CLASSICS BEYOND ANTIQUITY SERIES

Finding Classics in...



GREAT EXPECTATIONS



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (1860)

The Author and Classics

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), at least as far as we can tell from his work, was not a huge fan of the Classics. Classicists and the teaching of the Classics- particularly Latin- was disparaged and attacked in his novels. The link between Classics and Class issues seems to be one that was particularly pertinent for Dickens, as it occupied a status of being both aspirational and hostile. According to some traditions though, Dickens did win a prize for his Latin at school and later in life (1844) he undertook trips to Italy where he engaged with ancient sites such as the Colosseum and Pompeii. He was aware of the Classical Tradition even if he satirised it.



CLASSICAL THEMES AND IDEAS IN THE TEXT

Satis House

Miss Havisham's house is called Satis House. Satis is Latin for 'Enough', the root of the word 'satisfy' in English, the irony being that those who live in the house do not appear to be satisfied with their lives at all. In fact, much of the action in Satis house is used to highlight the deficiencies in the characters' lives- whether that be Miss Havisham's lack of love or Pip's lack of social standing.

Interestingly, when Estella introduces the name of the house, she says it "is Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew, or all three—or all one to me—for enough." She is neither educated or interested in these languages. To her they are all much the same despite her social class, which is typically associated with learning the Classics. Estella, being female, would not have been expected to have knowledge of Classical languages and her disregard of them only acts to highlight the fact that her position in society doesn't depend on this type of education. This also further embarrasses Pip who doesn't have the means of acquiring these social assets which would be key to his being seen as a gentleman.

Abuses of Latinate Words

One way that Dickens is famous for presenting character is through dialogue, and the abuse of Latinate words (those that come from Latin) is a key way that he marks the speech of characters who are pretentious and are trying to appear more cultured- only with the effect that they in fact highlight their lack of learning.

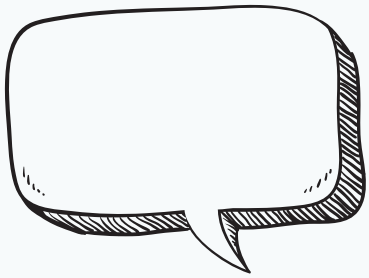
In Great Expectations, Pumblechook is a prime example of this. Many aspects of Pumblechook's speech act to characterise him as vulgar and affectatious such as his use of strange and confused syntax- an attempt to mirror poetic syntax often based on that of Latin and/or Greek in an attempt to sound more scholarly- and his incorrect use of Latinate words. Some examples of this include:

"with respections to [this boy]"



Here Pumbklechook is using an archaic form of a word that is a borrowing from post-classical Latin “Respection” meaning examination, judgement, or ‘looking back’. This word in English is labelled by the Oxford English Dictionary as obsolete, and would have been at the time of writing as the only examples of it in a similar context are from the 16th century!

The use of the plural also further highlights the his incorrect usage of the word. More common and appropriate ways of saying this would be “with respect” or “with regard”. These expressions are often mistakenly used in the plural in this context.



With regard- means in reference to

With regards- is used to send good wishes (hence the plural)

Not only is Pumblechook using an archaic and obsolete word, he is also using it incorrectly based on mistakes used with the more typical phrasing. The fact that there are at least two perfectly simple ways of saying this only acts to highlight how ridiculous his speech is.

He also refers to Pip's behaviour as "prodigygality"

This is a misspelling of 'prodigality' a word from the classical Latin (via French) 'prodigalitas' meaning extravagance. The references to Pip's childhood days also links this with the biblical parable of the 'prodigal son' who moves away spending lavishly only to return repentant later in life. The fact that this parable concerns a young man may help to explain the confusion that has occurred with the term 'prodigy'. 'Prodigy' refers to a child/young person who is particularly promising and which comes from a different Latin root- 'prodigium' an extraordinary thing or occurrence regarded as an omen, or monstrous person, a freak. This mish-mash of a word again highlights Pumblechook's lack of learning and his failed attempt at grand speech becomes comical.

Questions to consider *

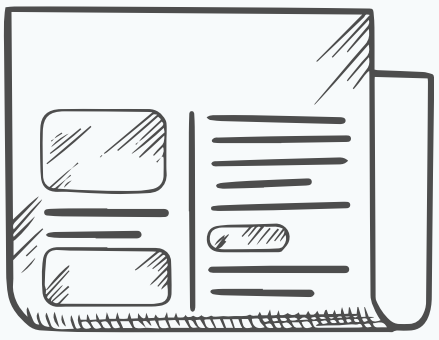
In what other ways does Dickens make Pumblechook seem uneducated?

