



ENGLISH VS. AUSSIE STORY: JACK MAGGS AS A POSTMODERN REWRITING OF DICKENS'S *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

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Abstract:

Close scrutiny of 19th-century Victorian literature shows that novels are the most predominant genre of literature in this period. Writers like Dickens and others attempt to deal with Victorian realism in their novels. By portraying characters like David Copperfield, Oliver Twists, Pip, and others, Dickens attempts to present a replica of Victorian society in his novels. The hue and cry of London Street are evident in Dickens's presentation of slum landlordism, child labour, pickpocketing, rape, prostitution, murder, criminality, convictism, and moral and social degeneration, which starkly contrasts with the myth of Victorian progress. But his characters are presented as possessing typical English moral standards despite their impoverished state of belonging to the lower stratum of society. One such Dickensian character is Pip from *Great Expectations*. However, with the advent of postmodernism in the 20th century, Dickens's novels are re-examined as repositories of various kinds of Victorian grand narratives. In the post-war intellectual climate of rewriting the Victorian classics, Dickens's *Great Expectations* is being rewritten by a host of writers. One such prominent rewriting comes from the Australian writer Peter Carey whose *Jack Maggs* rewrites Dickens's classic novel *Great Expectations* from a revisionary perspective.

Thus, this paper aims to make a comparative analysis of Carey's *Jack Maggs* as a rewriting of Dickens's *Great Expectations* from a postmodern perspective. This paper will examine Carey's act of rewriting Dickens's Victorian classic based on Lyotard's theory of postmodernism, which emphasizes dismantling the grand narratives through little narratives in the post-war period. The paper will also attempt to show how Dickens's English convict, Abel Magwitch, who had been deported to Australia for his criminal offenses in England, appears as Jack Maggs in Carey's novel to reclaim his English identity. He ascertains his Australianness when he is denied his English identity. Finally, the paper explores how postmodernism allows Carey to rewrite Dickens's classic with the employment of two postmodern techniques, 'metafiction' and 'parody.'

[Keywords: Victorian, Realism, Rewriting, Postmodern, English, Australian, Identity, Metafiction, Parody]

The Victorian Age (1837-1901) is generally considered to be the second most important period in English history after the Elizabethan period. Whereas the Elizabethan period is regarded by many as the 'Golden Age' of English history, the 19th century Victorian age comes next in importance to the Elizabethan period chiefly because of the enormous success England gained under Queen Victoria's rule. The progress in the aftermath of the industrial revolution is evident in the commercial success, technological innovations, and proliferation of industry, as well as in the numerous other social indicators during this period. The invention of the steam engine results in the progression of every sphere of life. People started living an industry-based, technology-orientated, commercial life that was quite unprecedented. As a result of this growing industrialization, a new section of middle class bourgeois emerged. With the hands of this middle-class bourgeois, the novel became a predominant genre of this period.

Although the Victorian age is usually considered an age of progress and development, close examination shows that this age is full of doubt, mysteries, and crises in various spheres of life. This apparent double standard between success and doubt and crisis is popularly known as the 'Victorian dilemma,' which is also a significant characteristic of this age.

This Victorian dilemma stems from the conflicting attitudes of progress and regress of the Victorian period. In other words, on the one hand, the Victorian age witnessed an enormous amount of progress through the establishment of factories and the resulting growth and success in business, commerce, and technology. The establishment and the expedition of various imperial

companies and the colonial craving for voyages to unknown territories endorses this myth of Victorian success. But whereas these phenomena are symbolic of Victorian progress, on the other hand, we see the general degradation and degeneration of human life. The shift from agrarian life to industry-based life results in growing slum landlordism, child labour, pickpocketing, prostitution, and physical and moral disease of various sorts in the cities. This gives rise to various kinds of crime in society. This apparent discrepancy between national progress and societal regress is the dilemma or the double-standard of the Victorian age.

But this dichotomy between success and regress is not the only dilemma discernible in the Victorian period. The conflict between science and religion is yet another dilemma in this period. The broader circulation of the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, propagated in his famous book *The Origin of the Species* (1859), created a crisis of faith for the Christians. The people who traditionally believed in the genesis myth of the *Bible* for so long began to suspect it with the increasing evidence of evolutionary theories of Darwin. Whether to blindly believe in the religious mythology of origin or question them through the Darwinian scientific temperament was at the heart of the period.

The two forms of Victorian dilemmas -one in the apparent duplicity of progress and regress and another in the form of science and religion, have their manifestations in the literature of this period. Poems like Tennyson's 'Ulysses' and 'In Memoriam' captures this sense of Victorian dilemma. This dilemma is also evident in Charles Dickens's novels too. His novels like *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and others expose Victorian double standards. Dickens's novels, therefore, on the one hand, criticize and reveals the social ills of London society; on the other hand, the texts construct the grand narratives of Englishness that the characters possess despite belonging to a lower stratum of the society.

