

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 22

Great Expectations - Part 1

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will begin with a new text today which happens to be Charles Dickens' novel Great Expectations. Now we read Great Expectations in dialogue with Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. So we'll pitch these two novels together and do a comparative study in terms of looking at the comparisons and the contrast and also the ways in which the two novels have some thematic overlaps with each other. Now, we notice that both Heart of Darkness and Great Expectations deal with some very interesting themes. Obviously, they are very closely corresponding to some of the social changes happening around the time, social, cultural changes, but more importantly, more immediately, they refer to certain changing notions of masculinity. And both have interesting correspondences with the empire in terms of how the whole idea of the inglorious empire comes into being. So both Heart of Darkness and Great Expectations, they are also novels about shame, social shame. And we have very interesting insight into the empire in as much as the entire imperial masculinity and the empire-backed capital, these are seen as not glorious commodities or glorious entities, but as things to be ashamed of. And shame is a very big notion, a very big experience in Great Expectations as it is in Heart of Darkness.

We will come to Heart of Darkness later. But in this particular session, we will focus more primarily on Great Expectations and look at how it marks a very interesting change in Charles Dickens's narrative style as well as thematic content. Now, As you all know, I mean, Great Exhortations is one of the most heavily studied, most heavily and widely read of Dickens's novel. And it also reflects some very interesting changes happening around

that time in the 1860s and 70s in which the novel is based. And we'll talk about that more as we move on. But the text we will study to sort of illustrate this relationship the text has with its cultural context should be on the screen. It's an essay by Claire Petit. It is called *Monstrous Displacements, Anxieties of Exchange and Great Expectations*. Now, coming as we are, on the heels of studying Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the whole politics of monstrosity, the whole notion, experience of monstrosity, I think it has a very interesting dialogue or some kind of a continuity with what we just you know left off with in our final reading of *Frankenstein*. And we will see how the Frankensteinian echo, the Frankensteinian resonance and allusion is very much there in some kind of a spectral subplot level in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* as well. So, let's look at the introduction, the beginning of the essay before we move on to the main text. And this should be on your screen. Contrary to traditional critical views, which characterize it as a return to his earlier comic style, *Great Expectations* represents a development in Dickens's thinking about social issues and an emergent culture of modernity in the 1860s, right. Now, you find that, interestingly, the two novels, *Heart of Darkness* and *Great Expectations*, they more or less occupy the same cultural epoch. Now, *Heart of Darkness* comes a little bit later in the 1890s, but we have the beginning of the fault lines of the empire, the fault lines of the euphoria around, you know, imperialism and all the rest of it.

Those are beginning to show. Now, *Great Resultation*, obviously, it, as Claire Petit illustrates over here, it is very complexly reflective of some of these deep social changes which are happening around that time, the emergent culture of modernity in the 1860s. Using Dickens's interest in contemporary research into disturbances of mind, this essay shows how descriptions of Pip's mental state are used to register anxieties about exchange and displacement, reflecting the larger themes of the novel. and emphasizing Pip's passivity. So Pip, as you know, who is the protagonist in *Great Expectations*, he's an orphan, he's brought up by his sister and his brother-in-law and the lack of the mother figure, the lack of the father figure is an important aspect of Pip's masculinity and the entire associated anxiety around his masculinity. So, there is this cultural panic, there is this immediate personal panic which also connects to the broader political panic in the novel. And of course the whole idea of the gentleman, the whole idea of the socially acceptable

male, the male subject, that also becomes a very big part in the novel. And of course those of you who read the novel would know how there is a sort of ultimate moment in the end the shame in finding out who funded his entire project of gentlemanliness. I mean the quote unquote convict Magwitch who is basically you know someone of an outsider and someone who is this dark presence, a dark underbelly of the empire who happens to fund you know Pip's education, Pip's upbringing and which is responsible for his entire you know movement and mobility towards you know gentlemanliness. So it is suggested that Dickens represents Pip's education as a modern subject, as dependent upon his surrender to an alienated and fragmented sense of selfhood. And this is a bit which is interesting because alienation and fragmentation are also a very big part of Heart of Darkness. And we find even in Heart of Darkness, Marlow, the protagonist in Conrad's novel, he constantly experiences alienation from his surroundings, from his environment, and also from the other human subjects around him. And that alienation also contributes to his fragmented subjectivity, the fact that he cannot tell the story properly, the fact that he has a nervous breakdown every now and then. So all these important descriptions, all these different aspects, the level of plot, the level of character, they all become part of Heart of Darkness in a very interesting way. We find similar experiences of self fear happening in Great Expectations as well.

