

“Pip is my story” Cross-Fertilising Narratives in Lloyd Jones’s *Mister Pip*

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Abstract In *Mister Pip* (2006), New Zealander writer Lloyd Jones transfers Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* to Papua New Guinea. Through a skilful play of metanarrative cross-references, Jones gives lifeblood back to the Victorian text while creating a new artistic work in which the 19th century enters into a dialogue with contemporary times offering its reader a modern ‘female’ *Bildungsroman*. This paper explores how *Great Expectations* turns out to be instrumental for the growth of Matilda, Jones’s main character, and for the development of the plot in a way that invites us to reflect on the imaginative power of literature and the unpredictable nature of its consequences in the world outside literary fiction.

Keywords Great Expectations. Mister Pip. Lloyd Jones. Bildungsroman. Postcolonial literature.

A person entranced by a book simply forgets to breathe. The house can catch alight and a reader deep in a book will not look up until the wallpaper is in flames. For me, Matilda, *Great Expectations* is such a book. It gave me permission to change my life.
(Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip*, 2006)

In Lloyd Jones’s 2006 novel *Mister Pip*,¹ Dickensian characters transmute from Victorian London to the Pacific.² Mr. Watts, the only white man left on the Papua New Guinea island of Bougainville at the time of a military blockade, initiates a group of local children into the imaginatively remote world of *Great Expectations*, “the greatest novel by the greatest English writer of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens” (21).³ As the narrative

1 The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize Best Book Award in 2007.

2 Jones places at the beginning of his novel an epigraph taken from Umberto Eco: “characters migrate”. This particular concept resonates throughout the entire work and clarifies both title and text.

3 Jones 2006. All references to *Mister Pip* will be to this edition.

unfolds, the 1861 *Bildungsroman* becomes central to the development of the plot and to the destiny of the whole local community in a way that invites us to reflect on the imaginative power of literature and the unpredictable nature of its consequences in the world outside literary fiction.

Mister Pip can be read as both a postmodern rewriting of *Great Expectations* and as a tribute to the narrative art of Dickens, whose enduring popularity at more than two hundred years since his birth equals that of few other writers. His work has been subject to various postcolonial appropriations⁴ aimed primarily at challenging the fixity of colonial texts through operations of textual hybridization, as well as by processes of intertextual and metatextual dismantling and reassembling. Yet *Mister Pip*'s revision of *Great Expectations* is in a sense unconventional by comparison. Jones's postcolonial response to Dickens is not of the strictly counter-discursive kind aimed at bridging narrative gaps (as happens for example in *Jack Maggs* by the Australian author Peter Carey); rather, the story of the orphan Pip turns out to be instrumental in the novel in problematizing the concept of 'home' and the act of 'returning', as well as in exploring the process of constructing one's identity. "If you're from a migrant society", the New Zealander writer affirms in an interview published in *The Observer*, "it's easy to see the orphan and the migrant as interchangeable. For both, the past is at best a fading photograph" (Jones in Bedell 2007).

Set in the early '90s against the backdrop of a brutal civil war that Jones himself had experienced as a journalist, the story is told from the perspective of Matilda, a young indigenous girl who, exactly like Dickens's Pip, is the subject of a first-person retrospective narration. For her (and her schoolmates) Dickens represents an escape from the atrocities of the conflict.⁵ Once they cross the threshold of the school they enter a new dimension and imaginatively live in another place: "[I]t was always a relief", Matilda comments, "to return to *Great Expectations*. It contained a world that was whole and made sense, unlike ours" (64). The children wait expectantly for their daily chapter of Dickens' novel as their engagement with Victorian England becomes gradually stronger – so much so that processes of personal projection and identification with Dickens's characters cannot be avoided. Matilda, in particular, seems to have found a "new friend" (23) in Pip, who becomes at times more real than the people actually surrounding her, and who enables her to go beyond the boundaries of the self, and to mediate and construct her experience of the world from that point on.

4 Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations* (1982), Michael Noonan's *Magwitch* (1982), Sue Roe's *Estella: Her Expectations* (1982), John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (1985), Alanna Knight's *Estella* (1986) and Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992) are among the many texts that engage with Dickens's *Great Expectations* in various ways.