Close scrutiny of 19th-century Victorian literature shows that novels are the most predominant genre of literature in this period. Writers like Dickens and others attempt to deal with Victorian realism in their novels. By portraying characters like David Copperfield, Oliver Twists, Pip, and others, Dickens attempts to present a replica of Victorian society in his novels. The hue and cry of London Street are evident in Dickens's presentation of slum landlordism, child labour, pickpocketing, rape, prostitution, murder, criminality, convictism, and moral and social degeneration, which starkly contrasts with the myth of Victorian progress. But his characters are presented as possessing typical English moral standards despite their impoverished state of belonging to the lower stratum of society. One such Dickensian character is Pip from *Great Expectations*. However, with the advent of postmodernism in the 20th century, Dickens's novels are re-examined as repositories of various kinds of Victorian grand narratives. In the post-war intellectual climate of rewriting the Victorian classics, Dickens's *Great Expectations* is being rewritten by a host of writers. One such prominent rewriting comes from the Australian writer Peter Carey whose *Jack Maggs* rewrites Dickens's classic novel *Great Expectations* from a revisionary perspective.

Dickens's *Great Expectations* is a representative English novel of the Victorian age that was serialized in the weekly periodical *All the Year Round* from 1860 to 1861. Finally, it was finally published in book format in 1861. The novel centres around the life of the protagonist Pip. The novel is a 'bildungsroman' that shows his progression from naivety to maturity. When the novel opens, we see Pip, living as an orphan with his brother-in-law and his sister, Mr. Joe Gargery and Mrs. Gargery, makes a visit to his dead parents' grave, where he is suddenly accosted by an escaped convict from Australia, Abel Magwitch, who demands food and file from Pip at the point of his life. However, Pip steals food and file from his sister's house to help the convict. Later, it is found that there is another convict hidden in the graveyard. However, when both the convicts got involved in a fight, they were caught by the police and imprisoned.

The next turn of events leads Pip to Statis House, owned by a wealthy spinster woman Miss Havisham who invites Pip to play at her house. Pip there finds a beautiful girl Estella whom Miss Havisham adopts and rears up to make her a gentlewoman. It is here, after meeting Estella, that Pip becomes aware of his class inferiority and nurtures a vision of becoming a gentleman. But as there is no possible means to do that, he joins his brother-in-law's blacksmith profession as an apprentice. When Miss Havisham comes to know of it, she hurls abuses at both Pip and Mr. Gargery for Pip's involvement with this profession. Immediately after, Pip is informed by a lawyer, Mr. Jaggers, whom he has seen at Miss Havisham's house before, that he is about to receive 'great expectations' from a secret benefactor who wishes to rear Pip as a gentleman by providing him an education. Considering it to be an act of Miss Havisham, Pip went to London to pursue education and become a gentleman.

In London, Pip learns from his friend Herbert about Miss Havisham's past life and other related stories. Later, he is suddenly visited by the convict, Abel Magwitch, the same person whom Pip helped with food and file towards the beginning of the novel. To Pip's utter surprise, Abel Magwitch reveals himself as Pip's secret benefactor. He also informs that the other convict he had fought with at the novel's beginning is Compeyson, who left Miss Havisham on her wedding day. Pip also learns that the beautiful Miss Estella, whom Pip loves, is the daughter of Magwitch. However, Pip felt a sense of guilt at the thought of being reared up with a convict's money. The novel then describes Pip's futile attempt to send Magwitch back to New South Wales, where he was deported. When Pip became bankrupt and imprisoned for debt, Mr. Joe helped him with money to get him out of this situation. Finally, Pip goes to Egypt for business, and when he returns, he reunites with Estella after undergoing many hurdles in their life.

This apparently simple story of the progress of Pip from an orphan to a prosperous Englishman is fraught with many complex issues, the most prominent of which is the construction of the 'grand narratives' of Victorian progress in the novel. In other words, a close inspection of the novel shows that although Dickens is critical of the social ills of the Victorian period in this novel, his novel constructs and endorses the grand narrative of Englishness which is dismantled later on by Peter Carey in his novel *Jack Maggs*. *Great Expectations* is narrated in the first-person narrative by Pip which means that all the novel's events and descriptions are presented from Pip's perspective. Through the employment of first-person narrative, Dickens wishes to treat his novel with 'realism' in an attempt to present a verisimilitude of Victorian society. Pip appears in the novel as a representative Englishman who is capable of maintaining moral integrity despite his impoverished state. For example, when Pip steals food and file from his house, he feels a sense of guilt and remorse. Nevertheless, this stealing does not make him a convict like Abel Magwitch, as he commits this to help someone. Even when Pip comes to know about the identity of his secret benefactor to be

Magwitch, he feels ashamed at the thought of being reared up as a gentleman out of the money of a convict. However, Pip's feeling is immediately over with his desperate attempts to make a safe passage for Magwitch.

