

Portrayal of Characters in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*

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Abstract. Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* is a novel that critically examines the intricate relationship between money and morality in Victorian society. The novel follows the journey of its protagonist, Pip, alongside other key figures such as Miss Havisham, Magwitch, and Jaggers, to explore how wealth influences personal character, ethical decisions, and social relationships. This paper delves into the ways financial prosperity can corrupt, transform, or redeem individuals, emphasizing Dickens' critique of social class distinctions and material obsession in 19th-century England. Pip's character arc serves as the central narrative through which Dickens illustrates the moral dilemmas associated with wealth. Born into poverty, Pip initially values kindness and hard work but later becomes ashamed of his origins upon receiving an anonymous fortune. His misguided belief that wealth equates to superiority causes him to distance himself from Joe and Biddy, individuals who represent genuine goodness. Over time, Pip learns that financial success does not guarantee happiness or virtue, and his return to humility signifies his moral redemption. Through Pip's disillusionment, Dickens exposes the moral emptiness of social mobility when driven by vanity and materialism. Miss Havisham's wealth, in contrast, is a source of stagnation and vengeance. Left at the altar, she allows her heartbreak to define her existence, using her fortune to manipulate Estella into becoming emotionally detached. Miss Havisham's decay—both literal and figurative—symbolizes the destructive power of wealth when it is hoarded and misused. Dickens presents her as a cautionary figure, highlighting the dangers of allowing money to fuel bitterness and isolation rather than personal growth and kindness. Magwitch, an escaped convict, subverts the traditional association of morality with social class. Though deemed a criminal by society, he amasses wealth through hard work and self-sacrifice, using it to help Pip achieve his aspirations. Unlike Miss Havisham, Magwitch's wealth is not a tool for revenge but for upliftment, challenging the rigid Victorian belief that morality is an inherent trait of the upper classes. His generosity and redemption underscore Dickens' argument that nobility of character is defined by one's actions rather than social status or wealth. The paper argues that *Great Expectations* presents a nuanced critique of wealth and morality,

demonstrating that financial status does not inherently determine a person's virtue. Dickens suggests that true worth lies in integrity, empathy, and human connection, rather than in material prosperity. His portrayal of characters shaped by wealth—both positively and negatively—serves as a timeless reflection on the ethical consequences of social ambition and material pursuit.

Keywords: Morality; wealth; obsession; social status; redemption.

Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* is a profound exploration of the relationship between wealth and morality, illustrating how money shapes the lives and decisions of individuals in Victorian society. The novel follows the journey of Pip, an orphan who comes into unexpected wealth, and through his experiences, Dickens critiques the rigid social hierarchy and materialistic aspirations of the time. The novel suggests that financial prosperity does not guarantee moral superiority, and in many cases, it can lead to corruption, disillusionment, or, conversely, redemption.

At the heart of the novel is Pip's transformation as he moves from a modest blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman with great expectations. Initially, Pip is content with his humble life, finding warmth and honesty in his relationships with Joe Gargery and Biddy. However, after his introduction to the wealthy Miss Havisham and the cold yet beautiful Estella, he begins to equate social status with worth. His sudden inheritance of wealth only deepens this belief, leading him to distance himself from his past and adopt a false sense of superiority. Over time, Pip learns that his financial status has not made him morally better or happier—rather, it has estranged him from the people who genuinely cared for him. This realization marks a key theme in Dickens' critique: money alone does not define a person's character.

Miss Havisham, another significant character, presents a cautionary tale of how wealth, when misused, can lead to emotional ruin. Betrayed in love, she becomes consumed by her heartbreak and uses her wealth to exact revenge on men by raising Estella to be heartless. Instead of using her fortune for good, she isolates herself in her decaying mansion, allowing her bitterness to define her existence. Through Miss Havisham, Dickens emphasizes that material wealth without emotional fulfillment leads to a life of despair and stagnation.

On the other hand, Magwitch, the convict who turns out to be Pip's benefactor, represents how money can serve as a means of redemption. Despite his criminal background, Magwitch earns his wealth through hard work and self-sacrifice, hoping to provide Pip with a better future. His generosity contradicts the societal belief that nobility and virtue are tied to birth and social class. Through Magwitch, Dickens suggests that the value of wealth lies in how it is used rather than how it is acquired.