5 An analogy might be found in Kipling's 1926 short story "The Janeites" in which Jane Austen's work constitutes a redemptive influence in a war-torn society.

Jones develops Matilda's story in parallel with that of Pip. From the moment she first begins to participate imaginatively in the early life of the Victorian orphan, to the events occurring in a much later period in her life recounted in the epilogue of the novel, she will perceive and interpret her life in the light of the Dickensian prototext. Moving closer to the 'literary' universe, however, means for Matilda distancing herself from the village's cultural and religious dogmatisms as they are symbolised by her mother, Dolores, who for her own part feels that her daughter's new exposure to a new cultural reality has raised a wall between the two of them. She fears that the teachings of "what she calls the Good Book" (42) (a legacy of German missionaries who had first exposed the local people to the Bible, the contents of which Dolores has absorbed and combined with traditional knowledge) might be compromised by Mr. Watts's antidogmatic principles and that she might lose her daughter to Victorian England (36). While the encounter with the new teacher (and with Dickens) represents the catalyst for the protagonist's process of emancipation and formation, it is seen as a threat by her mother who, at a certain point, in an attempt to protect the girl from the damaging influence of Mr. Watts's deviant readings, steals the only available copy of *Great Expectations* and hides it in their hut, a gesture which - as we will see later - leads to disastrous consequences for the entire community.

When we first meet Mr. Watts at the outset of Jones's compact novel, he is portrayed in the act of performing a ritual he repeats on certain days, wearing a clown's nose and pulling a trolley on which his wife, a mad local woman named Grace, stands as an "ice queen" (2). Referred to as 'Pop Eye'⁶ by the locals, this white man who is mysterious to their eyes does not fit in with the ethos of the island; he has emerged from a world they do not really know (11). It is *Great Expectations* that will provide the children with the key to this alien and remote world and enable them to establish contact with Mr. Watts's culture of origin - if the general assumption is true that literature reflects values and ideologies of a particular society. "He had given us Pip", Matilda affirms, "and I had come to know this Pip as if he were real and I could feel his breath on my cheek. I had learned to enter the soul of another. Now I tried to do the same with Mr. Watts" (57). For two months - from 10 December 1991 to 10 February 1992 - this surrogate teacher leads the children by the hand through what would otherwise be a tortuous path, helping them to decode different cultural signs and overcome linguistic barriers.

6 Jones is as careful as Dickens in creating his characters' names. For instance, Pop (in Pop Eye) is like Pip (and Pirrip) a palindromic word. The potential reversibility of the name suggests a double possibility of reading which, in this case, and at a metaphorical level, corresponds to the ambiguity of the character(s).

“I had never been read to in English before”, observes Matilda,

[n]or had the others. We didn't have books in our homes, and before the blockade our only books had come from Moresby, and those were written in pidgin. When Mr. Watts read to us we fell quiet. It was a new sound in the world. He read slowly so we heard the shape of each word. (20)

As Matilda discovers later in the novel, Mr. Watts simplifies the text for their “young ears” (228) (though without changing the meaning of the story), adjusting the London context to the local environment and giving significance back to it; he, ultimately, ‘(re)writes’ *Great Expectations*, transforming himself from reader into reader-author and so providing the first of the many variations on the Dickens story Jones’s novel contains. When the book disappears we witness yet another rewriting of the Victorian masterpiece, this time by the young students invited by Mr. Watts to “retrieve” (126) the story from their memory. These are exhorted not to linger over details but to recreate its “gist” (131) setting one fragment next to the other and “fill[ing] in the gaps with [their] own worlds” (131), fragments which he would transcribe into a notebook “to save Mr Dickens’ finest work from extinction” (147), – a scene that might recall Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (Walker 2011, 232). “At a symbolic level,” as Alistair Fox suggests, “one sees here the dynamics of a two-way hybridity that is meant to result in the creation of an entirely new imaginative space, one that is capable of accommodating the worlds of both cultures” (Fox 2009, 270-1). This is not the first time the children try to reconstruct *Great Expectations* though; they have in fact previously engaged in recreating the story of Pip in the evening for the benefit of their families, producing, chapter after chapter, another version of the already considerably revised reading Mr. Watts has offered them. The Victorian novel’s central themes are readily understood by the children; still, they remain at a superficial level in their interpretation of the story, and are unable to see the multiplicities of connotations an artistic work can contain. It will be Matilda who, at the end of her path of formation/transformation, and having become both adult and educated, arrives at a place where she can enjoy the literary work not as an enclosed entity but rather in its plurality of possibilities and achieve that full maturity that enables her to narrate her story the way in which we read it. After all, in the widely noted words of Julia Kristeva, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980, 66).