So this is the long and short of the essay and you know there are also references to a brief discussion of J.S. Mills's On Liberty which compares the ways in which both Mill and Dickens struggled to balance the support for liberalism and free trade with a belief in a sovereignty of the individual. A final discussion of Dickens's appropriation of elements of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. So again, this is, you know, very continuous with what we just studied, you know, the whole idea of the Frankenstein and quote unquote monster and how that too may be seen as a theatre of anxiety, as a theatre of alienation, right.

So that appropriation of elements of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein shows how Dickens chooses to attribute monstrosity to a culture which privileges consumption over production and which depends entirely on exchange to create value. So this is again the beginning of the commodity fetish, the beginning of the consumption economy which chooses

consumption over production and that in a way creates a sort of moral decadence, biological decadence, also cultural decadence, which we see replicated in a very dramatic way, perhaps slightly darker way, one might say, in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. So we have these big words coming in already, monstrosity, alienation, fragmentation, anxiety. all these are reflective of the very complex quotidian changes happening in a society in which these novels are embedded. So, we have an interesting line of continuity from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein coming into Heart of Darkness through Charles Dickens's you know great expectations. Right, so let us dive into the essay. as it were. And this should be on your screen, the whole idea of, you know, anxiety and moral panic around Great Expectations. So a little bit of history of the text in terms of when the text was written, what was the cultural epoch around the time, what was the momentum or zeitgeist of the time and so on and so forth. The publication of Great Expectations in weekly parts in all the year round from December 1860 to August 1861 was met with rejoicing by contemporary critics, which saw it as signalling Dickens's return to his earlier comic style after passing under the clout of Little Dorrit and Bleak House. Later critics too have seen in Great Expectations the move away from the broad social criticism of the preceding novels and a return to the more intimate personal narrative. Now this is a bit that we are very carefully reading because One of the important things that Great Exhortations illustrates is that a personal and the intimate are also political and discursive. So it is not like a return to the personal is an escape from politics. In fact, the personal becomes profoundly political in Great Expectations and even the immediate personal autobiographical idea of, you know, gentlemanliness or gentility we find at the end of the novel is profoundly social, cultural and discursive in quality and the shame that Pip has in the end and the knowledge that he is entirely funded by a convict is basically in a in a very micro way may be read as a shame of you know the the insider of the empire finding out the money which informs culture, informs art, informs architecture, informs you know social manners comes from some very very questionable sources, right. So that also has some kind of a interesting parallel, right.

Now What this article suggests is that the themes in the novels are 1850s and that far from turning his back on social criticism in the novel, Dickens rather begins a remarkable

investigation of the mechanisms of market capitalism and the constituents of modernity through the restlessly aspiring discontented Pip. So this entire idea of restlessness, aspiration, discontentment, disorientation, so all these are important words in terms of locating the subject, the feeling human subject in this maddening rush of the capital, maddening rush of capitalism and money and the market. So what happens to the human subject, the experience in subject in a very, very fast fetishizing market culture, right. So that is the interesting trust area that you know this novel is, this reading of the novel is proposing. Now there are some bits about Dickens's personal life that we don't really want to get into, so I skip a little bit, but we come to the end of the second paragraph of this page where there is an interesting point that Petit is making. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens may be dramatizing not only the pathological effects of a capitalist restlessness predicated on ideas of expansion and tireless exploitation of resources, but also his uneasiness about his own involvement in the capitalist marketplace. there is a bit of an insider's critique happening over here. So not only is a critique of capitalism, but the sense of shame and guilt and restlessness about being a part of the entire capitalist engine. Because also remember, Dickens was very much a celebrity writer at that time. He was making a lot of money.