Finally, he discards the 'great expectations' of Magwitch, tries his luck in Egypt, and reunites with Estella. Dickens's novel thus shows the moral and social progress in the life of Pip, but this success contrasts with Magwitch's social inferiority. In other words, Dickens presents Pip as a representative English hero who triumphs over the moral and social crises in life. On the other hand, he presents Magwitch as a convict deported to Australia, with all the negative associations. This is how Dickens's grand narrative of 'Englishness' and 'Victorian Success,' manifested through the character of Pip, is constructed through the binary representation of the Australian convict, Magwitch. However, this grand narrative of Englishness collapses in the Australian writer Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, which is a rewriting of Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

Peter Carey is one of the most representative writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. A two-time Booker Prize winner, Carey's most influential writing among the extensive oeuvre is *Jack Maggs*, which rewrites Dickens's *Great Expectations* from an Australian postmodern perspective. If we look at the history of Australia, we will find that the history of Australia as a nation is filled with criminal associations. In other words, the genealogical and cultural study shows that Australia is a nation of criminals, most of whom were deported from England. In the Victorian period, the convicts involved in different criminal activities in England were deported to the remote island of Australia. They were subject to brutal punishment by the English colonizers in Australia. They were also made to stay in Australia without having any scope to return to England. If someone ever attempts to return, they are caught, imprisoned, and inflicted with more severe punishment. Carey, however, deals with this theme of Australianness in his novel. In one of his interviews, Carey mentions regarding the purpose of his rewriting as:

I wanted to reinvent [Magwitch], to possess him, to act as his advocate. I did not want to diminish his "darkness" or his danger, but I wanted to give him all the love and tender sympathy that Dickens' first-person narrative provides his English hero Pip. [...] My Henry Phipps is not in any sense the same person as Dickens' Pip. They have both inherited money from a transported convict, but their actions and their characters are very different. (Carey)

Peter Carey's preoccupation with Australianness attempts to break the grand narrative of Englishness constructed by Dickens in his novel *Great Expectations*. Thus, Carey shifts the focus of his novel from Pip to Magwitch, Dickens's convict. Whereas Dickens made Pip his central character, Carey gives the narrative hold to Magwitch, who appears as Jack Maggs in his novel, so that he would be able to narrate his past life in England from his perspective. Not only at the narrative level, but there is also a significant number of changes at the story level. The first act of subversion can be seen in the shift of focus from Dickens's protagonist Pip to the Australian convict Magwitch, who appears as Jack Maggs in the novel. Unlike Dickens's *Great Expectations*, which describes Pip's progress from orphan to a successful English hero, in *Jack Maggs*, however, Carey shifts the focus to the convict Jack Maggs. When the novel begins, we see that Jack Maggs, a deported Australian convict and a wealthy and successful brickmaker in Australia, has returned to England after a gap of twenty-five years to meet his adopted son, Phipps (equivalent to Dickens's Pip), as well as to ascertain his identity of being an Englishman. However, contrary to his expectation, when this emotional craving to be identified as an Englishman is bound to fail, and he is denied English identity, he finally succumbs and becomes resolute in adopting his Australian identity.

There are several ways through which Carey's novel attempts to break the grand narrative constructed in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and through this process, he deals with the complex issue of Australian identity. Whereas most Australian writers feel ashamed of Australia's criminal past and remain silent about dealing with it, Carey has a peculiar notion about that issue. Through his novel *Jack Maggs*, Carey tries to show that Australian criminal history is deeply rooted in the Victorian society. In one of his interviews, Carey mentions:

"Australians do not like to celebrate this moment when the nation is born, and it has been something of a passion for me to do just that. We carry a great deal of self-hatred, denial, grief, and anger, all unresolved. It took a long time before I could think of exactly how I might use these passions to fuel a novel. Then one day, contemplating the figure of Magwitch, the convict in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, I suddenly thought THIS MAN IS MY ANCESTOR. And then: this is UNFAIR!" (Carey)

This English society of 19th century England makes Maggs a convict and then deports him to Australia. Once he becomes a convict, he is denied by all. Thus, at the novel's very beginning, when Maggs returns to meet his adopted son Phipps, whom he has reared up with his money, Phipps deliberately absconds himself with the disinclination to meet Maggs. Unlike Dickens's Pip, Carey's Phipps was well aware of the identity of his secret benefactor from the very beginning of the novel. He even corresponded in a letter with Maggs and was well aware of Maggs's arrival. However, when he considers the prospect of falling in trouble for meeting a convict, he hides himself in an attempt to safeguard himself, although the person benefited him.