Although they are not clearly revealed, the narration adroitly conveys a series of implications concerning colonial/postcolonial dynamics and related ideological stances. For instance, in his reading a canonical text of English literature to the children Mr. Watts might initially recall the figure of the coloniser who, through literature (traditionally regarded as

a bastion of *Englishness*), seeks to impose Western cultural models and thereby conquer colonised people's consciousness, while also legitimating and consolidating imperial power – "I want this to be a place of light" (16) the temporary teacher affirms during his first lesson (the conventional dichotomies of light/darkness, coloniser/colonised, superior/inferior are clearly evoked here). However, such an interpretation is soon undermined as, in the course of the following days, the same Mr. Watts invites the students' parents and relatives to tell their *own* stories to the classroom, restoring dignity and respectability to non-European civilizations, once excluded from or marginalized within master narratives. He thus opens up a space in which Dickens coexists with local myths and traditions, with stories about the magical powers of the color blue and the life cycle of the mayfly, with songs, parables and sermons about moral and immoral behaviour; a space in which written and oral intermingle one with another in a dialogue that, transcending time and place, seems to abrogate boundaries and cultural differences, including any form of hierarchical relation between teacher and pupil. Outside this microcosm, where fears and uncertainties are temporarily attenuated, lies a reality rife with racial and social tensions as a consequence of a secessionist struggle between local insurgents ('rambos'), who have revolted against a mining company exploiting the island's copper and government troops ('redskins').⁷ Jones focuses on a particularly critical phase in the conflict raging in this isolated village "where the most unspeakable things happened without once raising the ire of the outside world" (166) and in so doing, as many reviewers underlined at the time of the publication of the novel, he entrusts literature (and *significantly* the voice of a black female character) with the task of bringing a dramatic episode in contemporary history to the attention of an international audience.

If "[i]n its first half [...] [*Mister Pip*] seems a wonderful piece of meta-fiction, celebrating storytelling's power to enrapture and transport", as John Thieme has underlined in his review of the novel, "[m]idway through

7 "According to Port Moresby we are one country. According to us we are black as the night. The soldiers looked like people leached up out of the red earth. That's why they were known as redskins" (9), Matilda clarifies. Bougainville people, closer to the ethnic and traditional values of Solomon Islanders than Papua New Guineans are, in the words of Anthony Regan, "a united group with a sense of a separate identity, centred particularly on their very dark skin colour, much darker than the average in the rest of Papua New Guinea" (Regan in Phillips 2015). Throughout the centuries Papua New Guinea has experienced a long history of colonization by different rulers. After the Second World War it came under Australian control and in 1975 gained independence. In the '90s a dispute between Bougainvilleans and the government of Papua New Guinea arose in relation to the management of a copper mine at Panguna and its damaging effects on the local environment. The civil war that followed was devastating, exacerbated by local conflict between secessionists in Bougainville (led by Francis Ona, a former mine-worker) and anti-secession Bougainvilleans. It is in this context that Jones's novel takes place.

