

Features of Gothic Literature in “Great Expectations” By Charles Dickens

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Abstract. *This article explores the features of Gothic literature in Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. Gothic literature often includes dark and mysterious settings, strange characters, and themes of fear and suspense. In this novel, Dickens uses eerie places like Satis House and the misty marshes to create an unsettling atmosphere. The characters, such as the mysterious convict Magwitch and the tragic Miss Havisham, reflect Gothic traits of secrecy and emotional extremes. Themes of guilt, isolation, and mystery also play an important role in shaping the story. By mixing Gothic elements with his usual social commentary, Dickens creates a unique narrative that captures both the imagination and the emotions of the reader.*

Key words: *Gothic literature, Great Expectations, Charles Dickens, eerie settings, mystery, suspense, fear, isolation, supernatural, emotional extremes.*

Introduction

Gothic literature is a special type of writing that became popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is known for creating feelings of fear, mystery, and suspense. Gothic stories often take place in dark, creepy settings like old castles, abandoned houses, or misty landscapes. These stories include unusual characters, such as ghosts, villains, or people with deep secrets, and they often explore themes of isolation, guilt, and the supernatural.

“Gothic literature” is defined in the Encyclopedia Britannica as *a genre of literature that emphasizes the mysterious, supernatural, and dark aspects of human experience*. “Gothic” refers to the East Germanic language spoken by the Goths, an ancient group of peoples. It can also refer to things related to the Goths, such as their culture, history, or people. Emerging in the 18th century, it is characterized by a focus on themes like fear, horror, and the macabre, often set in bleak or decaying environments. Gothic literature typically features elements such as haunted castles, dungeons, and ominous landscapes, as well as an atmosphere of dread and suspense. It often explores the complexities of the human psyche, emotions like terror and madness, and the battle between good and evil. By using the distinctive features of Gothic, Charles Dickens increased an artistic value and impressiveness in his work “Great Expectations”.

Charles Dickens, a famous English writer of the 19th century, is not usually known as a Gothic writer, but many of his works include features of Gothic literature. Dickens used Gothic elements to create powerful emotions and highlight the struggles of his characters. For example, he combined terrifying settings, mysterious events, and strange characters with his focus on social issues and human

emotions. This makes his stories unique, blending the dark and mysterious with the real challenges of life.

In this article, we will examine how Gothic literature appears in Dickens's novel "Great Expectations". The story includes Gothic features like haunting places, unsettling characters, and deep emotional struggles, all of which add to the dramatic and mysterious atmosphere of the novel. Through this analysis, we can better understand how Dickens used Gothic elements to create vivid images and atmosphere. "Great Expectations" tells the story of a young boy named Pip, who dreams of becoming rich and successful. The novel follows Pip's life as he grows up, meets many interesting people, and learns important lessons about life, love, and identity. He strives to become a noble person on his modest life journey in order to transform into an important figure in society. He lives with the belief that he can achieve this goal through wealth.

The story begins with Pip as a poor orphan living with his sister and her husband. One day, he meets a mysterious escaped convict, Magwitch, who changes his life in an unexpected way. Later, Pip meets Miss Havisham, a strange and wealthy woman who lives in a decaying mansion with her beautiful but cold-hearted adopted daughter, Estella. Pip falls in love with Estella and believes that becoming a gentleman will make him worthy of her love. However, as Pip gains wealth and status, he starts to lose sight of what truly matters in life. "Great Expectations" is a powerful story about personal growth, choices, and the true meaning of happiness. Through Pip's journey, Dickens explores the challenges of life and reminds readers of the importance of staying true to oneself.

Literature review

The study of "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens has attracted a great deal of attention from literary critics and scholars. Many have explored the novel's rich themes, character development, and use of literary techniques. This section reviews key ideas from previous research, focusing on Gothic elements, themes, and Dickens's unique storytelling approach.

John Bowen¹ examines "Great Expectations" as a Gothic novel, emphasizing the presence of Gothic features like supernatural elements, emotional extremes, and symbolic characters, such as Miss Havisham and Magwitch, who embody Gothic archetypes. Sophie Ratcliffe² contextualizes Dickens's Gothic influences within the Victorian societal critique, highlighting how the novel intertwines fear and suspense with issues of class and morality.

Additionally, studies like those by John Mullan³ investigate themes of crime and punishment within the Gothic framework, particularly focusing on the psychological and moral struggles faced by Pip, the protagonist. These interpretations illustrate how Dickens redefined Gothic literature by blending its elements with his characteristic realism and social commentary.

Methodology

Textual analysis is used to closely examine the novel's text to identify Gothic elements, such as settings, mysterious characters, and supernatural hints. Key passages, like descriptions of Satis House or the marshes, are analyzed to explore how Dickens creates a Gothic atmosphere. The emotional depth of characters like Miss Havisham and Magwitch is also studied to understand how they embody Gothic themes of isolation, guilt, and decay. This method helps to reveal how Dickens blends Gothic features with his narrative style and social commentary. While "Great Expectations" does not contain overt supernatural occurrences like ghosts or monsters, Dickens uses symbolic elements that evoke a sense of the uncanny and the unknown. The mysterious benefactor who provides Pip with his wealth is revealed only later in the story, creating suspense and a sense of hidden forces shaping Pip's future. These elements contribute to a Gothic atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty, which is often heightened through the novel's use of dramatic irony and revelation, as discussed by scholars such as Bowen. Through these symbols, Dickens explores themes of fate, social mobility, and the consequences of one's past actions.

