

A Critique of Victorian Social Class in Dickens' Great Expectations¹

Dr. Md Sufian Ahmed

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Khairun Nessa Begum Women's College

Taaleem City, Hasanpur, Srigouri, Badarpur Karimganj, Assam, India

Abstract

Great Expectations is a masterpiece by Charles Dickens, which portrays expectations for different characters and these expectations are depend on their social classes and social changes in the overall community of the Victorian Period. There are many factors responsible for social changes in Victorian Period and one of the significant elements is industrialization which made individuals from the country side to move towards city communities leaving their cultivation work. We also find the class conflict during this period as the poor and class people used to be like rich people and rich people's attitude to oppress the poor people. Pip, the hero of the novel also has many expectations in his day to day life. Firstly, he dreams of becoming a blacksmith like Joe Gregory, his brother-in-law however, later on he needed to turn into become a gentleman of his word. The Setting of novel Great Expectation is the early Victorian England, the time of inconceivable social changes in the realm and the central point for these progressions was The Industrial Revolution of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Social Outcasts is the dominant theme of this novel which is depicted through the nature and character of Pip, an orphan boy and we also find the portrayal of Upper Class Society through the characters like Estella and Miss Havisham. These Characters represent the society at that time.

All through the original Great Expectations, Charles Dickens observed the class system in Victorian England, from criminals, unfortunate labourers, and working class to the exceptionally rich. To end the slavery was a significant focal point of Social changes and to eliminate burden on women and children. The circumstances in the creation lines were not ideal for working and it was the justification behind disobedience of average workers. The rise of Working Class in this period was critical as it was brought by industrialization. This article focuses around the theme of social class depicted in the novel by concentrating on the characters in particular

¹Address Author Correspondence to Dr. Md Sufian Ahmed at sufian92amu@gmail.com

Accepted: 18 May 2023 / Published online: 31 May 2023

© The Author(s), 2023. Paper ID, 100176.

the hero of the original Pip, portrayed as a representation of development and self-awareness and furthermore contains brief presentation that investigates the job social class in Victorian society. This study concentrate an illuminates Dickens such that he introduced the issues and problems of Victorian society and its social classes in Great Expectations with an significant focus on Pip's struggle with fate, deep quality, and wealth.

Keywords

Expectations, Social Changes, Working Class, Victorian Society, Social Outcasts, Growth and Personal Development.

Introduction

The term "Victorian" connected with Queen Victoria's rule of England from 1837 to 1901 which was followed by her oldest child Edward VII. Victorian Age, portrayed by class-based society was a time of change. There we can find three classes, Working Class, Upper class and Middle Class every one having own arrangement of characteristics to act in the general community. The Industrial Revolution was main consideration responsible for political and monetary change in this period and due to these progressions unfortunate men alongside women and youngsters entered the labouring working power so they can satisfy their essential necessities doing humble positions and experiencing unfortunate living conditions. Great Expectation is portrayed by Charles Dickens depicting different characters in regard to their social classes in the Victorian nation. Dickens mentions his main character Pip, protagonist of the novel as a representation of lower class with high desires and expectations of becoming rich like the upper class people displayed in the novel particularly Miss Havisham and Estella. The story of the novel emphasis the main character Pip, as his expectations change over time and he later wants to be a gentleman. Pip's portrayal of Victorian notions of what it meant to be a "gentleman" is vivid. Pip's life is depicted in Great Expectations from his early years to his adulthood. Great Expectations is a bildungsroman that tells the story of Philip Pirrip, better known to the world as Pip, as he grows up. Great Expectations most significant character is Pip: he is both the hero and the narrator, whose activities are centre of the fundamental plot of the novel. In the society that Charles Dickens portrays in Great Expectations, social class played a significant role. In society, a person's social class is determined not by their character but rather by the manner in which they receive treatment and their education. Many characters from Great Expectations get various treatments on account of their social class and this displays the separation around then in which rich individuals used to disturb poor people. The main purpose of Charles Dickens to write this novel was to show how the lower classes were treated unfairly in Victorian England's class system. Living peacefully was hard for the poor, and moving up from lower to upper class was hard because upper class people used to oppress them. The novel explores a wide range of themes, including aspects of society, revenge and pride, justice, humanity, and so on. Through Pip, the main character, Charles Dickens explores these concepts. Models of Class Structure Through the character Pip in Great Expectations, Charles Dickens depicts models of class structure during the Victorian era. Due to the societal shifts that took place during the Victorian era, Pip

finds it challenging to classify him and other people. Alternately, he tries to establish his own rules in order to determine his identity and position in society by expressing his fate. This novel likewise brings up issue to the issues that were available in the general public like difference, exactitude and social order that were existing with various levelled characterization framework and were embracing another model of social grouping that is subject to self-assurance and the capacity to acquire status by doing activities as opposed to by his introduction to the world. As Tomalin mentions, "The orphan boy, with dead parents and siblings in the graveyard in the marsh, has a cruel elder sister who treats him like a male Cinderella. He encounters monsters- Magwitch, Orlick, Miss Havisham, Jaggers and the nameless man with a closed eye and a file – and can't tell which threatens and which favours him. His innocence becomes tarnished by money and what it seems to promise. He neglects the good spirits who protect him – Joe the blacksmith and Biddy the simple school teacher – and is lured by Estella, a Belle Dame sans Merci" (Tomalin, 2011). From this explanation we get a clear idea of the characters and their social class during the Victorian era, as presented by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectation*, from this character description by Claire Tomalin.

