the door” (402). The metaphor of Miss Havisham as a prisoner graphically depicts the situation while also recalling her own self-imposed confinement: “I still held her forcibly down with all my strength, like a prisoner who might escape” (402). Lastly, the scene reaches its climax with the metaphorical image of the ashes of Miss Havisham’s scorched dress falling all about them like rain: “until I saw the patches of tinder that had been her garments no longer alight but falling in a black shower around us” (402). Shortly afterwards, when the doctor arrives and tends to her burns, the narrator repeats “every vestige of her dress was burnt” (403) although with the mass of white bandages and cotton wool, “she still had something of her old ghastly bridal appearance” (403). These images generate an atmosphere of mystery and a darkly gothic scene, once again confirming Dickens’s skill as a writer. This analysis corroborates “[h]ow language is used to create mood and emotional climate” (Eagleton 2013: 166).

*Obiter dictum*, Miss Havisham’s fiery torture is “the novel’s revenge on her for her heartless designs on its hero”, as Terry Eagleton (2013: 162) proposes. The semantics of guilt and remorse are confirmed when Miss Havisham falls to her knees before Pip, in a powerful and eloquent image of repentance. These semantics surface once more in the final episode of the chapter when Miss Havisham’s desire for mercy is clearly articulated through the repetition of the imperative sentence that closes the chapter: “Take the pencil and write under my name, ‘I forgive her!’” (403). Dickens explores the consequences of past actions through the personality and behaviour of his characters; he even implies a cause-effect relation, the outcome being the logical result of past choices. Miss Havisham

herself tells Pip: “If you knew all my story, [...] you would have some compassion for me and a better understanding of me” (400). Just as Pip begins the narrative searching for his origins, attempting to understand his past so that it might inform his present situation, here Dickens proposes – *mutatis mutandis* – that each step in the sequence of events is a direct result of what occurred in the past. This *modus operandi* also creates a sense of realism, since the narrator establishes a discourse that is notable for its verisimilitude and vividness. The inference is that “the merit or art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth”, in the words of John Forster (1828: 727–728).

## 8. Conclusion

*Great Expectations* is a pivotal work in the history of world literature, by virtue of its content and of its rhetoric; by virtue of *what* it says, as much as of *how* it is said. These selected extracts demonstrate Dickens’ extraordinary achievement, *inter alia*, in his masterful treatment and use of metaphor. The study has demonstrated how metaphors develop a strong atmosphere of fear in the opening scene in the marshes, when the reader encounters the protagonist for the first time as he reflects on his origins in the cemetery. It has also investigated the tropes that construct a framework of irony, parody and humour at the mock-fortress of Mr Wemmick in Chapter 37. It has analysed the intentional symbolism of Miss Havisham and Satis House, identifying the metaphors that develop an atmosphere of darkness, coldness and decay. The significance of the dilapidated scenery of the gardens at Satis House is evaluated, as well as the climactic incident of the fire and the semantics of the old lady’s despair, remorse and repentance. Ultimately, we may conclude that each set of metaphors generates a determined narrative mode and is successfully employed to achieve a specific tone within the novel.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The novel was originally published between 1<sup>st</sup> December 1860 and 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1861. It was divided into 36 weekly instalments, published in the periodical *All the Year Round*.
- <sup>2</sup> Dickens in fact wrote an alternative ending to the novel, in which the two characters meet in London, specifically in Piccadilly.
- <sup>3</sup> For the interpretation of lexical units, we have consulted the *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, among others.
- <sup>4</sup> Dickens lived near St James’ Church, Cooling, whose churchyard contained the graves of thirteen children belonging a single family, laid out in two rows and separated by a larger stone. It is likely that this was the tragic inspiration for the opening scene of Dickens’ novel. The intricate level of detail that the narrator employs, depicting the appearance and positioning of the little graves, lends verisimilitude to the description.
- <sup>5</sup> This image also appears in Chapter 5 of *Oliver Twist*.
- <sup>6</sup> This device also appears in *David Copperfield*, when the protagonist arrives at Salem House and describes some of its features, beginning with the names engraved by the door.



- <sup>7</sup> The full sentence where this phrase appears is the following: “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” (3).
- <sup>8</sup> For an examination of some of the symbols employed in the novel, particularly the marshes and the fog, see the study by H. M. Daleski (1970: 237–269), especially the second section (244–247).
- <sup>9</sup> On the empirical level this corresponds to the Hoo Peninsula, between the Thames and the Medway estuaries in northern Kent.
- <sup>10</sup> Readers interested in gaining a deeper understanding of irony, its characteristics and effects in Dickens’ discursive world should consult the work of H. Sucksmith, specifically chapter 8, entitled “The Rhetoric of Irony” (Sucksmith 1970: 140–165).
- <sup>11</sup> In the final part of the novel, Pip describes how Miss Havisham takes from her pocket “a yellow set of ivory tablets, mounted in tarnished gold” (397), once again recalling the sense of decay and deterioration which is discussed here.
- <sup>12</sup> Towards the end of the chapter, two metaphors appear associated with light: “the frosty light” and “frosty light of the cheerful sky” (64). These once again confirm the supremacy of Dickens’ skill as a writer, artfully constructing the tone and the mood of each scene, employing metaphorical impressions of light, darkness and – here – cold.

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