



From Aristotelian to Foucauldian Analysis: A Study of the Pattern of “Reversal” in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*

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Abstract. This paper intends to analyse reversal, which is an essential pattern, in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. It starts by treating reversal as a purely poetic device that dates from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Then, the meaning of reversal is deepened in its effect on displaying Dickens’ dealing with larger social issues, such as gender, power and imperialism. In this sense, *Great Expectations* is not only a work rooted in poetic tradition, but also a highly “modern” one that possesses significant social meaning in the Victorian period.

Keywords: Reversal, Recognition, Gender, Power, Imperialism.

1 Introduction

Great Expectations is one of Charles Dickens’ late novels, where “dramatic scenes about people’s lives in Kent and London are clearly illustrated in terms of economic and intellectual poverty, discrimination against children, and all other forms of violence that affect the psychology and life of the characters in the story”^[9] (Nur 15). Running through all these themes, there is an underlying pattern in the novel, which is the pattern of reversal, that almost happens in every major character. Among these characters, Pip, Magwitch and Mr. Joe are the three prominent ones whose story lines are worth exploring. In doing so, Dickens’ seemingly accidental twists of the plot obtain more reasonable and more significant social and cultural meanings.

2 An Aristotelian Analysis of Pip’s Expectations: The Poetics of Reversal

The pattern of “reversal” (“anagnorisis”) dates back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers around to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability and necessity”^[3] (Aristotle 11). In Aristotle’s original context, reversal occurs in drama. Charles Dickens, however, tends to inherit this poetic heritage and blend dramatic elements into the genre of the novel. In *Great Expectations*, Pip the protagonist’s journey is a distinct representation of this pattern.

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The very first reversal of Pip's expectations is definitely Mr. Jaggers' announcement of his upcoming fortune near the end of the first volume. In Chapter 18, Mr. Jaggers appears in a dramatic way, opposing Mr. Wopsle's narrow view of justice and standing up for the law of England. Very interestingly, Dickens describes him like this: "The strange gentleman, with an air of authority not to be disputed, and with a manner expressive of knowing something secret about every one of us that would effectually do for each individual if he chose to disclose it"^[2] (Dickens 136-137). Mr. Jaggers seems to stand at other people's boundary between knowing and not-knowing, ready to tip the balance. And when Pip sees him, Pip's first reaction is "The stranger did not recognize me, but I recognized him"^[2] (137). In Aristotle's *Poetics*, one element closely related to reversal is exactly "Recognition": a change from ignorance to knowledge^[3] (Aristotle 11), and Aristotle holds that reversal is most powerful when it occurs along with recognition^[3] (12). Linking Mr. Jaggers' knowing manner and Pip's "recognition" of this knowing man, one can see there is a subtle hint here about the upcoming dramatic scene: Pip's reversal of fortune.

Then in Chapter 19, almost abruptly, Pip transforms himself externally and internally. Besides the preparation of the suit, the hat, the boot and the hosiery, what is reversed is Pip's mindset and the way he speaks. The opening sentence displays this pattern of reversal: "Morning made a considerable difference in my general prospect of life, and brightened it so much that it scarcely seemed the same"^[2] (Dickens 148). Pip renounces his past with determination, and is afraid that something might interfere with his great expectations. With this urgency to open a new chapter in life, he develops an unpleasant tendency to speak in a condescending manner. Pip asks Bidley to help Joe "in his learning and his manners"^[2] (149), and regards Bidley's reluctance as "a bad side of human nature"^[2] (150), which is very proud. Another scene is when Pip thinks of the fugitive he met before, he couldn't help feeling ashamed. This not only shows Pip's changing attitude after the reversal of fortune, but more importantly, serves as a foreshadowing for the second reversal, which happens near the end of volume two.