The novel Setting in England in the 1800s and follows the struggles of a young orphan to find a better place in the world. The critical point in Pip's life is visiting Satis House interestingly and his acquaintance with Miss Havisham and her adopted girl, Estella. In the novel, these two characters shaped Pip's life and played a significant role in it. Pip falls in love with Estella after visiting Miss Havisham and Estella, but Estella does not care for his affection because she was taught by Miss Havisham to exorcise people with her beauty. Pip becomes infatuated by their wealth and Estella's charm. Confronting dismissal from Estella, Pip feels embarrassed about his social foundation and wants to turn into a noble man to overcome upon Estella. Pip seeks to establish relationships with a wide range of society members as he investigates these various social classes. According to Upham "Pip's confusion about class structure and definition brings about the possibility for his story to be one of self-discovery and self-definition. The fact that he is a blank slate creates an internal desire for him to find out more about himself. Due to the identities of those around him, Pip understands that because others in society are associated with jobs or ranking that he should also have a means through which to identify himself. This creation of self can only happen if he becomes aware of the identities that exist within society, and selects which specific role he desires to achieve"(Upham, 2012). Pip wants to move up from lower to the upper class, but he faces a lot of challenges along the way. Finally, with the help of a lawyer named Mr. Jaggers, he convinces Pip to move to London and gives him a lot of money to go to school. He expects to become a 'gentleman' who has all the values appreciated by the society in order to have Estella and an upper class lifestyle. Social Class In the nineteenth century, social and urban organization were just beginning to emerge in Britain, and social class plays a significant role in the story of *Great Expectations*.

This is when England saw modern as well as financial development for a huge scope due to the modern revolution and incited wide open populace to move the urban communities leaving their agriculture work. A lower-class family lives in a village at the beginning of the novel. Mr. Joe, a blacksmith, and his wife, a housewife of a lower socioeconomic class. She used to work on the house and frequently complained about her apron. She beats Pip because she was disappointed by her hard work. Novel

high-class, well-dressed women like Miss Havisham and Estella represent an additional family. These are the two different types of families that show the existence of social classes in society. As Dickens share his opinions, "I was scared by the immensity of London. I think I might have had some faint doubts whether it was not rather ugly, crooked, narrow, and dirty" (Dickens,2002)

Pip shifted to London and expensive habits like hiring a personal assistant and spending a lot of money on clothing. As a result, failing in debt. This shows the normal monitors goals without considering anything they jumps at the chance to follow the rich people. Estella also develops as traveling like Pip; She was exposed to false values and was taught by her adopted mother, Miss Havisham, to seduce people with her beauty. In any case, later on she gains from her experience that the real significance of having care about somebody is. In the novel *Great Expectations*, family also plays a significant role as a reflection of social class. Pip, in contrast to Estella, grows up with Joe's support and love, but he does not understand the value of Joe's love until later, when he comes to terms with his mistakes. Learning as a child is an important part of growing up for Pip and Estella. At the end of the novel, Estella notices, "suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be"(Dickens,2002).

Pip education and becoming a gentleman give him the chance to move up the social ladder, which middle- and lower-class people rarely get. In addition, social injustice in a Victorian-era society based on social class is addressed in *Great Expectations*. Pip, the novel's protagonist, aspires to overcome the challenges and escape his social class. Despite his poor upbringing and education, he wants to be a "gentleman." On the one occasion Pip says, "As often I was restless in the night, and that was every quarter of an hour, I reflected what unkindness, what an injury, what an injustice, Biddy had done to me" (Dickens,2002).

Search for Self-identity *Great Expectations* embody each characters look for their self-identity. The novel's main character, Pip, shares his life experiences with the readers, revealing glimpses of his search for social identity. In the novel, Pip is defined as always eager to discover his own identity and feeling lost about his life. He always wonders where he came from and where he needs to go because he lost both of his parents at a young age and was left in the care of his sister and Joe Gargery, his brother-in-law. The novel tells the story of Pip's childhood and adulthood. He describes his own experiences from early childhood to adulthood, and through these descriptions, we learn about the Victorian social class where Pip tries to find his own identity. Throughout his life, Pip was enraged by Victorian society's conduct and eventually considers changing into a strong man. As a matter of fact he was hoping to wed with Estella, rich young women and in view of that he was thinking to change himself and needed to be the upper society. According to Kibin, "The main theme makes a strong point: it doesn't matter what happens to a person in their life, he or she cannot change who they truly are, inside the facades and fancy clothing, behind the reputation and wealth. Unfortunately, Pip doesn't realize this at first: he's always tried to change himself ever since that first cold meeting with Miss Havisham, and especially Estella, and to fit a mold that he thought was what they wanted" (Kibin, 2021).

