

Role of Social Class and Mobility in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*

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Abstract. This research article explores the themes of social class and mobility in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, focusing on how the novel critiques the rigid class structure of Victorian England. Dickens presents a world in which class distinctions are deeply ingrained, influencing identity, personal relationships, and opportunities for advancement. Through the protagonist Pip's journey—from a humble orphan to an aspiring gentleman—Dickens examines the complexities of social mobility, exposing both its allure and its limitations. Pip's initial belief that wealth and status equate to personal worth drives him to reject his working-class origins, particularly his loyal guardian Joe Gargery. However, as Pip matures, he realizes that true nobility lies in kindness, integrity, and moral character rather than in aristocratic refinement. It further investigates the roles of other key characters to deepen the discussion on class dynamics. Joe Gargery, though uneducated and simple, embodies dignity and genuine goodness, standing in stark contrast to the self-serving and deceitful upper-class figures such as Compeyson. Miss Havisham, despite her wealth, lives in emotional ruin, demonstrating that money does not guarantee fulfillment. Meanwhile, Magwitch, an escaped convict, subverts traditional class expectations by amassing wealth and using it to uplift Pip, thereby challenging the Victorian notion that morality is inherently linked to social standing. By placing *Great Expectations* within the historical context of 19th-century England, this study highlights how Dickens critiques the social hierarchy of his time, where class mobility was increasingly possible due to industrialization but remained fraught with moral and personal consequences. Using literary analysis and historical insights, this research argues that Dickens ultimately challenges the conventional notion that class status determines worth. Instead, he advocates for a society that values character, integrity, and human connection over material success.

Keywords: Industrialization; convention; integrity; tradition; moral character.

Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* offers a profound exploration of social class and mobility, revealing the complexities and illusions of the

Received : 21st March, 2025; Accepted : 5th April, 2025

Victorian class system. Through Pip's transformative journey from a poor orphan to an aspiring gentleman, Dickens critiques the rigid social hierarchy of his time and questions the belief that wealth and status equate to true worth. Pip, initially content with his modest life as Joe Gargery's apprentice, first experiences class consciousness when he visits Miss Havisham's decaying mansion. Estella's scornful remark—"He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy! ... And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!" (*Great Expectations*, 60)—ignites Pip's deep-seated shame about his working-class roots and fuels his desire to rise above them.

As Pip unexpectedly inherits wealth from an unknown benefactor, he moves to London, believing that financial prosperity will grant him happiness and respectability. However, his newfound social standing alienates him from those who genuinely care for him. Joe Gargery, despite his lack of refinement, embodies true nobility through his kindness and unwavering loyalty. When Joe visits Pip in London, Pip feels ashamed of his humble background, admitting, "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money" (222). This moment underscores the theme that social mobility, when driven by superficial aspirations, often leads to moral and emotional detachment rather than fulfillment. Dickens also contrasts the fates of other characters to highlight the arbitrary nature of class distinctions. Miss Havisham, though wealthy, is emotionally and psychologically destroyed by betrayal. Magwitch, a convict, subverts societal expectations by amassing a fortune and selflessly using it for Pip's betterment. His words—"I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work" (327)—challenge the notion that virtue and nobility are reserved for the upper class.

Ultimately, *Great Expectations* argues that true gentility is defined not by birth or wealth but by character. Pip's eventual recognition of Joe's moral superiority and his remorse for abandoning his roots illustrate Dickens' critique of a society that prioritizes status over integrity. Through its rich character portrayals and social critique, the novel exposes the illusions of class mobility and asserts that human worth is not determined by social rank but by personal virtue.

The Illusion of Gentility: Pip's Aspirations and Disillusionment

At the beginning of the novel, Pip is a humble and kind-hearted orphan raised by his abusive sister, Mrs. Joe, and her kind and simple husband,

Joe Gargery. Despite his modest upbringing, Pip is largely content with his station in life until he visits Miss Havisham's eerie Satis House and encounters Estella. Estella's cold demeanour and scorn for Pip's common origins awaken in him a deep sense of inferiority. This moment is pivotal in shaping Pip's aspirations for upward social mobility:

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.(61)

It illustrates how Pip internalizes class-based shame, seeing himself as unworthy in the eyes of the upper class. His desire to transcend his humble origins becomes an obsession, reinforced by his mistaken belief that Miss Havisham is his secret benefactor. When he unexpectedly inherits wealth from an anonymous source, he views it as validation of his social aspirations.

However, Pip's transition to the life of a gentleman in London is fraught with moral and personal failures. He grows distant from Joe, the embodiment of humble integrity, and begins to adopt the superficial manners of high society. He even admits, in an almost transactional tone, "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money." (222)

Here, Pip's disdain for his past reveals how wealth and status have initially corrupted his values. He believes that financial prosperity equates to refinement and worth, but this illusion is gradually dismantled.

