



Great Expectations: A Reflection of Victorian Social Class

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Abstract

Great Expectations is a masterpiece by Charles Dickens, which depicts expectations of various characters and these expectations are based on their social classes and social changes in the society of the Victorian Era. There are many factors responsible for social changes in Victorian Era and one of the important factors is industrialization which made people from the rural side to move towards cities leaving their agriculture job. 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 protagonist of the novel too has many expectations in his life. Firstly he dreams of becoming a blacksmith like Joe Gregory, his brother-in-law but later on he wanted to become a gentleman. The Setting of novel *Great Expectations* is the early Victorian England, the time of great social changes in the nation and the major factor for these changes was The Industrial Revolution of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Social Outcasts is the dominant theme of this novel which is portrayed through the character of Pip, an orphan boy and we also find the depiction of Upper Class Society through the characters like Miss Havisham and Estella. These Characters represent the society at that time. Throughout the novel *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens explored the class system in Victorian England, from criminals, poor peasants, and middle class to the very rich. To end the slavery was a major focus of Social reforms and to remove burdens on women and children. The conditions in the factories were not favorable for working and it was the reason for rebellion of working class. The rise of Middle Class in this period was of significant importance as it was brought by industrialization. This article focuses on the theme of social class portrayed in the novel by studying the characters most importantly the protagonist of the novel Pip, depicted as a symbol of growth and personal development and also contains brief introduction that explores the role social class in Victorian society. This study also throws light on Dickens in a way that he presented the problems of Victorian society and its social classes in *Great Expectations* with a special focus on Pip's struggle with destiny, morality, and wealth.

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

Introduction

The term “Victorian” related to Queen Victoria’s reign of England from 1837 to 1901 which was followed by her eldest son Edward VII. Victorian Age, characterized by class-based society was an age of transition. There we can find three classes, Upper Class, Middle Class and Working Class each one having own set of characteristics to behave in the society. The Industrial Revolution was major factor responsible for political and economic change in this period and because of these changes poor men along with women and children entered the laboring working force so they can fulfill their basic needs doing menial jobs and suffering from poor living conditions. *Great Expectations* is a masterpiece by Charles Dickens portraying various characters in respect to their social classes in the Victorian society. Dickens painted his main character Pip, protagonist of the novel as a representation of lower class with high ambitions of becoming rich like the high class people shown in the novel specially Miss Havisham and Estella. The story of novel revolves around the main character Pip, as his expectations changes over the time and later on he wanted to become a gentleman. Perception of “gentleman” in the Victorian Age is vividly portrayed through the character of Pip.

Great Expectations portrays the life of Pip, from his childhood to adulthood. As a bildungsroman, *Great Expectations* depicts the development of a single character while growing up, Philip Pirrip, better known to the world as Pip. Pip is the most important character in *Great Expectations*: he is both the protagonist and the narrator, whose actions are core of the main plot of the novel. Social class played a vital role in the society which is depicted by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*. Social class is not a measure to define individual’s character but in society it is determined by the manner in which an individual gets a treatment and his or her education. Many characters from *Great Expectations* get different treatments because of their social class and this shows the discrimination at that time in which rich people used to harass the poor’s. The major concern for Charles Dickens for writing this novel was to expose the injustice done to the lower class people in the class system of Victorian England where to live a peaceful was a very hard task for the poor’s and uplifting themselves from lower class to upper class was a very difficult task as upper class people used to oppress them. There are many themes in the novel such as aspects of society, pride and revenge, justice, humanity etc. Charles Dickens explores these themes through the central character Pip.

Models of Class Structure

Charles Dickens depicts models of class structure in the Victorian Era through the character of Pip in *Great Expectations*. Pip finds it difficult to categorize him and others due to the societal changes which occurred in Victorian Age. He alternatively tries to set his own set of rules to find his identity and place it within the society by dictating his fate. This novel also raises question to the problems that were present in the society like dissimilarity, exactitude and social classification that were existing with hierarchical classification system and were adopting a new model of social classification that is dependent upon self determination and the ability to gain status by doing actions rather than by his birth. “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 description of characters by Claire Tomalin, we get the clear idea of the characters as well as their social class in the Victorian era as presented by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectation*.

The Setting of the novel is 1800s of England and its plot follows a young orphan who struggles to find a better place for him in the world. The crucial point in Pip’s life is visiting Satis House for the first time and his introduction with Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter, Estella. These two characters played a key role in Pip’s life as they shaped and molded his life in the novel. After having a visit to Miss

Havisham and Estella, Pip gets infatuated by their richness and charm of Estella, Pip falls in love with Estella but she does not care for his affection as she was taught by Miss Havisham to excruciate people with her beauty. Facing rejection from Estella, Pip feels ashamed of his social background and desires to become a gentleman to win over Estella. As Pip explores these kinds of social classes in the society he looks to form relationships with all kinds of people in the society. "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 desires to lift himself from lower class to the upper class but he faces many obstacles in the way and finally with the help of the lawyer, Mr. Jaggers when he asks Pip to move to London and he was promised a huge amount of money to pursue his education. "Several years later a lawyer named Mr. Jaggers appears and informs Pip that an anonymous benefactor has made it possible for him to go to London for an education; Pip believes that the money is from Miss Havisham, who does not dissuade him of the notion. Once in London, Pip is taught to be a gentleman by Matthew Pocket and his son Herbert, the latter of whom Pip met years earlier at Satis House" (Britannica, 2020).

