

The Two Endings of *Great Expectations*

Two primary questions: Which ending is more *emotionally* satisfying? Which ending is more *aesthetically* satisfying? In my opinion, although the revised ending is probably more conventional and somewhat trite, it also has many virtues that make it both more emotionally satisfying and more aesthetically satisfying than the original ending.

Arguments for original ending and/or against revised ending:

- The meeting between them in the revised ending seems too contrived.
- In some ways the original ending is more realistic or true to life than revised ending—How often do people with a history like theirs manage to come to such a happy ending?
- The revised ending is trite and conventional, like the standard “happy ending” in which all ends well for the hero and heroine of the story.

Arguments for revised (published) ending and/or against original ending:

- Pip and Estella’s union at the end of the story is consistent with the workings of fate in the novel: it seems appropriate for fate, which seems to have decreed many unlikely but emotionally or thematically appropriate occurrences (and coincidences) in the novel, to allow them to be together.
- The novel as a whole is not concerned with being “realistic,” so there’s no compelling aesthetic reason to insist on realism or naturalism at the end of the story.
- The revised ending is thematically consistent with the symbolism of rebuilding Satis House: starting over, rebirth, rejection of coldness and isolation, etc.
- The story seems to have prepared them for the possibility of being together: they have both learned many lessons and become better people who are now truly capable of love.
- Estella shows signs of warmth to Pip earlier in the story: there are hints that they might end up together, that there is some openness to Pip in Estella’s heart.
- A good ending should tie up loose ends instead of leaving so many questions unanswered and feelings between Pip and Estella unresolved. He doesn’t seem to have let go of her since he isn’t involved with anyone else after eight years, but there is apparently no chance that they will be together.
- The original ending is too abrupt and emotionally flat.
- The revised ending is much more emotionally satisfying: we want Pip to find love and feel that he deserves it, and we want Estella to find happiness after all of the pain she has been through.
- The revised ending gives the reader something to imagine—rich possibilities for the future lives of the characters. The original ending seems to suggest that the two characters have reached a point of stagnation in their lives that doesn’t allow for much further joy or growth or change (and as a result the story seems “closed off”), but the revised ending does allow for that possibility.
- The revised ending is more “just” to Estella’s character because it gives her more of a sense of resolution.
- Although it can be considered a cliché, the happy ending is handled with restraint and good taste; it doesn’t suffer from heavyhanded indulgence in treacly, sentimental pleasures.

Original ending:

It was four years more, before I saw herself. I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, brutality, and meanness.

I had heard of the death of her husband (from an accident consequent on ill-treating a horse), and of her being married again to a Shropshire doctor, who, against his interest, had once very manfully interposed, on an occasion when he was in professional attendance on Mr. Drummle, and had witnessed some outrageous treatment of her. I had heard that the Shropshire doctor was not rich, and that they lived on her own personal fortune.

I was in England again—in London, and walking along Piccadilly with little Pip—when a servant came running after me to ask would I step back to a lady in a carriage who wished to speak to me. It was a little pony carriage, which the lady was driving; and the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another.

“I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella, too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!” (She supposed the child, I think, to be my child.)

I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.

—based on the proof slip reproduced by Edgar Rosenberg in the W. W. Norton (1999) edition of *Great Expectations*, p. 492.

Published ending:

“Dear Pip,” said Biddy, “you are sure you don’t fret for her?”

“O no - I think not, Biddy.”

“Tell me as an old, old friend. Have you quite forgotten her?”

“My dear Biddy, I have forgotten nothing in my life that ever had a foremost place there, and little that ever had any place there. But that poor dream, as I once used to call it, has all gone by, Biddy, all gone by!”

Nevertheless, I knew while I said those words, that I secretly intended to revisit the site of the old house that evening, alone, for her sake. Yes even so. For Estella’s sake.

I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband, who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness. And I had heard of the death of her husband, from an accident consequent on his ill-treatment of a horse. This release had befallen her some two years before; for anything I knew, she was married again.

The early dinner-hour at Joe’s, left me abundance of time, without hurrying my talk with Biddy, to walk over to the old spot before dark. But, what with loitering on the way, to look at old objects and to think of old times, the day had quite declined when I came to the place.

There was no house now, no brewery, no building whatever left, but the wall of the old garden. The cleared space had been enclosed with a rough fence, and, looking over it, I saw that some of the old ivy had struck root anew, and was growing green on low quiet mounds of ruin. A gate in the fence standing ajar, I pushed it open, and went in.

A cold silvery mist had veiled the afternoon, and the moon was not yet up to scatter it. But, the stars were shining beyond the mist, and the moon was coming, and the evening was not dark. I could trace out where every part of the old house had been, and where the brewery had been, and where the gate, and where the casks. I had done so, and was looking along the desolate gardenwalk, when I beheld a solitary figure in it.

The figure showed itself aware of me, as I advanced. It had been moving towards me, but it stood still. As I drew nearer, I saw it to be the figure of a woman. As I drew nearer yet, it was about to turn away, when it stopped, and let me come up with it. Then, it faltered as if much surprised, and uttered my name, and I cried out:

“Estella!”

“I am greatly changed. I wonder you know me.”

The freshness of her beauty was indeed gone, but its indescribable majesty and its indescribable charm remained. Those attractions in it, I had seen before; what I had never seen before, was the saddened softened light of the once proud eyes; what I had never felt before, was the friendly touch of the once insensible hand.

We sat down on a bench that was near, and I said, “After so many years, it is strange that we should thus meet again, Estella, here where our first meeting was! Do you often come back?”

“I have never been here since.”

“Nor I.”

The moon began to rise, and I thought of the placid look at the white ceiling, which had passed away. The moon began to rise, and I thought of the pressure on my hand when I had spoken the last words he had heard on earth.

Estella was the next to break the silence that ensued between us.

"I have very often hoped and intended to come back, but have been prevented by many circumstances. Poor, poor old place!"

The silvery mist was touched with the first rays of the moonlight, and the same rays touched the tears that dropped from her eyes. Not knowing that I saw them, and setting herself to get the better of them, she said quietly:

"Were you wondering, as you walked along, how it came to be left in this condition?"

"Yes, Estella."

"The ground belongs to me. It is the only possession I have not relinquished. Everything else has gone from me, little by little, but I have kept this. It was the subject of the only determined resistance I made in all the wretched years."

"Is it to be built on?"

"At last it is. I came here to take leave of it before its change. And you," she said, in a voice of touching interest to a wanderer, "you live abroad still?"

"Still."

"And do well, I am sure?"

"I work pretty hard for a sufficient living, and therefore - Yes, I do well."

"I have often thought of you," said Estella.

"Have you?"

"Of late, very often. There was a long hard time when I kept far from me, the remembrance, of what I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth. But, since my duty has not been incompatible with the admission of that remembrance, I have given it a place in my heart."

"You have always held your place in my heart," I answered.

And we were silent again, until she spoke.

"I little thought," said Estella, "that I should take leave of you in taking leave of this spot. I am very glad to do so."

"Glad to part again, Estella? To me, parting is a painful thing. To me, the remembrance of our last parting has been ever mournful and painful."

"But you said to me," returned Estella, very earnestly, "'God bless you, God forgive you!' And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now - now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends."

"We are friends," said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.

"And will continue friends apart," said Estella.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.