

The Unfulfilled Self:  
Pip's Realization of Self-Identification in  
*Great Expectations*

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Introduction

I will examine, in this paper, Pip's life, focusing on his sense of self in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61). I especially use concepts contained in R.D. Laing's two books, *The Divided Self* (1960) and *Self and Others* (1961). Laing discusses how the self has binary elements of inside and outside, authentic and false, or embodied and unembodied. He explains that the authentic self should be inside, authentic, and embodied. He writes '[T]he I's [...] are hypothetical selves to some of which some of us may subscribe. I think of me being inside my body and at the same time the inside of my body being somehow 'inside' my private space'.<sup>(1)</sup> Laing's theory of this dichotomy about self can be applied to Pip's life. Pip's self lies within him when he stays in the village, but he loses it when he inherits huge property and lives in London. This story describes Pip's journey to realize his self.

The transitions in Pip's life can be explained based on Laing's psychoanalysis. First, I investigate how Pip's life is turned inside out. As his self which lies in him is taken out, he feels emptiness. This story starts with an accident in a graveyard, and ends in the graveyard in his village. Pip, whose parents are dead, wants to find his self. He asks his parents' tombstone who he is. However, he fails to understand who he is because of Magwitch's intervention. Pip becomes an unembodied person. Pip loses his self.

Second, I focus on a false identity which leads Pip into the wrong place. Pip gains a false self and lives in a false world after he inherits huge property. Pip begins to create a false self because of Estella's scorn. This is not what he wanted. So, Pip is led astray in his life. He has forgotten to find his authentic self.

Finally, I want to explain how Pip discovers his authentic self, which he has wanted to obtain. Magwitch's return from Australia leads Pip to the real world. His return

makes Pip right side up. The convict, who has obstructed Pip's aim at the graveyard, helps Pip to regain his self. Pip's marriage with Estella in the last chapter proves his recovery of self.

### 1. The Lost Self

From the opening scene in *Great Expectations*, Pip wants to realize his identity and self. Pip stands alone in the graveyard. His 'first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from [the] tombstones'<sup>(4)</sup> of his parents and younger brothers. This is because he has to realize who he is. As he has never seen his parents, he cannot imagine his figure from the view of parents. R.D. Laing states that one 'has a body which has an inside and an outside; that he has begun at his birth and ends biologically speaking at his death; that he occupies a position in space; that he occupies a position in time [...]'.<sup>(5)</sup> But Pip's story starts with describing the deaths of his parents and brothers. The beginning of this story shows that Pip is confused by missing his 'body which has an inside and an outside'.<sup>(6)</sup> Pip visits the tombstone to feel his self in him.

Feeling the pain, Pip feels both his body and self. Pip's sister hurts him with 'Tickler', a violent device. It 'was a waxed-ended piece of cane, worn smooth by collision with my tickled frame' (7). Pip 'twist[s] the only button on [his] waistcoat round and round, and looked in great depression' (7), when he thinks of 'Tickler'. This scene suggests that Pip should have noticed his self because pain is one of the elements to realize identity.

Suddenly, Pip's meditation for realizing his self is interrupted by Magwitch. Pip loses the opportunity to search for his self identity. Pip states, '[Magwitch] turned me upside down and emptied my pockets' (2) to take out food. As a result, this compels Pip to feel emptiness. His identity inside his body fades out. Pip says, in order to meet Havisham, 'my head was put under taps of water-butts, and I was soaped, and rasped, until I really was quite beside myself' and 'I was put into clean linen of the stiffest [...] and was trussed up in my tightest and fearfullest suit' (48). And Pip has to meet Havisham, whose heart is 'broken' (53). These scenes represent that Pip's body and self are separated. Pip fails to fulfil his first aim and his inside is also pulled out from his

body.

This situation reveals Pip's unembodied self. Laing points out that '[t]he embodied person has a sense of being flesh and blood and bones, of being biologically alive and real: he knows himself to be substantial'. Magwitch threatens Pip, saying that if Pip betrays him, 'your heart and your liver shall be tore out, roasted and ate' (3). By being turned upside down, Pip's inside spills out like his pocket and his body also becomes empty. His body does not absorb anything. Laing continues that '[s]uch a divorce of self from body deprives the unembodied self from direct participation in any aspect of the life of the world [...] The unembodied self [...] engages in nothing directly'.<sup>(6)</sup> Following Laing's idea, this scene implies that Pip's future is to deteriorate to a worse and false place.