its direction changes, as the political backdrop to the action begins to intrude into the villagers' world more directly" (Thieme 2007, 55). Both rebels and army pay visits to the village at different times in this second half of the novel and it is during one of these raids that they see a beachfront shrine that Matilda has previously erected around the name of Pip written on the sand. They mistake the name of Pip for that of a rebel fighter. The fact that the only copy of *Great Expectations* has been stolen by Dolores, and that no one is able to produce evidence that Pip is no more than a fictional character, generates misunderstanding and a catastrophic turn of events beginning with the burning of all the villagers' houses (and the book hidden in Dolores's hut with them) by the soldiers as an act of revenge for their refusal to reveal the identity of the person they are supposedly protecting. Suspicions against the community are increased by the presence on the island of Mr. Watts, a white man whose identity and place of origin are unknown. In an attempt to save the villagers Mr. Watts first makes the soldiers believe that he is Mr. Dickens.⁸ Later, during a subsequent visit by the rambos, he responds to their persistent questionings by identifying himself as Mr. Pip. This wavering of the boundaries between the actual and the fictional worlds, between the reality depicted by Jones and that constructed through the reading of *Great Expectations*, is especially evident in the chapters that follow when we witness Mr. Watts (as Mr. Pip) telling his story in a way that, beyond the frame of the novel, poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality and calls our attention to what can happen when literature trespasses on the world outside the text.

In the same way in which Mr. Watts has fascinated his students by reading Dickens in the classroom, he enthalls the rebels sitting around a campfire "with their mouths and ears open to catch every word," and "their weapons resting on the ground in front of their bare feet like useless relics" (165). The impact of this scene is strong and meaningful, and the pages that follow are the highest expression of the power of storytelling, which is able to suspend, though only temporarily, the struggles and the horrors of the war. Offering his audience a singular fresco in which events from his own life are intermingled with scenes from *Great Expectations* and local ancestral stories, Mr. Watts reveals as well as revisits his past for his own purposes through a potential act of re-writing his own identity. Paraphrasing the famous incipit of Dickens's novel, he begins his autobiographic narration with: "My Christian name is Philip, but my infant tongue could make of it nothing longer or more explicit, so I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (162) and, once wearing the clothing of the Victorian

8 Daniel, one of the children, ingenuously exclaims to the soldiers: "'Pip belongs to Mr. Dickens, sir,' [...] point[ing] in the direction of the schoolhouse" (97), a gesture which is clearly misinterpreted.

character, he proceeds with his fictitious account aided by the complicit children, above all Matilda who is asked by her teacher to translate his words into the local language to the rambos who, unaware of Mr. Watts's fabrication, absorb the story through the girl's voice.

Mr. Watts's personal rewriting of the Dickensian novel harks back to that polyphony of worlds which had already taken shape in the classroom, and is enriched in this retelling by episodes in his own life in New Zealand before his migration to Bougainville: his meeting with Grace, and the death of their daughter Sarah from meningitis soon after her birth. Particularly notable is the passage in which he refers to the "spare room" (179) which, in addition to the implications it produces of a strictly linguistic nature,⁹ serves as an exceptionally powerful metaphor within a wider discourse of cross-cultural interaction that *Mister Pip* brings to light at different levels throughout the entire narration, and provides an opening for a series of ideological reflections on the postcolonial condition. On the walls of that room Mr. Watts and Grace had oddly written their "separate histories and ideas" (184) as a way of transforming it into a place in which two different cultural spheres might converge and cohabit, as they imagined a possible hybridised future for "their coffee-coloured child. [...] They agreed to gather their worlds side by side, and leave it to their daughter to pick and choose what she wanted" (179). This zone of exchange and negotiation can be seen as a visual actualization of Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space',¹⁰ which in this case, however, tellingly remains unexplored as the premature death of the baby annuls that possible hybridised future. It is unclear whether the room is one of the fantasies Mr. Watts is creating for the benefit of his audience or has really existed. What is certain is that he attributes to his wife local stories that have really been gleaned from the villagers, a device which allows him to revive, in Monica Latham's words,

a culture threatened with extinction as the newer generation listens suspiciously to their parents' stories in class and are sometimes ashamed of them. The ancestral tales, which celebrate a reverence for nature, rely on a deep understanding and knowledge of the earth, rhythms of life, wisdom and observation, are absorbed by Mr Watts, a *bricoleur* [...] who riffs on Dickens' novel, digests the natives' individual tales and then serves them back to them as a collective, hybrid story wrapped in his own experience, diction and language. (Latham 2011, 87)

9 Matilda here struggles in overcoming cultural and semantic barriers. "The spare room. This presented some translation difficulty", the girl confesses. "I talked about a womb to be filled, a hull to fill with fish. I spoke of the coconut hollowed out of its white flesh and milk" (179).