Again, Magwitch's self-revelation is also full of dramatic elements, when the natural elements seem to possess the power of reversal: "So furious had been the gusts that high buildings in town had had the lead stripped off their roofs", and "Violent blasts of rain had accompanied these rages of wind"^[2] (314). It is under such destructive forces that Magwitch presents himself, which foretells the reversal he is going to bring to Pip. Before Magwitch reveals himself as the benefactor, Recognition happens for the second time as Pip says "I could not have known my convict more distinctly than I knew him now"^[2] (317). Then, similar to the way the Greek drama often unfolds, the reversal of the plot also happens in the dialogue between Pip and Magwitch. Truth looms ahead of Pip through Magwitch's continual interrogation, until at one point, everything comes to light: "All the truth of my position came flashing on me, and its disappointments, dangers, disgraces, consequences of all kinds rushed in such a multitude that I was borne down by them and had to struggle for every breath I drew"^[2] (320). The scene is quite similar to Oedipus' knowing his destiny in *Oedipus Rex*, which Aristotle illustrates as the best example of Reversal and Recognition. This is a point where limited human viewpoints and the human condition are mocked by something more universal and more omniscient. One is always blind to his or her circumstances; that is why

reversal happens, and when reversal happens, there are often tragic elements beneath.

Then at last, in Aristotle's *Poetics*, recognition and reversal involve pity and fear and thus produce *Catharsis*. A novel such as *Great Expectations* indeed contains dramatic elements and this is why Aristotle's *poetics* is applicable. When we read Pip's journey of great expectations, how it proves to be an illusion, and how it finally evolves into reconciliation, we truly produce sympathetic feelings towards Pip and also a fear of actually becoming him. In the end, the great power of cathartic release comes into being.

3 How Joe Becomes Joe? A Reversal of Family and Gender Pattern

When Pip is developed as a round character full of ups and downs in his life, the god-father-like character Joe seems to be more like a flat character (in E.M. Forster's terms): "Joe was a fair man... He was a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish, dear fellow - a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness"^[2] (5). Pinpointing Joe's actions and motives, however, one can actually perceive several significant elements of how Joe is made such a character, and in this process, the play of reversal also matters.

In Joe's family, there is already an existing pattern of reversal, when Mrs. Joe seems to be the patriarch and masculine figure, mastering and controlling everything while Mr. Joe is mild, good-natured, submissive, and full of femininity. In Chapter 7, when Joe is asked about the reason why he didn't go to school, he explains as follows: "My father, Pip, he were given to drink, and when he were overtook with drink, he hammered away at my mother most onmerciful"^[2] (45). Joe's father often beats his mother hard so that "she was in poor health, and quite broke. She weren't long of following, poor soul, and her sense of peace came round at last"^[2] (46). This serves as the explanation of how Mr. Joe turns out to be the key figure in reversing the family pattern. When Mr. Joe's mother suffers from the patriarchal oppression, he chooses not to follow the same disastrous road and becomes the one to overturn the power system in the family, which is of great ingenuity for Dickens to depict so. In this way, Mr. Joe's reversal of roles in the family has a larger social meaning. Dickens is especially good at using family relationships to explore the social, political, and economic changes of his age.

However, when scrutinizing the novel, we can find that the tone towards gender and domestic issues is still mocking and even skeptical. Looking at Mrs. Joe's ending, one is able to understand that ultimately, Dickens gets things reversed again. Employee of Mrs. Joe as Orlick is, he acts in a condescending manner towards her. Later on, Mrs. Joe's physical paralysis caused by Orlick has a symbolic meaning: she is deprived of all those capabilities for self-expression, even if that expression is highly masculine. Finally, Mrs. Joe loses her memory and the ability to speak and is even dead because of Orlick, when the reversal occurs again. But this time, this reversal is full of ironic implications, and Dickens' strong social critique grows out of it.

4 Fortune or Misfortune? Magwitch's Struggle for Power Reversal

In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch is a character that deserves to be explored from his own perspective, rather than the perspective of Pip. Magwitch represents an underclass of Victorian society, an orphan who lives as a beggar, a thief, and a variety of day laborers in an age of “deprivation, dehumanization and criminality”^[1] (Alzouabi 163). Again, Magwitch is another figure who loses his right to speak and therefore falls into the context of power discourse. This time, it is social class that lies at the center of the power conflict.