¹Bowen, John. "The Gothic in *Great Expectations*." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 2014, pp.14-20;

² Ratcliffe, Sophie (2014). *The Condition of England Novel*. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 2014, pp. 95–104.

³Mullan, John (2017). *Crime in Great Expectations*. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 45, pp. 130–135.

Analysis and discussion

Great Expectations contains numerous elements of Gothic literature, which is evident through its dark settings, mysterious characters, and the exploration of psychological and supernatural themes. The novel's atmosphere, character development, and thematic depth reflect a blend of traditional Gothic elements with Dickens's unique social commentary, making it a significant example of how Gothic conventions can be adapted to critique Victorian society.

A key feature of Gothic literature is the use of eerie, isolated, and often decaying settings to create an atmosphere of mystery and fear.

"Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea⁴." The marshes are described as "bleak" and "overgrown with nettles," and the churchyard is introduced with a sense of decay and death. The atmosphere is dark, isolated, and mysterious, which are all core features of Gothic literature. Gothic settings often evoke feelings of fear and dread, as they are not just physical spaces but also psychological landscapes that reflect the internal turmoil of the characters.

"A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints... his teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin."⁵ Magwitch is the embodiment of fear, and his sudden, violent encounter with Pip highlights the Gothic theme of unpredictability and danger. His threatening behavior, combined with the descriptions of physical suffering, intensify his grotesque nature, making him a Gothic figure of terror.

"You bring me, tomorrow morning early, that file and them wittles. You bring the lot to me, at that old Battery over yonder." Pip's experience of fear and helplessness is amplified by the Gothic trope of being trapped or unable to escape. Magwitch's threat to Pip includes the possibility of violent death, which plays into the Gothic theme of death being ever-present and inescapable.

"She was tall and bony, and almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops⁶." Mrs. Joe is presented as a domineering, harsh figure who prides herself on raising Pip "by hand." Her physical description emphasizes her harshness—she has a "prevailing redness of skin," and the fact that she "wore a coarse apron" symbolizes her no-nonsense, labor-intensive life. Her role as a strict and overbearing figure is reinforced by the metaphor of raising Pip "by hand," which Pip later interprets as being raised through physical discipline, often delivered with a "hard and heavy hand."

"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 larceny⁷." The passage builds tension through the recurring references to the convict on the marshes. Pip's dread and fear of being caught in his crime make him feel trapped, much like a Gothic protagonist. The mention of the convict's "iron leg" and Pip's heightened anxiety—especially with the impending danger and Mrs. Joe's incessant reprimands—further amplify the suspense.

"I had seen the damp lying on the outside of my little window, as if some goblin had been crying there all night, and using the window for a pocket-handkerchief⁸." The mist itself is symbolic of uncertainty and confusion, both physical and psychological, which is common in gothic literature. The imagery of "goblin" tears and webs suggests something supernatural or haunting at play, contributing to the feeling of an oppressive, inescapable environment.

"Then, as I looked up at it, while it dripped, it seemed to my oppressed conscience like a phantom devoting me to the Hulks⁹." Dickens also employs the concept of phantoms or spirits to emphasize

⁴ Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Edited by Harry S. New, Penguin Classics, 2003. – P.3.

⁵ Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Edited by Harry S. New, Penguin Classics, 2003. – P.4.

⁶ The same source. – P.12.

⁷ The same source. – P.14.

⁸ Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Edited by Harry S. New, Penguin Classics, 2003. – P.26.

⁹ The same source. – P.26.

the protagonist's guilt and fear. Additionally, Pip's guilty conscience makes the mist appear as a "phantom," symbolizing his fear of being caught by the authorities.

"When a man's alone on these flats, with a light head and a light stomach, perishing of cold and want, he hears nothin' all night, but guns firing, and voices calling¹⁰." The passage creates a dark and ominous atmosphere, intensified by the bleak weather, the convict's aggression, and the mist that blurs everything in uncertainty. The convict's talk about his suffering and fear of being hunted by soldiers adds to the sense of delirium and fear, which is a common trait of gothic literature. The combination of these elements gives the scene an eerie, almost feverish quality, heightening the tension and fear typical in gothic stories.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens incorporates several key features of Gothic literature, blending the eerie and the mysterious with the social and psychological aspects of human experience. The novel presents haunting settings like the decaying Satis House, while its dark, brooding atmosphere is complemented by themes of decay, isolation, and moral ambiguity. Characters like Miss Havisham and the convict Magwitch embody Gothic archetypes of the vengeful, tormented soul and the ambiguous, often monstrous figure, both reflecting the darker aspects of Victorian society. Dickens uses Gothic conventions not only to heighten suspense and drama but also to explore deeper questions of identity, social class, and redemption. These Gothic elements serve to enrich the novel's exploration of personal and societal transformation, reinforcing the theme of confronting the past to move forward.

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¹⁰The same source. – P.33.