Pip cannot compensate for his unembodied self in a false world. Instead, he wants to make up for it by being a gentleman. Laing says, '[t]he loss of one's own perceptions and evaluations, which comes with occupying a false position (doubly false in that one does not see that it is false), is only 'realized' retrospectively'.<sup>(7)</sup> Pip, who does not come to appreciate his place, continues to progress in the wrong direction.

### 2. Misdirection

Pip has a strong desire to be a gentleman after he meets Havisham. At the same time, Pip meets Estella, Havisham's adopted daughter. Though Pip comes to love her, she makes fun of Pip as a 'common labouring-boy!' (55). Or, while playing cards, she says looking his hands, 'what coarse hands he has' (55). Kathleen Sell writes that, Pip 'comes to define "gentleman" as someone who would be worthy of Estella's attentions, in other words someone with a genteel veneer both in manners and body, and as someone with expectations'.<sup>(8)</sup> Estella's words make Pip change his mind. Pip misunderstands that he must be a gentleman to fill his emptiness. J. Hillis Miller states about the situation which misleads Pip that Pip 'denies that he is an orphan, "brought up by hand," destined to be apprenticed to Joe and spend the rest of his life as a country blacksmith'.<sup>(9)</sup> Instead of discovering his identity, he wants to upgrade his place in life.

Pip is led into the wrong place. Pip encounters an upper-class boy, Herbert. Pip

fights Herbert and beats him. This fight symbolizes Pip's elevation to 'the class of the exploiters'.<sup>(10)</sup> By beating Herbert, Pip feels a bit of satisfaction. This wrong satisfaction leads Pip to the false world. Though Pip's life stage is updated, Pip's life still remains empty. Miller says Pip's 'essence is defined entirely by negations (he lacks the education, language, manners, and fine clothes of a gentleman [...])'.<sup>(11)</sup> In fact, Pip is bothered by Joe's illiteracy. Joe cannot read Pip's letter to him. Pip evaluates 'Joe's education, like Steam, was yet in its infancy' (41). After pointing out Joe's illiteracy, Pip also reveals his lack of etiquette knowledge. Herbert points out Pip's ill-mannered use of a knife, a fork, a glass and napkin at their first dinner in London. Though Pip's status seems to be developed, his essence has not changed until his lost self is fulfilled.

Pip manages to escape feeling shame by being gentleman. He has been afraid of being ashamed. When Pip takes Joe to Havisham, Pip feels ashamed of Joe's illiteracy and Sunday clothes because Joe, a blacksmith, wears those clothes uneasily. Pip thinks of "gentleman" as the way to avoid being ashamed and being made fun of by others, especially by Estella. As Laing states, 'the false self rises in compliance with the intentions or expectations of the other, or with what are imagined to be the other's intentions or expectations'.<sup>(12)</sup> However, his behaviour does not mean that he can find his self. This is just compensatory behaviour that fulfils his false desire. As Pip misunderstands his purpose, his action invites false results and assumes a false identity by becoming a gentleman.

Miller states that Pip 'is not what he is, and he is what he is not' at this point.<sup>(13)</sup> As Miller points out, Pip has no self and identity in him. His first purpose has been lost and his emptiness gets stronger. Pip manages to fulfil his emptiness by escaping from his village. David Hennessee remarks that 'the inescapable emphasis on social distinction in the gentlemanly ideal means that he maintain a certain distance, literal and emotional, from his former acquaintances'.<sup>(14)</sup> However, Pip's first aim to get his authentic self is never achieved. Laing explains what one should be as follows;

To be 'authentic is to be true to oneself, to be what one is to be 'genuine'. To be 'inauthentic' is to not be oneself, to be false to oneself; to be not as one appears to be, to be counterfeit. We tend to link the categories of truth and reality by saying

that a genuine act is real, but that a person who habitually uses action as masquerade is not real'.<sup>(15)</sup>

In the case of Pip, he covers and conceals his lost self by wearing new and expensive clothes. Pip has lost his self after his progress. Therefore Pip feels shame, misuses tableware and fails to win Estella. His wrong behaviour continues until Magwitch returns.

### 3. Self Identification

Pip has not discovered his authentic self in this false situation because he has never progressed. Laing remarks that '[t]he person in a false position may not be aware of being "in" such a position. Only to the extent that he is not completely "in" this position, that he is not totally estranged from his "own" experience and actions, can he experience his position as false. Perhaps without his realizing it his "life" comes to a stop'.<sup>(16)</sup> Following Laing's analysis, after Pip acquires huge property, Pip does not make any progress.