When we are laughing at Pumblechook's mistakes, does that make us complicit in class bias? Why?

If used correctly why do Latinate words make characters seem more itelligent?

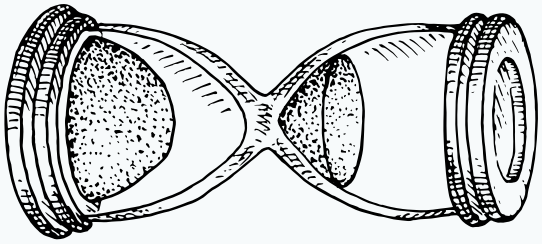
Telemachus and Penelope

In a newspaper article suggesting that Pumblechook is Pip's benefactor, Pip is referred to cryptically as Telemachus. Telemachus in Greek Mythology was the son of Odysseus a hero of the Trojan War. In the Odyssey of Homer, named after his father, Telemachus is coming of age in a world which has strict codes for what it means to be a man, particularly in elite circles. Without his father, who is away and presumed by many to be dead, Telemachus sets out to discover what happened to him and in the process to become a man himself. His coming-of-age narrative was prompted by the words of the goddess Athena disguised as the friend of his father, Mentor. We can see apt parallels with the situation of Pip who is coming of age in Victorian society and without a farther is attempting to define himself as a gentleman, and Pumblechook is keen to cast himself in the role of Mentor, the catalyst for his successful integration into society.



The reference in the newspaper article is deliberately light, referring to Pip's stage of life and introducing the word-play around the term Mentor (both the name of Athena-in-disguise and the term for a supporter/guide in English). It seems to have been put in as a way of the author showing off his classical learning.

However, the allusion can also lead us to interesting reflections on the themes of time and waiting in the novel. One of Pip's 'mother-figures' in the novel is Miss Havisham who, living in a large house, attempts to keep it exactly as it was when she was jilted by her fiancée many years ago. We can see this as a sinister, macabre echo of the life of Penelope, Telemachus' mother. Penelope famously waited for her Husband for 20 years, while he was away fighting at Troy and then during his much-delayed return journey, attempting to keep his kingdom Ithaca as it was when he left. She keeps Telemachus young for his age, remains unmarried to numerous suitors- who incidentally are parasitically eating her out of house and home much like the insects and mice in the home of Miss Havisham- and she spends her days weaving a shroud for her father-in-law which she then unpicks at night. Like Miss Havisham she is a character almost frozen in time, bound up in the themes of marriage and death. In Greek mythology and thought, however, Penelope was praised and revered as an example of the perfect wife. By taking these themes to the extreme Dickens is questioning this classical paradigm of womanhood, and presenting us with a gothic monster.





Questions to consider

In Victorian England do you think everyone reading the newspaper article would understand the reference to Telemachus? Why?

Do some more research on the character of Penelope. What characteristics did the Ancient Greeks particularly admire in her? Do you think these characteristics were admired in Victorian women too?

How similar/different are views about women in Ancient Greece and Victorian England?

Penelope was the Queen of Ithaca and ruled on her own in the absence of Odysseus for 20 years. How would the Victorians have been viewed in light of their own Queen Victoria?

Why would Dickens want to subvert the ideal of Penelope?

What does Dickens wish to say about women with the character of Miss Havisham?

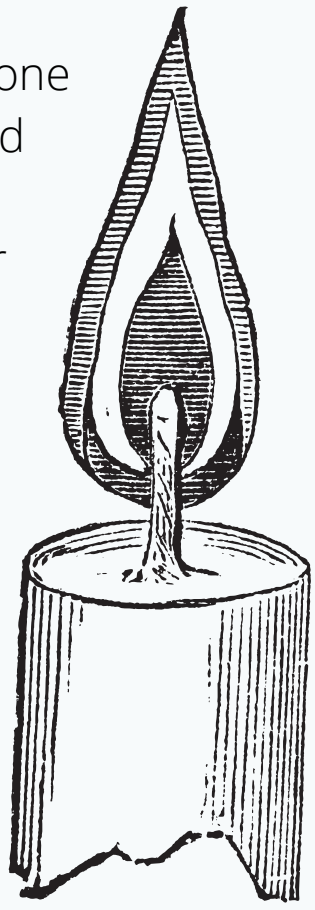
Plato’s Cave

Plato’s cave is an image that occurs quite frequently in the works of Dickens and is one of the few places that Classics is not either overtly mocked or deliberately subverted.