10 Bhabha 1994. For an in-depth analysis of *Mister Pip* and hybridization see Latham 2011.

In a postcolonial context, can the novel thus be read in a positive light as an example of polyphony in Bakhtinian terms, as an attempt to bridge the distance between two worlds and even to merge their cultures? Or, after all, are the children (and Matilda in particular) ‘colonised’ by Dickens (and by Mr. Watts) in a manner that will inevitably affect their future? It might seem that even though the colonial experience is evoked in such a way as to call to our mind old paradigms, Jones invites his reader to perceive in the power of the ‘word’ a possible way of working through those paradigms and overcoming them. As Matilda affirms, referring to Mr. Watts’s orations: “my Mr. Dickens had taught every one of us kids that our voice was special, and we should remember this whenever we used it, and remember that whatever else happened to us in our lives our voice could never be taken away from us” (256).¹¹

Telling his story does not, however, save Mr. Watts from a tragic end. If his strategy was to buy time for an escape – and it is in fact for this reason that he had asked the rebels to spread his account over seven nights – the return of the redskins to the village interrupts his “Pacific version of *Great Expectations*” (175) (which significantly remains ‘open’), and he is cruelly killed, chopped up and thrown in pieces to the pigs (173). The same destiny befalls Matilda’s mother, who is raped and later killed as she refuses to remain silent before such an atrocity. Recalling those painful events at a distance of time, Matilda sees her mother in a different perspective, connecting her with the figure of the Dickensian ‘gentleman’ – defined by Mr. Watts during his lessons as someone “who will always do the right thing” (53) – a term that he substitutes in more recent times with “*moral person*” (210). “He said that to be human is to be moral”, recounts Matilda “and you cannot have a day off when it suits. My brave mum had known this when she stepped forward to proclaim herself God’s witness to the cold-blooded butchery of her old enemy, Mr. Watts” (210). She is in a certain sense responsible for the events that have caused the teacher’s death, and, as is typical of Dickensian female characters, she tries to redeem herself for her mistakes before dying.

After having witnessed the inhuman murder of her mother and her teacher (her ‘putative father’ in a sense) the girl is able to escape the

11 In discussing the “issue of counteracting the ‘voicelessness’ and ‘historylessness’ of the dominated culture” which is raised in this novel, Dana Shiller writes: “However true to one’s imagination or lived experience this notion may be, it expresses an idea that must seem naive to readers familiar with the line of criticism exemplified by Gayatri Spivak’s work, which highlights the complexities of the debate about ‘voice’ in a postcolonial context. Spivak advances the notion that Westerners granting collective speech to the ‘subaltern’, or member of a marginalized category, cannot help but re-inscribe the subaltern’s subordinate position in society [...]. Spivak’s argument would complicate any simple conflation of Matilda’s voice with self-expression, but the novel already complicates such a view itself, in that it is through both Dickens’ ironic novel and through Mr Watt’s refraction of that novel that Matilda finds what she needs to construct her own life” (Shiller 2012, 94).