His books were selling in huge numbers. So he's very much a part of the, he was very much an insider, shall we say, of the capitalist machine, of the capitalist engine. So on one hand, this book is a, some kind of a cautionary tale against the unchecked movement of capitalism, unlegislated movement of capitalism. But at the same time, there is a self-reflexive shame about being a part of that movement as well. It is now commonplace that as Labour became more specialised in the nineteenth century, more divisions appeared between people. So, you know the whole idea of the industrialization of labor, it also created divisions in people in terms of social hierarchy, in terms of the difference between producer and consumer. It also created different kinds of social identities which are predicated on the location apropos of labor, apropos of the capital, apropos of production and consumption. Joe points out, so Joe happens to be, you know, Pip's very ideally sort of pre-industrialist, pre-industry, industrial, you know, workman in *Great Expectations*. So Joe points this out when he explains his reasons for leaving after visiting Pip in London.

So the whole idea of the villager, the village blacksmith, the village, you know, tradesman, the village worker being essentially feeling claustrophobic in London is embodied in Joe. So, Joe points this out when he explains his reasons for leaving after visiting Pip in London. He says, one man's a blacksmith and one's a whitesmith and one's a goldsmith and one's a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come. So the whole idea of divisions, the whole idea of how this kind of a new capital or new commodity culture is creating more divisions is voiced by Joe in the novel. But Dickens also shows how divisions manifest themselves within people as they adjust to a highly competitive environment.

So, this capitalism is very highly competitive capitalism. It's so cannibalistic in quality, it's everyone going after everyone else and then you know basically going for the room on the top as it were. So in a way it becomes some kind of anticipation of what then becomes the American dream, the whole idea of making it big in your life if you have the capital and the work ethic and the relentless pursuit of success. The clearest and most famous example of this in a novel is of course Wemmick's rigidly divided existence. The office is one thing and private life is another, he says. But Dickens shows this self-division more pervasively in his portrait of Pip living in terror of his expectations. and alienated from himself. So this idea of alienation happens at a very existential affective level. When Pip gets more and more alienated from his true self, when this happens because there is increasingly movement into the whole engines of capitalism which also involves masculinity, certain forms of socially acceptable masculinity etc. and connected to this is the whole idea of upbringing, education etc. And of course, education, upbringing, they're all funded by capital. And as I mentioned, Pip finds out in the end, it's shameful knowledge really that his entire funding comes from a very questionable source. The newly rich Pip feels powerless and vulnerable, describing his relationship to his servant, for example. as my bondage to the taskmaster. So you know the whole idea of the master-slave relationship is turned on his head to a large extent because you know Pip now finds himself extremely uncomfortable with the whole idea of owning servants, the whole idea of people you know waiting on him and that is happening because of this immediate you know creation production of capital and he is now very much part of the machine. Others have already usefully pointed out some of the allusions to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in Great Expectations. So as I mentioned, Frankenstein is a very interesting subtext. I mean, it's not

really mentioned directly, but we have similar tensions, similar dramatizations, similar forms of vulnerability, alienation, aspiration happening in Frankenstein as well, as we have studied so far. So there are allusions to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Through his pervasive use of multiple, distorted and displaced versions of the Frankenstein story, Dickens was able to elaborate upon the problematics of identity as a result of capitalist division.

The monstrosities which Dickens figures in *Great Expectations* are those of competitive capitalism, the violent division of human sympathy, the promiscuity of exchange, the obscuring of agency and the transgression of the traditional boundaries of privacy, individual sovereignty and space. Now, we spend a lot of time and interpretative energy with transgression in Frankenstein. So we talked about how the transgressive scientific knowledge system in Frankenstein creates a problem for its own system and how unchecked science, unchecked pursuit of science can become a problem if it's not connected to ethics and accountability. So we have similar problems happening in *Great Explanations* as well, where the very human elements of sympathy, empathy, agency, they become security, sovereignty, privacy, they become problematized with its newly emergent forces of capitalism, in which Pip is very much a part of, in which Dickens, the writer, the best-selling celebrity writer, is also a part of. So, again, that ultimate autobiographical self-reflexivity must not be lost sight of. So, Pip's actual migration in the text is attended by the bewildering migrations in his dreams, mimicking the transgression of boundaries between people and things, which, I suggest, Dickens registers as an inevitable, yet alarming and violent effect of market capitalism, right. So, again, the whole idea of transgression between, of boundaries between people and things. The whole idea of subject and object begins to blur away in this kind of a competitive, almost cannibalistic, capitalist frenzy that Claire Petit seems to be pointing out. And this blurring of boundaries between the subject and the object, between the commodity and the subject becomes a problem. And we see that happening through the different forms of transgression which are represented and mimicked by Dickens in the novel.

