

CHARLES DICKENS' *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*: A REFLECTION OF THE VICTORIAN ERA'S SOCIAL DYNAMICS

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Britain could be considered a dynamic place that had a wealthy period of time during the nineteenth-century Victorian era by means of pioneering the new forms of social and urban organizations. The Victorian era was foregrounded as a patriarchal, narrow-minded and religious period, for this reason, literary works function as a medium to externalise the social dynamics of the era including the dramatic effects of the industrial revolution such as exploitation and poverty. Many authors prefer to practice a realist approach while projecting this respected era and therefore, as a phenomenon of the change, social dynamics or processes were clearly reflected through many novels. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is a paradigm for the reflection of this process, which is the story of Philip Pirripi, Pip, a young boy who lives with the Gargery household that consists of his sister and her husband Joe since the death of his parents. The novel narrates Pip's great expectations by demonstrating the assistance that was provided by a benefactor which gradually leads him to change the course of his life towards upward mobility. In this respect, the novel could be considered as a reflection of the Victorian era's social dynamics, especially the ecological and economical effects of the industrial revolution, the class-divided social hierarchy, and the separation of spheres. Considering the given objects, the present paper aims to foreground the functioning of class dynamics including mobility and distinctions with references to the concept of the social ladder and the principles of the system.

The disparity and inequality between classes are perpetually fictionalised in the novel through the depiction of characters in terms of their economic status and social behaviours thus, there is a clear dichotomy between the upper class and the lower class that is not only transpired through their income but also their understanding of moral goods. Generally, upper-class people are depicted to be proud and conceited whereas working-class people are in contrast with them hence, depicted as humbler and more naïve. Many members of the upper class position themselves higher than the lower class, which in a way indicates their uneasiness towards the lower class since they regard themselves superior considering the level of education, standards of morality, and understanding of ethics. As might be expected, the dialogues in the novel

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discursively perpetuate the process of victimisation and the dehumanisation of the working class. For instance, during Pip's first visit to Satis House, Estella does not even look at him while feeding him as though he were a "dog" (p. 36) furthermore, during another visit, Estella's arrogance comes to a head when she accuses Pip of snitching and addresses him by calling "rude pig" (p. 46) To continue with Miss Havisham who is a member of the upper class as a result of a legacy rather than an endeavour; she is possessed of extreme hubris. In fact, Pip is manipulated by Miss Havisham for his entertaining skills which he earns money from, she in a way makes a payment for him to "play" with her although she is aware of the "strangeness" of her requests (p. 33). In the same manner, she manipulates Estella as well by using her as a medium to take her revenge on men (Houston, 1992, p. 15) At the same time, the character of lawyer Jaggers also functions as an indirect reflection of the process of humiliating the working class; he constantly washes his hands after talking to someone regardless of whom (p. 93). This behaviour of him could be an outcome of his disgust towards the working class as though they might defile Jaggers. On the other hand, the Gargery Household consists of the working class; Joe as the breadwinner of his family is a blacksmith who cannot either read or write due to not receiving a proper education. To illustrate, during one of the intimate conversations between Jim and Pip, Jim reveals in private his background referring to himself as unlucky because of his subjugation to work in order to provide and take care of his mother since they have escaped from the oppression of his father (p. 27). Furthermore, Jim does not utterly approve of the relationship between Miss Havisham and Pip, in fact, he refers to it as privy and criticises it by suggesting that it is arguable for the working class members to go and entertain the member of the upper class in their own house as if it is a stable job (p.40). One could clearly understand the so-called paradoxical position of Jim; not receiving a proper education, being considered lower and less-qualified are not preventing him to behave logically and realise the strangeness of this befit master-slave relationship.

In the meantime, the judicial system which is behoved to be just and fair is radically affected by the deeply rooted prejudice towards the working class and could be considered deformed and corrupted. In fact, the so-called system functions as a medium to predominantly perpetuate the antagonism and hostility which is based on class status. (Hagan, 1954, p. 170) The trial of Compeyson and Magwitch could be taken into consideration as a support of this argument; Compeyson purposely attires according to the proper dress code which foregrounds his gentlemanliness whereas, Magwitch is an embodiment of low life and vulgarity. From the given instance, one could comprehend the relation between appearance and class position;

physical appearance functions as a determiner of class status and in this case a determiner of their punishment as well; Magwitch's committal is decided to be fourteen years while Compeyson's is seven years in spite of the fact that he as the main but substance malefactor (p.159).

Pip is an individual who struggles with his class position in the social hierarchy due to being a member of the working class. He desperately longs for climbing the social ladder for upward mobility and becoming a gentleman. Estella is the main objective for Pip not only by virtue of her beauty but also her class position, since Pip compares her with himself and considers her unreachable. However, Pip assumes that by becoming a gentleman he could be good enough to succeed the upward mobility and eventually clarify the issue of disparity between him and Estella. By the courtesy of his benefactor, Pip has a chance to move to London and receive proper education to improve his living standards and it is, therefore, could be considered a turning point towards his class mobility. However, his underlying assumptions regarding the members of the upper class, to exemplify hypocrisy, comes in possession of his own truths and even personality. Pip experiences an abrupt but radical change in his personality that leads him to become a swell who behaves selfishly and underestimate his former friends. (Ta, 2015, p. 317) He begins to alienate from his family and friends as a result of involving the upper class. In fact, according to Pip, Joe's coming to London to his neighbourhood is not considered appropriate (p. 99) because he is frightened that Joe would lower his status by embarrassing him.

Social integrity was substantial during the Victorian period and in order to maintain that some restrictions were required to control the subjection of different class members in favour of the continuity of social hierarchy. With an aim of being accepted into upper-class mainstream society, Pip begins to behave differently, in a way he attempts to imitate the dress codes and behaviours of the bourgeoisie in order not to be isolated and marginalised. He begins to spend time in a union for gentlemen and even has a footman to serve him. When Joe and Pip are reunited, Joe addresses him "sir" which is the expected approach from a working-class member during a conversation with the upper class. Despite their relationship by affinity, social hierarchy needs to be respected and maintained and it is, therefore, functions as a medium to symbolise the distinct discrepancy between classes and the strict rules of the system. However, at the end, when the true identity of Pip's benefactor is revealed and he learns that the benefactor is a criminal, Pip experiences self-realisation and becomes aware of the harsh reality of his so-

called class mobility that it is in fact, only the “myth” of upward mobility (p. 143) He begins to question the understanding of the class status and the morality that is mostly constructed by the authority. He gradually comes to a conclusion and decides that class hierarchy is indeed a social power to separate individuals and furthermore, there is not a potential social ladder and class status is not the determiner of one’s morality instead it is one’s own conception and perspective.

All in all, the present paper provided the reader with an analysis of Charles Dicken’s *Great Expectations*. The novel functions as a medium to not only reflect but also perpetuate the Victorian era’s social dynamics and the constructed understanding of bourgeoisie morality. The clear discrimination between different class members is conveyed through the depiction of such complex characters who are struggling with inner conflicts; each character has a particular understanding of life and ideology which are manifested through their personality traits. In conclusion, the strict rules and instructions of a typical class hierarchal system which is also a religious and patriarchal policy are accurately reflected in the novel through the enacted and therefore, acceptable behaviours of characters under the oppressive system.

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