Pip: The Corrupting Power of Wealth

At the beginning of *Great Expectations*, Pip is portrayed as a humble and kind-hearted boy, content with his modest life despite the hardships he endures. Raised by his harsh and abusive sister, Mrs. Joe, and her kind and protective husband, Joe Gargery, Pip's early life is shaped by love and hardship. Joe serves as a father figure, teaching Pip the values of hard work and honesty. However, Pip's visit to Miss Havisham's mansion marks the first shift in his perception of class and self-worth. When Estella mocks his coarse hands and thick boots, Pip experiences deep shame:

I took the opportunity of being alone in the courtyard, to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. My opinion of those accessories was not favourable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages. (*Great Expectations*, 61).

This moment plants the seed of social aspiration in Pip, making him believe that wealth and refinement determine a person's value.

Pip's transformation accelerates when he unexpectedly inherits a fortune from a secret benefactor, whom he mistakenly assumes to be Miss Havisham. With his newfound wealth, he moves to London to become a gentleman, distancing himself from his humble origins. As his status rises, he grows increasingly ashamed of Joe, who represents his working-class background. When Joe visits Pip in London, Pip feels embarrassed by his simple manners, "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money" (222). This stark contrast between Pip's former and current self-highlights the corrupting influence of wealth on his values and relationships.

However, as Pip matures, he gradually realizes that his pursuit of social status has been misguided. His expectations crumble when he learns that his benefactor is not Miss Havisham but the convict Abel Magwitch, challenging his notions of class and worth. Pip initially recoils at the revelation, but he later comes to admire Magwitch's kindness and selflessness. This realization marks Pip's moral redemption, as he acknowledges that true worth lies not in wealth but in integrity and loyalty. He reflects on his previous arrogance with regret, saying, "I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe"(447).

Miss Havisham: Wealth as a Source of Bitterness and Revenge

Miss Havisham, one of the most haunting figures in *Great Expectations*, exemplifies how wealth does not guarantee happiness or virtue. Despite her immense fortune, she is emotionally devastated and trapped in a perpetual state of decay. After being abandoned at the altar by her fiancé, Compeyson, she becomes fixated on her heartbreak, freezing time at the moment of her betrayal. She wears her tattered wedding dress for decades and leaves her wedding feast untouched, allowing it to rot. Pip describes the eerie scene upon first seeing her:

She was dressed in rich materials—
satins, and lace, and silks—all of white.
Her shoes were white. And she had a
long white veil dependent from her hair,
and she had bridal flowers in her hair,
but her hair was white. (56-57)

This image of a wealthy woman decaying in her self-imposed isolation serves as a powerful metaphor for how wealth, when combined with emotional suffering and obsession, leads to ruin rather than fulfillment.

Instead of using her wealth to rebuild her life or help others, Miss Havisham seeks vengeance against all men. She adopts Estella and raises her to be cold and unfeeling, moulding her into a tool for revenge. She instructs Estella to "Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!" (96). This line reveals Miss Havisham's deep bitterness and her determination to use her wealth not for love or kindness, but for manipulation and destruction. She believes that by making Estella emotionally detached, she can inflict suffering upon others, just as she was hurt. However, in doing so, she not only damages Estella's ability to love but also ensures her own continued misery.

Miss Havisham's obsession ultimately leads to her downfall. When Pip confronts her with the consequences of her actions, she is overcome with guilt. Realizing the damage she has done, she begs Pip for forgiveness: "What have I done! What have I done!" (406). This moment of despair highlights Dickens' critique of a society that values wealth and status over genuine human relationships. She finally understands that money and revenge have brought her nothing but suffering. Tragically, shortly after her redemption, she is engulfed in flames when her decayed wedding dress catches fire, symbolizing the destructive power of her long-held resentment.

Magwitch : Wealth as a Tool for Redemption

In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch, the escaped convict, serves as a powerful contrast to Miss Havisham in the way he uses wealth. While Miss Havisham's fortune fuels her resentment and destruction, Magwitch's hard-earned money becomes a tool for redemption and selflessness. His transformation from a desperate criminal to a devoted benefactor challenges the rigid Victorian belief that morality is inherently tied to social class. Unlike the aristocrats and gentlemen Pip idolizes, Magwitch proves that kindness and nobility can emerge from the most unexpected places.