Pip initially tries to find out his identity of thing in the society, but later becomes overwhelmed and ashamed of him. He is an innocent child who feels terrible for the other characters' unfortunate

circumstances. Pip's modern identity is shaped in large part by Estella's role in his life. Pip loves Estella without thinking the outcomes. Pip is now ashamed of own identity and makes the changes in order to win Estella's love back. Pip also uses Estella to symbolize his moral development and to establish his own identity. When Pip is trying to figure out who he is as a person, he has to deal with a lot of problems, just like Miss Havisham, who always uses Estella to set his morals so he can figure out who is his real benefactor. On the other hand, Pip just wanted to win Estella's love, so he wanted to change how he dressed and how he looked, and he was embarrassed to know his social class.

When Pip starts to admire Magwitch while he is losing Estella to Drummle, it eventually forces him to realize that a person's social status isn't that important and that Magwitch hurt the people who cared for him because he was a gentleman. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens was a reflection of Victorian society in terms of the moral tendencies of the people who lived there at the time. The Victorian era is characterized by virtues like strength, purity, chastity, and honesty, and Victorians typically place a high value on these morals. Pip was enthusiastic in this circumstance, undergoing transformations and addressing a variety of moral issues. Someway Pip fails to remember the qualities he was raised with that Miss Havisham and Estella has adulterated him with rich life. Pip still has high expectations for his life despite having been in such a situation. As a result, his continuous effort to alter himself reveals his struggle to find self-identity.

The novel's central theme is social class. As can be seen in the storyline of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Dickens went into great detail about how the Victorian class system worked through the characters of poor farmers, criminals, the middle class, and the upper class. Pip realizes that worth, affection, and loyalty are more important than class and wealth. Pip accomplished this idea of being unassuming when he can know that, his franticness to wed Estella, nobody's social condition is associated with one's unique person not the slightest bit. The novel's depiction of social class is based on Victorian England's post-Industrial Revolution class system, which may be the most important thing to keep in mind. Dickens prefers characters whose fortunes have been earned through commerce to the nobility and hereditary aristocracy in most of his works. At last toward the finish of novel Pip comes to know that having abundance is everything throughout everyday life and feels embarrassed about his way of behaving with different characters like Joe and Biddy. Through the exploration in light of social class struggle we can say that Pip's acknowledgment regarding somebody's social standing doesn't have anything to do with their genuine characters. A sign of loyalty and honesty is to be a member of the lower class. The upper class's treatment of the lower class is appalling, but the lower class teaches humility and forgiveness.

Conclusion

The novel explores the social class as one of the major theme. As can be seen in the narrator of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Dickens went into great detail about how the Victorian class system worked through the characters of poor agriculturalists, criminals, the middle class, and the upper class. Pip realizes that worth, affection, and loyalties are more important than class and wealth. Pip accomplished this idea of being unassuming when he can know that, his franticness to wed Estella, nobody's social condition is associated with one's unique person not the slightest bit. The novel's

depiction of social class is based on Victorian England's post-Industrial Revolution class system, which may be the most important thing to keep in mind. Dickens prefers characters whose fortunes have been earned through commerce to the nobility and hereditary aristocracy in most of his works.

At last toward the end of novel Pip comes to know that having abundance is everything throughout everyday life and feels embarrassed about his way of behaving with different characters like Joe and Biddy. Through the exploration in light of social class struggle we can say that Pip's acknowledgment regarding somebody's social standing doesn't have anything to do with their genuine characters. A sign of reliability and honesty is to be a member of the lower class. The upper class's dealing and behaviour of the lower class is dreadful, but the lower class teaches humility and forgiveness.

References

1. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020, May 14). Great Expectations. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Expectations-novel-by-Dickens>
2. Dickens, C. (2002) Great Expectations. London: Penguin Books Ltd. p. 161, 281, 477
3. Kibin. (2021). A search for identity in great expectations by charles dickens. <http://www.kibin.com/essayexamples/a-search-for-identity-in-great-expectations-by-charles-dickens-E8eOHzHB> SparkNotes Editors. (2021).
4. SparkNotes: Great Expectations. Retrieved from <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/greatex/themes/>
5. Tomalin, C. (2011) Charles Dickens: A Life. New York: The Penguin Press. p. 377
6. UKEssays. (November 2018). How does Great Expectations Reflect the Victorian Era?. Retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/exploring-victorian-elements-in-great-expectationsenglish-literature-essay.php?vref=1>
7. Upham, A. (2012). "Class Structure in Great Expectations: Dictate Your Own Fate". English Senior Seminar Papers. Paper 4. https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/english_seniorseminar/4