And these become the alarming and violent aspects of market capitalism. Pip's delirious dreams during the illness he suffers after Magwish's death from the climatic chorus of an

alternative narrative thus that runs through *Great Expectation*. So this is a dream and this is a passage from the novel. I confounded impossible existences with my own identity. I was a brick in the house wall. and yet entreating to be released from the giddy place where the builders had set me. I was a steel beam of a fast engine, clashing and whirling over a gulf, and yet I implored in my own person to have the engine stopped, and my part in it hammered off. So, notice the vocabulary of machines over here. So, the engine you know the whole idea of builders and hammers and these are used to describe human subjects fever. So, again we find this very blending of languages of the machining type and the human type. So, mixing of two different registers which also tells you the point that we just discussed. the blurring area, the borderlines between the subject, the object, between the engines and the biological organisms and tissues, right. And that becomes an important aspect in *great expectations*, the exhaustion, this sense of entropy slowing down, the decadence of energy which comes at a cost to this frenzied run of the capital. The images which appear in his dream I think are significant. Brick, steel beams, engines and hammers. These are the materials of industrialism and it is within these that the unconscious Pip figures his identity as trapped. So the whole access to identity, the whole access to agency is mediated through machines, is mediated through these very, very interesting objects. His sense of panic and powerlessness in the dream are rendered by the words entreating and implodes. We have this sort of spiritual language very, very uneasily mixing with this very machining vocabulary. So entreating, imploring, almost, you know, religious words which are connected in a very complicated way, very problematic way with the language of the machines, the language of the very, very inorganic matter. And a sense of individuality crushed or blocked is dramatized by pip's becoming only one brick in the wall. So it's a passive, non-feeling object. And one part of a vast engine, so the massive engine of capitalism is sort of consuming all the human subjects who are consumers inside it. So again, the difference between the producer and the consumer also begin to blur away. In early 1860s, at the same time that Dickens was writing *Great Expectations*, Karl Marx was using similar images of mutilation and displacement in a now famous protest against industrial capitalism in *Das Kapital*.

So, this is a bit that we will spend some time with and now end. And you know this whole

idea of locating Great Expectations and this very, very interesting philosophy of the capital, philosophy of the object, philosophy of fetish, that Marx was theorizing around that time. Of course, Das Kapital as you all know is a commentary, a cultural commentary on the very rapidly changing social, cultural conditions which are happening because of this massive industrialization and what happens to the human subject during this time, during these drives as it were. And this is a quotation from the Das Kapital. So all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over and exploitation of the producers. They mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work, and turn it into a heated toil. that transform its lifetime into working time and drag its wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital, right. So again this frenzied movement of the capital, the frenzied chariot of the capital and that takes everything into this massive competitive race where the human is transformed into the you know inorganic machine which just keeps functioning without any feelings and the whole idea of charm and leisure and enjoyment disappear And what we have is just passive productivity, where you just keep producing like a machine until you can't anymore. And if you look at the language over here, mutilation, fragmentation, degradation, all very violent vocabulary.

So, the violence created by this unchecked movement of the capital, this frenzied movement of the capital is both corporeal as well as psychological. It affects the human subject in a very mental level and it also creates a sense of discontinuity in intimate relationships. So, the wife, the children, the family, different forms of kinship, they begin to suffer because of this unchecked, you know, drive of capital, this unchecked movement of the capital. So Dickens and Marx, he here seemed to be confronting the same horror. Again, when you talk about the horror or confrontation of horror, you know you go to Heart of Darkness and the famous line where Kurtz looks into the abyss of the horror of imperialism and just mutters the horror the horror which happened to be his final dying words. So, you find this is how this very interesting trajectory one can draw a line, a diachronic line from, you know, Great Expectations to you know Heart of Darkness. Of course Frankenstein before that anticipates it at a more bioscientific level and how this whole idea of alterity or otherness which is paradoxically produced by excessive