However, Pip's false life ends with Magwitch's return. Pip finds that he has been controlled and emptied by the convict. Miller remarks that '[t]his discovery is really a discovery of the self-deception of his great expectations'.<sup>(17)</sup> The convict's return makes Pip realize that his false position betrays him. Having his world turned upside down by Magwitch's return, Pip regains his identity. Pip, who loses his self, retrieves his identity when he gets burned. His clothes, which symbolize his gentlemanliness and false identity, burn at the Havisham's. The fire occurs in Havisham's room and Pip takes 'a double-caped great-coat' and 'another thick coat' off and covers Havisham with them on the floor. Joanne Finkelstein explains that '[t]he wearing of exclusive garments and insignia such as furs, silks [...] and so on has, in the past, been an advertisement for an individual's status'.<sup>(18)</sup> The representation of his false status in the false world vanishes. His false life also ends and Pip notices what he really obtains.

Just as Pip's life is turned upside down, the boat which Magwitch and Pip use to escape from England overturns. This accident breaks up Pip's false self. Pip is restored.

After the accident, Magwitch is injured and dies. Pip also becomes sick. While Pip is in bed in a faint, Joe comes to London and takes care of Pip. Pip regains consciousness and says Joe that he 'feel[s] thankful that [he] ha[s] been ill' (446). This situation makes sure that Pip understands that he has lived in failure until then. The accident and his fever urge Pip to realize that his first purpose is to find his authentic self. As his life is turned right side up, he does not fail to fill his emptiness. Pip regains his body and self.

Pip finds himself in the forge when he comes back to his village eleven years after his work in the East. Another little Pip lives there. He is the son of Joe and Biddy. Joe has named him Pip, wishing that 'he might grow a little bit like you' (457). Pip takes him to the graveyard and shows him the tombstones, 'understanding one another to perfection' (457). Pip finds his authentic self here. Little Pip finally fills Pip's emptiness which Pip really needs to fill. Little Pip makes old Pip achieve his identity. Pip gains his self in the graveyard, which he has wanted to do all along.

Pip desires nothing here as his emptiness is filled. Therefore Pip has given up marriage to Estella. This is because Pip has already been embodied self thanks to little Pip. So, Pip says about marriage that 'it's not at all likely. I am already quite an old bachelor.' (457). However, he has the opportunity to marry her. Pip encounters Estella, for whom Pip has been involved in a false world and become a false self to win her. Laing says, '[t]he unembodied self [...] cannot really be married to anyone. It exists in perpetual isolation. And yet, of course, this isolation and inner non-commitment are not without self-deception'.<sup>(10)</sup> Pip has escaped from such a situation here. Though this story does not depict their marriage, considering Pip's state in the last scene, we may say that Pip marries her.

### Conclusion

This story starts and ends in the graveyard, where Pip tries to find his authentic self. Pip knows he has no identity in his childhood. But Magwitch appears near his parents' tombstone. Pip misses a chance to realize his self. As Pip is misled, his discovery of self is delayed. Magwitch looks like a shadow of Pip's father from hell and Pip has to follow his commands. The commands continue until Magwitch's return. Magwitch

means to raise Pip as a gentleman, which misguides Pip's purpose. Though Pip just wanted to know his self, the overprotective parent, Magwitch sends much money from Australia, not knowing Pip's real state of mind. This confuses Pip. Magwitch makes Pip forget his first aim and misleads him. Magwitch thinks that Pip might live a better life by upgrading his status. In a false world, Pip progresses and lives as gentleman. However, this depends on his appearance. When Pip learns that his benefactor is the convict, Pip becomes independent of Magwitch, an over-parenting father. This is the way Pip realizes his authentic self. To reaffirm his self-identification, Pip has to visit the graveyard again as if to teach little Pip, who reminds us of Pip in childhood, who he is.

### Notes:

- (1) R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 18.
- (2) Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 1. All quotations are from this edition and will be given in the text.
- (3) R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 35.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- (5) R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1960; repr. Penguin Books, 1990), p. 67.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- (7) R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 23.
- (8) Kathleen Sell, 'The Narrator's Shame: Masculine Identity in *Great Expectations*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 26, 1998, 203-226(p. 205).
- (9) J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 261.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- (12) R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1960; repr. Penguin Books, 1990), p. 98.
- (13) Miller, p. 261.
- (14) Davaid Hennessee, 'Gentlemanly Guilt and Masochistic Fantasy in *Great Expectations*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 34, 2004, 301-328 (p. 314).
- (15) R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 108-109.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 113.

- (17) Miller, p. 270.
- (18) Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 114.
- (19) R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1960; repr. Penguin Books, 1990), p. 87.