

What's Up with the Ending?

Brace thyself. There are TWO different endings to *Great Expectations*. We know, we know. But before you go running away, let us discuss just how amazing having two endings can be.

The original is simple. The second one is Hollywood-ified. The original would have premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. The rewritten ending would have premiered at The Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Basically, Dickens wanted to end his novel with a certain note, a certain tone if you will. He didn't want his protagonist to get the girl. However, because *Great Expectations* was serialized, Dickens was writing his "episodes" several weeks in advance. He decided to run his ending by his good friend and playwright, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Sir Edward warned Dickens that if he didn't give Pip a happy ending, the masses would revolt. Heeding his advice, Dickens rewrote his ending in a way that suggests that Pip and Estella will be together forevermore. However, he does so in a way that preserves the melancholy uncertainty and ambiguity that pervades the original ending. Check it out:

The first ending, the original ending, sees Pip and Estella reuniting after many years. Estella is not the bright star she once was. She's been married to an abusive husband who Pip loathes. Pip isn't jonesing for her anymore. They part peacefully, but as strangers. The end.

The second ending comes replete with all but fireworks and Disney music. Pip returns to Satis House to find that it has been torn down, but on the horizon he sees a figure that's looks a lot like Estella. Out of the rubble of the decayed mansion which at one point represented to Pip all that he could never, ever have, comes new love. It's a very phoenix-like moment. In the marsh mists that are rising around them, Pip says, "I saw no shadow of another parting from her" (3.59.46), and we are led to believe that Pip and Estella live happily ever after. However, this final sentence is a bit strange in its emphasis of the word "shadow," for even though Pip tells us that there were no more shadows, the word is weighty and we can't help but see a shadow in our minds. But that's just us. We like to think, however, that in appeasing the masses with this second ending, Dickens infused it with the subterranean undercurrent of another meaning altogether.

Guess which ending is most popular? Yup, even today the novel is usually published with the rewritten ending first, and the original ending following.

Questions to Consider

- How would you describe the tone of each ending?
- Why do you think Dickens eventually rejected the first version?
- Which ending is more optimistic or happy? Which is more ambiguous or uncertain?
- What difference does each ending make in how you view the story you just finished reading? Do the different endings leave you with different understandings of what came before?
- Which do you like better? Why? What makes a good ending anyway?
- Do you think Dickens compromised his original artistic vision to please his audience? Should writers and artists be motivated by what their audience wants and likes or by other concerns? If other concerns, like what?