Power is the focus of Michael Foucault's research. Foucault discovers a potential web of ideological control with “power” at its core, which is cognitively involved in the micromechanics of knowledge, power, and discourse activity. In Foucault's view, the reason why power is accepted is because it “traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse”^[5] (Foucault 119, 1980). Moreover, power should be applied in the network of relations, which means that power can be exercised in a certain hierarchy. However, the hierarchy is not fixed because power is “an eternal mode of combat, not a contract to regulate transactions or a comparison of territorial conquest”^[4] (Foucault 26, 1979).

Foucault's theory actually provides a solid base for explaining Magwitch's motives as well as the possibility of becoming the one that possesses the ability of reversal. At the very beginning of the novel, Magwitch is presented as the convict with “a great iron”^[2] (2), which is a highly Foucauldian symbol of “discipline and punishment”. And later on, the “condemnation” of Magwitch's “docile body” (in Foucault's phrase) is further enhanced as he is exiled to Australia, which corresponds to Foucault's idea that “in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations”^[4] (Foucault 136). Magwitch's punishment becomes more sympathy-inducing when readers are told that he is actually the victim of a more powerful person Compeyson. However, it is also in Australia that Magwitch reverses his destiny. Being a sheep-farmer, stock-breeder and doing other trades, he says “I've done wonderful well. There's others went out alonger me as has done well, too, but no man has done nigh as well as me. I'm famous for it”^[2] (Dickens 319). Notably, Magwitch transfers his fortune to the protagonist Pip and makes Pip the spokesman for himself, for his fortune and his desire for power that he has been lost in all his life.

Such a great ironic writer Dickens is, however, that he never lets things run smoothly as readers thought they would be. Magwitch's second reversal occurs when he comes back to England. The situation is very similar to Dickens' dealing with gender issues: Magwitch also faces a “re-trial” and what awaits him is final death. Magwitch is able to succeed and reverse his fortune in Australia, a place outside of Britain. Nevertheless, he could hardly return in the real sense. If he returns, his former attempt will be overturned again, like what actually happens in *Great Expectations*. “Although Australia is a colony, it runs well in imitating the British primitive capital accumulation process and pursuing profits, but Britain still remains politically and culturally dominant”^[10] (Gan 774). As a result, Magwitch's contribution to the pattern of reversal serves as Dickens'

capacity to pinpoint fundamental social issues from the perspective of class and colonialism. What's more interesting in the end is that it is Mr. Joe, a man in the center of British culture (even if he is underprivileged in the gender sense), that pays off Pip's debt. It's hard not to regard it as another turn of reversal. We see at first Magwitch brings fortune to Pip, but at last fortune is lost while Magwitch surprisingly transforms himself to goodness and is even redeemed, achieving "a way of salvation, a metaphorical one, to save his guilt-stricken soul"^[11] (Zannat 112). On the contrary, Mr. Joe at first fails in turning Pip back to the original tradition-based track, but ultimately, he truly gives Pip the life-saving money, and here, Pip's great expectations come to an end. From these twists and turns, "it goes almost without saying that *Great Expectations* is concerned with capitalism and the dynamics of wealth and class"^[7] (Grass 618).

This "circulation of social and economic capital" other than "the processes of production of wealth"^[8] (Knežević 71) becomes another distinctive feature of the pattern of "Reversal" in *Great Expectations*. And significantly, when Foucault describes this reversal of power, he puts emphasis on the fluidity of power between two sides so that "one can look at the subject's 'present history' in a different light, and ultimately 'no longer what we were, no longer what we did, and no longer what we thought'^[6] (Foucault 45-47). By putting circulation and fluidity into the "Reversal" pattern, Dickens shows his superb craftsmanship in social criticism: an engagement in an extremely skilled way.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of the pattern of "reversal" in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* from Aristotle's *Poetics* to Michael Foucault's power theory reflects the fact that Dickens is a writer who stays on the track of Western tradition, whose works possess both classicality and modernity. While the application of Aristotelian poetic ideas reveals the aesthetic value of *Great Expectations*, the correspondence to Foucauldian thoughts displays a highly advanced social consciousness. Dickens operates all this implicitly, yet in a way that none of his companions can ever surpass.

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