Great Expectations: Social Problem Novel

The late 1830s and early 1840s witnessed the advancement of the ‘social problem’ novel which came forth as a result of the social upset which was a reaction to the Reform Act of 1832. The Reform Act stood, among many things, as an answer to the socio-economic and political problems which arose because of rapid urbanization and industrialization. The ‘social problem’ novel was another method of critiquing abuse of both the government and big businesses who were playing a part in the hardship faced by the poor, who in turn were not able to profit from Britain’s rising economic prosperity. Hence, stories written about the working class man were aimed at the middle class to create sympathetic overtones and ultimately to advocate change. In this context Dickens was a social realist, writing to reveal the more brutal side of Victorian life to all of society, as well as expose the false idea that society was manageable for all by highlighting the poverty and injustice they faced. This explains why many of the negative characters in Dickens’ books personify the corruption of the upper and middle classes and the hypocrisy of big businesses. This can be seen in Mr Jaggers, whose expediency leads him to keep Molly on as a servant after having got her off a murder case, with the idea that she now is forever indebted to him - despite her lower status Jaggers sees no objection in keeping her as his cook.

Dickens, as well as many other authors in the mid-19th-Century, were influenced by the ‘Bildungsroman’. This is a novel that deals with the growth of both the physical and mental maturity of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. The bildungsroman normally finishes with a relatively happy ending, despite the course of the novel exploring the protagonist’s experiences of loss and isolation, with the ending containing themes of nostalgia and finality. An example of a loss that the main character experiences in the ‘Bildungsroman’ would be the relinquishing of his childhood dreams of grandeur which may lead into his adult life. At this point of giving up his dream, he in turn parts with the mistakes and bitter disappointments that accompany this quest. This sense of loss was especially apparent in 19th-century novels, as it reveals the brutal realist message that renouncing one’s dreams will lead to a life of usefulness in society. Sir. Edward Bulwer-Lytton said that “Dickens' original unhappy ending might disappoint his Victorian readers, who had come to be expected the virtuous and reformed characters be rewarded with the joy of home and family”. As a response to Bulwer-Lytton’s opinion, Dickens reworked the ending of his novel so Pip would meet Estella in the destructions of Satis House after having become a widow. Dickens altered the final sentence from “I could see the shadow of no parting from her” to “I saw no shadow of another parting from her”. The original ending has an understated and a distant melancholy to it, implying the message that life does not always give perfect happiness – all Great Expectations are doomed even when you have learned lessons the hard way. The revised ‘Satis House’ ending has been considered to imply that Pip and Estella walk off into the sunset together.

A noteworthy change in the novel from the 18th to the 19th century was the shift of emphasis from a character’s action to the character himself. Realism in the 19th Century was more focused on the character as the hardships the characters faced in their lives that was more applicable to the reader, which was opposed to romanticism which prioritized a character’s action. This was coupled with the rising popularity of serialization, in which multiple issues composed of just a few chapters were released incrementally over a certain period - which for

Great Expectations was between December 1860 and August 1861. Serialization’s increased admiration began a paradigm change that altered the publishing scene for novels after that point. There were a few benefits from this, most notably that most people who enjoyed reading these stories were in the working class. The price of the novels spread out over a longer period of time made it more affordable to society, especially the working class. This was a positive step towards what Dickens and other authors were trying to achieve - highlighting that this was how the working class would only be able to read literature would spark sympathy among the middle classes.