island (following a flood in which she almost drowns)¹² and be reunited with her 'real' father in Townsville.¹³ Jones's reflection on the art of narrating becomes more elaborate here. The path of formation started by Mr. Watts in the small village of the Pacific island when Matilda was thirteen years old continues in Australia and subsequently in London, where we find her researching Charles Dickens as a Ph.D. student and witness her passage from reader to fictitious writer of the story conceived by Jones. This transition is encapsulated in the last pages of the novel in Matilda's symbolic gesture of taking the top sheet of paper from her thesis (significantly titled "Dickens' Orphans") and beginning to write on the back of it "Everyone called him Pop Eye" (253). In a perfect circular structure the end rejoins the beginning and we understand that we have just read the protagonist's memoir; *Mister Pip* might thus be seen as a 'self-begetting novel' in which, in Patricia Waugh's words, the "emphasis is on the development of the narrator, on the modernist concern of *consciousness* rather than the post-modernist one of *fictionality*" (Waugh 2003, 14). If Dickens had once taught her to 'escape' from the reality of her island home through imagination and to develop 'expectations' of her own, the Victorian writer (whose work and personal life are now critically and more fully comprehended) helps her to come to terms with *that* reality and leads her to delineate and renegotiate her own identity. As a survivor and witness to a traumatic experience (understood in LaCaprian terms)¹⁴ Matilda recognises in the act of telling her story a way to confront her past and to put the pieces of her self back together (going through what Toni Morrison calls a process of "re-memory", cf. Morrison 1987). "I do not know what you are supposed to do with memories like these", Matilda confesses. "It

12 She is saved from drowning by a log which she tellingly names Mr. Jagers after the man who saves Pip's life.

13 Matilda's father had joined the miners and gone to work in Australia, another element that Matilda feels she shares with Dickens's character. In her words: "Me and Pip had something else in common; I was eleven when my father left, so neither of us really knew our fathers" (25).

14 In *History in Transit. Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Dominik LaCapra distinguishes "between the traumatic (or traumatizing) event (or events) and the traumatic experience. The event in historical trauma is punctual and datable. It is situated in the past. The experience is not punctual and has an elusive aspect insofar as it relates to a past that has not passed away - a past that intrusively invades the present and may block or obviate possibilities in the future. So-called traumatic memory carries the experience into the present and future in that the events are compulsively relived or reexperienced as if there were no distance or difference between past and present. In traumatic memory the past is not simply history as over and done with. It lives on experientially and haunts or possesses the self or the community (in the case of shared traumatic events) and must be worked through in order for it to be remembered with some degree of conscious control and critical perspective that enables survival and, in the best of circumstances, ethical and political agency in the present" (LaCapra 2004, 55-6). See also LaCapra 2014.

feels wrong to want to forget. Perhaps this is why we write these things down, so we can move on" (209-10). As it is typical of the *Bildungsroman*, Jones's novel ends with Matilda "making some choice, thereby confirming that the protagonist has achieved a coherent self" (Mickelsen 1986, 418). Forgetting is, conversely, what it seems Mr. Watts has tried to do. A crucial moment in the process of filling those gaps left by her teacher is the visit that Matilda, as a grown up woman, pays to Mr. Watts's first wife in New Zealand. The picture that this woman provides of her husband is explanatory as well as disconcerting. Old photographs in a scrapbook are shown to Matilda and we understand now that the ritual Mr. Watts and Grace repeated on the island was an act they performed in the theatre – "The Queen of Sheba" – and we understand, more importantly, that Mr. Watts has throughout his life mounted a number of such 'performances', constructing multiple 'identities' and related versions of his own self within what is an essentially literary space.

If we read Mr. Watts's life and Matilda's life through that of Pip it might seem that the difference between the two characters in Jones' novel turns precisely on the possibility/impossibility of creating a new identity and on the concept of 'home' and 'homecoming'. As Franco Moretti reminds us, Pip makes more mistakes than any other character in the Dickensian gallery; he has "joyfully grasped at the chance to break away from the world of his childhood" and he will pay for this – his "only desire [...] to return to his first love [...] will be denied him" (Moretti 2000, 184). One might argue that both Mr. Watts and Pip turn away from their own pasts and that for this they will pay. Matilda, however, can seemingly succeed where Mr. Watts/Pip have not. In her concluding words: "Pip was my story, even if I was once a girl, and my face black as the shining night. Pip is my story, and in the next day I would try where Pip had failed. I would try to return home" (256). If in the traditional *Bildungsroman* the notion of a 'return' gives the process of achieving identity a quality of closure which re-establishes the link between childhood and growth, past and present, in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* such a 'return' takes the form of shedding upon the present the disquieting light of the past. We do not know if that of Matilda is to be understood as a figurative return or not. But however complex the notions of 'home' and 'return' might be, the writer allows his reader to perceive at least a glimpse of hope.

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