Magwitch first appears as a desperate, threatening figure when he encounters young Pip on the marshes. Starving and shivering, he demands food and a file to remove his shackles. Despite his fear, Pip pities the man and secretly helps him. This small act of kindness leaves a lasting impression on Magwitch. Later in the novel, Pip learns that his mysterious benefactor is not Miss Havisham, as he had assumed, but Magwitch, who has spent years in Australia working tirelessly to earn money for Pip's future. Upon revealing the truth, Magwitch expresses his deep pride in Pip, telling him, "I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work" (329). This moment shatters Pip's illusions about wealth and class, forcing him to recognize that true generosity and goodness can come from even the lowest rungs of society.

Magwitch's character challenges the Victorian-era belief that social standing determines a person's worth. Although he is labelled a criminal, his actions prove him to be more noble than many of the so-called gentlemen in the novel. Unlike Compeyson, a well-dressed and

educated man who cruelly deceives Miss Havisham, Magwitch is rough and unrefined but possesses genuine loyalty and gratitude. Pip initially recoils at the idea of being supported by a convict, but as he spends time with Magwitch, he comes to see him as a father figure. By the end of the novel, Pip acknowledges Magwitch's moral superiority, saying, "I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe" (367)

Jaggers and Wemmick: The Dual Nature of Wealth and Morality

In *Great Expectations*, Mr. Jaggers, the formidable London lawyer, epitomizes a world where wealth and legal power often overshadow moral considerations. As a man of immense influence, he navigates the legal system with ruthless efficiency, prioritizing strategy over sentiment. Unlike Magwitch, who uses his wealth for redemption, or Miss Havisham, whose fortune fuels her decay, Jaggers operates in a realm where morality is secondary to professional success. His cold pragmatism is evident in the way he interacts with Pip, treating him not as a person but as a client bound by legal obligations. He warns Pip early on, "Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There's no better rule" (340). This reflects his deeply ingrained skepticism, shaped by years of working in a corrupt legal system where wealth often dictates justice.

Despite his detachment, Jaggers is not entirely devoid of a moral compass. One of his most striking moments comes when Pip realizes that Jaggers, in his own way, has tried to do good—such as saving Estella from a life of crime by taking her away from her criminal parents. However, he does not act out of sentimentality but rather from a belief in the power of control and opportunity. His manner remains strictly professional, never allowing personal emotions to interfere with his work, "I have no feelings here. I have only one client at a time" (423), he tells Pip, reinforcing his philosophy that emotions have no place in his professional world.

In contrast, his clerk, John Wemmick, provides a fascinating counterpoint. At Jaggers' office, Wemmick mirrors his employer's detached and calculating nature, advising Pip to treat financial and personal matters separately, "Portable property, that's the rule to go by" (302). However, outside of work, Wemmick transforms into a warm and caring individual, devoted to his aged father at their cheerful home, the "Castle." Unlike Jaggers, who embodies a rigid, all-encompassing approach to law and wealth, Wemmick demonstrates that one can function

within a corrupt system without being morally compromised. Pip observes this contrast, realizing that Wemmick's personal life offers an alternative view of success—one that includes compassion and emotional fulfillment.

Conclusion

Great Expectations offers a penetrating critique of the complex relationship between wealth and morality in Victorian society. Pip's transformation from a humble, kind-hearted boy into an aspiring gentleman encapsulates how the allure of wealth can distort personal values and corrupt genuine relationships. His growing shame for his modest origins—symbolized by his dismay at his “coarse hands and common boots” (61) - marks the beginning of his internal conflict. As he distances himself from Joe Gargery, whose steadfast honesty and unconditional love once defined his world, Pip's misguided pursuit of social status leads him to abandon the very virtues that originally nurtured him.

Miss Havisham's tragic narrative further underscores that money does not secure happiness or moral fulfillment. Her fixation on past betrayal and her deliberate decay—epitomized by her frozen bridal ensemble—reveals how wealth, when intertwined with bitterness and revenge, breeds ruin rather than redemption. By using her fortune to shape Estella into an instrument of vengeance—commanding her to “Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!” She demonstrates the destructive potential of misdirected affluence.

Conversely, Magwitch's evolution from a desperate convict to Pip's generous benefactor challenges the era's rigid class prejudices. His declaration, “I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work”, illustrates that nobility is not a birthright but is earned through sacrifice and selfless action. Additionally, the contrasting personas of Jaggers and Wemmick highlight that money itself is neutral; it is the individual's approach—whether cold and detached or warm and compassionate—that determines its moral impact.

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Work Cited

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