Again, when Maggs goes to meet his foster mother, Ma Britten, she first refuses to recognize him. Even when she becomes able to recognize him, she refuses to shelter him. She even frightens him with the prospect that he may fall in trouble if someone finds him. Later on, it is revealed that this Ma Britten engages Maggs in adopting the life of a convict in the former days. It is Ma Britten who makes him a criminal. She even acts as an abortionist who disapproves of Maggs's relationship with Sophina; she even gives the potion to Sophina to abort her baby, and both die in the process. Later in the novel, she also gives an abortive potion to another woman named Elizabeth, who also dies with her baby at the time of birth. Thus, she acts as an archetypal agent for destruction.

Ma Britten is none other than the symbolic representation of Mother Britain, who acts as a foster mother and destructor to their citizens. It is Britain, or rather, the industrial Victorian England, that gives birth to so many crimes and vices in the cities; it gives rise to poverty, prostitution, murder, child labour, pickpocketing. Once someone is bound to commit these crimes out of poverty, they are branded as convicts and are deported to Australia, never to return to the country. Like Ma Britten refuses to provide

Maggs shelter, in the similar way, there is no place for the deported convict to reclaim the identity of English. His attempts to meet his son Phipps and his desire to be identified as an Englishman thus tend to fail. When Mother Britten enquires about Maggs of his purpose for returning to England, their conversation indicates this identity crisis of Maggs:

“What do you want, Jack?” said the old woman, and this time her voice quavered.”

“What’re you doing here in London?”

“It’s my home,” Jack said, raising his voice and revealing the fiercer character which the porter at the Golden Ox had briefly glimpsed. “That’s what I want. My home.” (5)

When Maggs fails to find his son in the house given by Maggs to Phipps, he takes a job as a footman in the house of Percy Buckle. There he meets a profligate writer named Tobias Oates in Buckle’s house. Tobias Oates is a mesmerizer, as well as a meticulous commercial writer. At the beginning of the novel, we see that Tobias tries to get his hold of Maggs as a mesmerizer or hypnotizer to know about Maggs’s past life. As a writer, he also plans to take Maggs as an inspiration for his future novel. He even has odd relationships with his wife and children and has an immoral relationship with his sister-in-law Elizabeth. Almost all the stories have their resonances in Dickens’s life. He practices mesmerism, rumoured to be engaged in a problematic relationship with his sister-in-law. He is a writer too. Carey makes Tobias Oates modelled on Charles Dickens. In other words, through the incorporation of the postmodern ‘metafiction’ technique which self-consciously concentrates on the process of writing or the construction of the text itself, Carey inserts Dickens as a character in his novel to expose the hypocrisies associated with his novel-writing. Through metafiction and parody, Carey is able to deconstruct the grand narratives of Dickens.

Finally, in the novel, Carey makes Maggs come out of the clutches of Oates as a mesmerizer and writer. He opposes Oates’s practice of mesmerizing him. He even opposes Oates’s misrepresentation of his life in his novel. Therefore, in order to write his own version of his previous life, Carey incorporates the forms of letters sent to Phipps. All these textual experiments are nothing but a means to ascertain self-representation and self-identity of being an Australian for Maggs. Finally, he meets his son Phipps, whom he reared up with money but becomes shocked at his cold responses and denial. Thus, we can see various forms of problematic parent-son relationships in the novel from the Englishman’s side. Maggs is a foster child of Ma Britten, who abandons him. Oates neglects his duties toward his wife and children. Phipps disregards Maggs’s benevolence on him and abandons him. Mercy Larkin, a maid-servant in Buckle house, was forced into prostitution by her mother to save the family. Thus, upon the counsel of Larkin, Maggs forsakes his desire for this parental tie with Phipps. He also abandons his craving to be recognized as an Englishman.

Finally, when Mercy Larkin suggests that Maggs return to Australia and look after his wife and children there, contrary to the act of the English characters, Maggs realizes his Australian ties. The novel thus ends in his return to Australia with Mercy as a caretaker for his children. His ties with Australia thus resolve his identity crisis. Whereas he is denied the English identity for being a deported convict and regarded as a permanent outsider by the Englishmen, he becomes a representative and proud Australian. We can thus conclude with Bruce Woodcock’s comments on the novel:

This is a story of dispossession, appropriation and retaliation. Jack Maggs is an orphan, betrayed and brutalised into a life of crime by an uncaring society, which, having made him a criminal, then punished him with imprisonment and transportation to Australia. He returns in search of his home and reparation, and his quest reveals a continuing mental bondage to illusions about England, his past, his ‘family’ and the other sources of his identity. (120)

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