consumption, excessive greed, that otherness comes back to haunt the subject, which then, you know, has to encounter the moment of horror, which happens in *Heart of Darkness*, which happens in *Great Expectations*, of course, it happens in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, right? Now, both Dickens and Marx seem here to be confronting the same horror, although it is perhaps significant that while Marx's labourer is a passive and mutilated victim of the industrial process, Dickens complicates Pip's experience in his dream. He is both passive, as a brick in the house, while active, as a steel beam of a vast engine. So, one might argue that Dickens' representation of the human horror is more complex, is more ambivalent. The vocabulary is more ambivalent because there is this passivity in describing himself as a brick in the house wall, but also the whole idea of almost a feeling, energetic entity of a steel beam of a fast engine, you know, you just move forward in time with great velocity.

But that also tells you something how the difference between numbness and velocity is blurred in this particular frenzied capitalist enterprise where the faster you move the more numbed you feel. So velocity is not the opposite of numbness way. In fact velocity creates numbness in a very paradoxical way. And this is the ambivalence, the paradox of production and consumption that Dickens is trying to portray in *Great Exhortations*. So that Pip can be both an active participant and a passive victim of the same perhaps reflects Dickens's own ambivalent attitude to the self-help culture of the 1860s. So, like I said Dickens on the one hand has been critical of this but at the same time he is very much aware that he is an insider into his entire enterprise, entire engines of capitalism. So there is a degree of ambivalence about Dickens's take as it were. on the movement of the capital. So we stop at this point now but it's interesting to note what the essay is trying to pitch and looking at the social changes, the massive rise of the industrial engines and what happens to the human feeling, the human subject, the human body at this time. And the different affect-networks that are sort of spreading around the different industrial networks, the network of, let us say, glory and shame and ambition and aspiration, but also guilt, right. And we find at some level all these different affective narratives are connected to each other in very intersectional ways. So, on one hand, there is this aspiration to climb the social ladder, the aspiration to become this sort of gentleman, but at the same time, it comes at a cost of guilt and shame and the knowledge that, you know, the whole gentlemanly

process, the whole masculinity motive over here is funded from very dark sources, you know, illegal sources perhaps, or immoral sources. And immorality, the relationship between immorality and mobility over here, It's very complicated, right? So there is this innate ambivalence in Great Expectations, which is why it's a very dark novel. It doesn't really give any resolution.

And obviously it gets darker when it comes to Heart of Darkness. I mean, it is more dark than Great Expectations. And perhaps it is sort of less ambivalent as well. It is very much a very deglamorized picture. Like Heart of Darkness, Great Expectations, it goes after the glamour and the glitz of the gentlemanly world only to be betrayed in the end and only to be aware in the end that moment of epiphany that beneath all those glitz and glitter and glamour lies a very, very dark world. That is where the money comes from. That is where the funding comes from. That is where the real work of capitalism is operative and operationalized and very, very dark, very, very cynical. And that becomes even more cynical, even darker, even more tired and exhausted by the time we come to Heart of Darkness. So in summary, what we can see in the very first session, hopefully, is how both Great Expectations and Heart of Darkness, they are diachronically connected. So, you know, there's a trajectory of time, the sense of temporal shift, but there is a temporal continuity as well, right? So in terms of his notion and gaze of the empire, the inglorious empire, the whole idea of shame and guilt and the different processes of othering which are at work.

And at some level, othering also happens at psychological level. It's not just about racial othering or political othering. but how you're othered from your own self, your pure sense of self, and how that othering happens through industrialization, through the forces of capital at work, how someone like Pip moves from being a village boy to a Londoner. But that movement, that sense of mobility and agency and aspiration, it also comes at a cost to the sort of dark, cost of how being fragmented from your true subjective self. So these are some of the things we will talk about in greater details as we move on but it's the first session on Great Expectations and as you can imagine as you can see already I'm constantly bringing in Heart of Darkness but also bringing in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein to see how

you know the texts that we study in the novel are connected to each other and while doing Frankenstein we also had to dial back to Robinson Crusoe as well. So, at some level, the text, obviously carefully chosen for this course, they are quite dialoguing with each other. So, dial back to the earlier text. We also simply anticipate some of the texts which are to follow. So with this, we conclude the first session of Great Resultations. We'll carry on with more closer discussions from this essay with connecting the text and the context in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.