Social Class

Nineteenth century Britain was a place with new emerging of social and urban organization and social class has played a very important role in the plotline of *Great Expectations*. This is the time when Britain saw industrial as well as economic growth on a large scale because of the industrial revolution and prompted countryside population to move the cities leaving their agriculture job. At the starting of the novel, we find a lower class family living in a village. Mr. Joe, a blacksmith and his wife, kind of a lower class housewife. She used to do the household works and usually complaints about her apron. Because of her hard work, she used to feel disappointed and beats Pip. There is one more family we find in novel high-class, well-appareled women like Miss Havisham and Estella. These are the two different kinds of families that signal the social classes' existence in the society. "On the one hand, Gargery family is a poor, uneducated, living in a village. On the other hand, Miss Havisham lives in a mansion called Satis House. The Pockets' house is full of servants. Estella is a young lady who dances well and educated abroad. Also the other women in Pip's snobbish life in London represent the typical high-class Victorian women. Having seen the two different lives in early years of his life, Pip wants to shift to the upper class. 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" (UKEssays, 2018).

Fascinated by the appearance and facilities of the rich people especially Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip, protagonist of the novel as he too wanted to be rich by uplifting himself from his poor background and become a gentleman like rich people. Early impressions of London as observed by Pip remind the Industrial Revolution and its effects. When Pip comes to London, he is shocked to see the unbelievable crowd resulted from immigration for job and unpleasant smell coming from the factories sewage. "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). As Pip moves to London, he is exposed to urban world with glamour and develops expensive habits like hiring personal servant, buying expensive clothes etc. all this results falling in debt. This shows the common mans aspirations without thinking about anything as they likes to follow the rich people.

Estella too grows as orphan like Pip; she was taught by Miss Havisham, her adopted mother to lure people with her beauty and was exposed to false values. But later on she learns from her experience that the actual meaning of having care about someone is. Family also plays an important role as a part of social class in the novel *Great expectations*, Pip unlike Estella grows with support and love from Joe but was unable to feel the value of love from Joe but later on he conciliates with Joe after understanding his

mistakes. For Pip and Estella learning while growing up is a major part of their growing up process. At end of the novel Estella observes “suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be”(Dickens,2002). Pip’s education and becoming a gentleman provides him the chance to move towards the upper class which middle and lower class people do not get chancevery easily.

Great Expectations also deals with the burning issue of that time i.e. social injustice in a social class based society in the Victorian Era. Protagonist of the novel Pip seeks to break the obstacles and elude from his social class. He wishes to be a “gentleman”, despite of his poor background, education. 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 represents each characters search for their self identity. The major character of the novel, Pip, who shares his life experiences with the readers give us the glimpses of his search for identity in the society. We read in the novel that Pip usuallyfeels confused about his life and always looks forward to find his own identity. He always thinks thatfrom where he come and where he has to go becauseat the very young age he lost his parents and was in the care of his sister and his brother-in-law, Joe Gargery. The story of the novel contains Pip’s childhood as well as adulthood, he narrates his self experiences from his early childhood to adulthood and from his experiences we come to know the setting of Victorian social class where Pip tries to find his personal identity. Pip in his life was angered by the behavior of Victorian Society and ultimately thinks to reform himself into strong man. Actually he was expecting to marry with Estella, a rich girl and because of that he was thinking to change himself and wanted to be the upper class. “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 at first tries to find his identity of thing in the society but later on he becomes overwhelmed andfeels ashamed of him. Heis an innocent child and feels extremely bad for the unfortunate situationother characters. Estella’s role is major in the life of Pip, which results in his modern identity forming.Pip loves Estella without thinking about the consequences. Pip is now ashamed of own identity and forces himself to undergo the changes so that Estella will love him back. For the sake of self identity, Pip also uses Estella to ground his own identity, to denote his moral development. In the course of self identity Pip has to face lots of problem like the character from the novel Miss Havisham, who always use Estella to lay down his morals so he shall know that who is his real benefactor but Pip without thinking of anythingwanted to win Estella’s love, for that reasonhe wanted a change in his clothing style as well as his looks and was feeling ashamedto recognize his own social class.When Pip comes to admire Magwitch while he is losing Estella to Drummle eventually compel him to realize that someone’s social condition is not of that importance and that his behavior as a gentleman caused him to hurt the people who had care for him. Charles

Dickens’s *Great Expectations* reflected the Victorian Society in perspective of moral tendency of that era’s people inside the novel. Victorian Agerepresent some features such as strength, virtue, cleanliness, chastity and honesty and these morals Victorian people usually hold with high consideration. In such condition Pip was enthusiastic and he goes through some changes and deals with different kinds of moral issues. Someway Pip forgets the values he was raised with that Miss Havisham and Estella have corrupted him with rich life. As Pip has faced such situation, still he is having great expectations in his life. So he continually tries to be a changed person and because of that we find his struggle for searching self identity.

Conclusion

The Social Class theme is core of novels plotline. As seen in the plotline of the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, Dickens very minutely explored the class system of Victorian era through the various characters ranging from poor farmers, criminals, middle class and upper class. Pip realizes that class and wealth are not important than worth, affection and loyalty. Pip achieved this concept of being humble when he is able to know that, his madness to marry Estella, no one's social condition is connected to one's original character in no way. "Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the novel's treatment of social class is that the class system it portrays is based on the post-Industrial Revolution model of Victorian England. Dickens generally ignores the nobility and the hereditary aristocracy in favor of characters whose fortunes have been earned through commerce" (SparkNotes, 2021). Finally at the end of novel Pip comes to know that possessing wealth is everything in life and feels ashamed of his behavior with various characters like Joe and Biddy. Through the research based on social class conflict we can say that Pip's realization about someone's social standing has nothing to do with their real characters. Belonging to the lower class is a symbol of loyalty and honesty. The behavior of the upper class towards the lower class is wretched but lower class presents the lesson of humbleness and forgiveness.

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