In Plato’s Republic he sets out the analogy of the cave to describe the nature of education, and how they come to true knowledge, which is represented by the sun. In the cave prisoners are seated and chained so that they cannot move their heads, they stare at the wall where images are projected. These images are shadows cast by puppets in the light of a fire behind the prisoners. The prisoners believe the images they see to be true and engage in discussions about the images. A prisoner is then freed from his chains. He sees the puppets and the fire. Then he is led out of the cave into ‘the real’ world. Blinded by the light of the sun, he cannot look at the trees, rocks and animals around him, but instead looks at the shadows and reflections (in water) cast by those objects. As he becomes acclimatized, he turns his gaze to those objects and finally, fully acclimatized, he looks to the source of illumination, the sun itself. He realises that what he had taken for knowledge was not knowledge at all but mere shadows, imitations, and reflections of knowledge, it was only by journeying out of the cave and gradually being exposed to increasingly ‘real’ knowledge, that he was ultimately able to engage with true knowledge, here represented by the sun.

Satis house is described throughout the novel as a dark cave-like place, and Pip's early interactions with it lead to realisations about himself.

"I followed the candle down, as I had followed the candle up, and she stood it in the place where we had found it. Until she opened the side entrance, I had fancied, without thinking about it, that it must necessarily be night-time. The rush of the daylight quite confounded me, and made me feel as if I had been in the candlelight of the strange room many hours...I took the opportunity of being alone in the courtyard to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. My opinion of those accessories was not favourable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages."



Pip's transition from the darkness to the light here leads to his first realisations about the "truth" of his social class, which will shape his actions throughout the rest of the novel.

In Chapter 38 of Great Expectations, we get an extended section that really resonates with Plato's Cave imagery.

Pip sees "the distinct shadow of the darkened and unhealthy house in which [Miss Havisham's] life was hidden from the sun." She is trapped like the prisoners of the cave living in a strange world filled with fake things and Pip is able to recognise this now that he has left the house and his childhood behind and returned to Satis House with fresh eyes.

The scene continues and Miss Havisham projects "an awful figure with its ghostly reflection thrown large by the fire upon the ceiling and wall," Not only does Miss Havisham represent the prisoners but she is also shown to be part of the deception of the cave. Her prisoners, Pip and Estella, have been shown images of the terrible awe-inspiring figure of Miss Havisham and were led to believe that she was more central and important to their lives than was necessarily the case, a fact they start to realise later on in the novel.

Estella also engages in an argument reminiscent of one in Plato’s Republic- Socrates' argument about the difficulty of transitioning from shadow to light- she says to Miss Havisham "If you had brought up your adopted daughter wholly in the dark confinement of these rooms, and had never let her know that there was such a thing as the daylight. . . , and then, for a purpose had wanted her to understand the daylight and know all about it, you would have been disappointed and angry" People cannot be expected to know the true nature of things unless they are shown their true forms, just as Estella argues she cannot be expected to be able to love Miss Havisham when she has not shown her true love.



Questions to consider

Fire is also a central theme of the novel, now you know the role of fire within the allegory of the Cave how does this effect your understanding of the following quotations about fire?

"I looked disconsolately at the fire. For the fugitive out on the marshes with the ironed leg, the mysterious young man, the file, the food, and the dreadful pledge I was under to commit a larceny on those sheltering premises, rose before me in the avenging coals."

"... show me Estella's face in the fire, with her pretty hair fluttering in the wind and her eyes scorning me,—often at such a time I would look towards those panels of black night in the wall which the wooden windows then were, and would fancy that I saw her just drawing her face away, and would believe that she had come at last"

What things did Pip learn in places related to the cave (Satis House and the Forge) that turned out to be false? Did any of them turn out to be true?

What do you consider is truth in the novel? Is the description of this accompanied by images of light?

Do you think the journey out of the cave is a good metaphor for learning?

FURTHER READING

* For all additional questions don't be afraid to Google and explore websites like Wikipedia if you want to find out more about what things were like in the ancient world as well as looking at our recommendations.

Homer's *Odyssey*

Plato's *Republic*, The Analogy of the Cave can be found at 514a–520a

For more about Latin (and Greek) word roots explore Maximum Classics
https://maximumclassics.com/ks2-3-word-roots/

More about Penelope:
https://www.britannica.com/topic/Penelope-Greek-mythology

A good starter article about Women in Ancient Greece
https://www.worldhistory.org/article/927/women-in-ancient-greece/

Plato's Cave Explained Clearly in its context of Metaphysics
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-metaphysics/