True Nature of Gentility: Magwitch's Role in Pip's Realization

The most dramatic turning point in Pip's understanding of social class comes when he learns that his mysterious benefactor is not Miss Havisham, but the convict Abel Magwitch. This revelation shatters Pip's illusions about gentility and forces him to reassess his own prejudices. Initially, he is horrified, "The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast." (327)

Pip's reaction underscores the deep-seated class biases that he has absorbed from society. However, as he spends more time with Magwitch, he realizes that nobility is not determined by wealth or birth but by character and actions. Magwitch, despite his criminal past, has worked tirelessly to secure Pip's future out of genuine affection and gratitude. In one of the most poignant moments of the novel, Magwitch tells Pip, "I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work." (326-327). This highlights Magwitch's selfless love, directly contrasting with the so-called gentlemen of the novel, such as Compeyson, who is refined in appearance but deceitful and cruel. By the end of the novel, Pip acknowledges his own misguided judgments, admitting, "I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe." (456)

Miss Havisham and Estella: The Corrupting Influence of Wealth

Miss Havisham and Estella serve as prime examples in *Great Expectations* of how wealth, when combined with emotional trauma and manipulation, can lead to personal ruin rather than fulfillment. Although both characters are privileged in terms of financial status, they suffer deeply from their distorted views of love, human connection, and self-worth. Through their tragic arcs, Dickens critiques the Victorian society that equated wealth with superiority, demonstrating that material fortune alone does not guarantee happiness or moral integrity.

Miss Havisham, once an heiress full of hope, becomes a cautionary figure of the destructive power of wealth when combined with heartbreak. After being jilted at the altar by her fiancé, Compeyson, she allows her pain to consume her, transforming her home, Satis House, into a decaying shrine to her betrayal. Rather than healing or moving forward, she remains trapped in the past, still wearing her tattered wedding dress and keeping her wedding feast untouched for decades. Her bitterness manifests in her cruel manipulation of Estella, whom she raises to be incapable of love. She instructs Estella with chilling words, "Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!" (96). Instead of using her immense wealth for good, Miss Havisham wields it as a tool of revenge, warping an innocent child into a weapon against men. This reinforces Dickens' criticism of a society where privilege can lead not to kindness and generosity, but to cruelty and self-destruction.

However, Miss Havisham does experience a moment of redemption when she finally realizes the immense harm she has caused, both to Estella and to Pip. Upon witnessing the pain Estella endures in her own loveless marriage and hearing Pip confront her about his suffering, she is overcome with remorse. In a moment of despair, she cries, "What have I done! What have I done!" (406). This moment of self-awareness humanizes Miss Havisham, showing that even those consumed by bitterness can find redemption. Yet, her tragic end—perishing in a fire when her wedding dress catches aflame—symbolizes the ultimate consequences of a life fuelled by resentment and obsession. Her death serves as a grim warning about the perils of clinging to the past and allowing wealth to dictate one's emotional life.

Estella, raised by Miss Havisham to be emotionally detached, becomes another victim of wealth's corrupting influence. Although she is beautiful, refined, and highly sought after in high society, her inability to love or form genuine connections leaves her deeply unfulfilled. She marries Drummle, a man of aristocratic status, yet her marriage is an abusive and miserable one. Her high social standing does not bring her happiness; rather, it reinforces the idea that status without emotional depth is meaningless. Dickens emphasizes this theme through Estella's own admission to Pip when she acknowledges, "I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape." (495)

Through Estella's suffering, Dickens critiques the notion that social mobility equates to personal fulfillment. Her transformation at the end of the novel suggests that true redemption and contentment do not come from wealth or social standing, but from self-awareness and the capacity for love.

The fates of Miss Havisham and Estella highlight Dickens' central message: wealth, when unaccompanied by compassion and morality, leads only to misery and destruction. While Miss Havisham remains trapped by her past until her tragic end, Estella, through suffering, gains the opportunity for personal growth. In both cases, Dickens dismantles the illusion that social elevation guarantees happiness, reinforcing the novel's broader critique of a rigid and materialistic class system.

Joe Gargery: The Embodiment of True Nobility

Joe Gargery, the humble blacksmith in *Great Expectations*, stands as a moral counterpoint to the novel's more socially elevated yet morally flawed characters. While Pip initially views Joe as unsophisticated and unworthy of admiration, he later realizes that Joe embodies the true essence of nobility—not through wealth or refinement, but through kindness, honesty, and integrity. Throughout the novel, Joe remains constant in his goodness, offering a stark contrast to the corrupting influence of social ambition.

Joe's wisdom is deeply rooted in his simple yet strong moral values. When Pip, as a child, is caught lying about the extravagant feast he supposedly had at Miss Havisham's house, Joe gently reprimands him, emphasizing the importance of honesty, "Lies is lies. However they come, they didn't ought to come, and they come from the father of lies." (70).

Unlike other characters who manipulate or deceive to gain social advantage, Joe believes in truthfulness and integrity. His words, though spoken in a simple and unpolished manner, carry profound ethical weight. This moment foreshadows Pip's later struggles with self-deception and moral corruption as he attempts to navigate the rigid social hierarchy of Victorian England.

As Pip ascends the social ladder, his perception of Joe changes. He begins to see Joe as a symbol of his lower-class past, something he is eager to distance himself from. When Joe visits Pip in London, Pip feels embarrassed by Joe's lack of refinement, even wishing he could avoid the visit entirely, "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money." (222). This moment highlights how Pip, blinded by his desire to be a gentleman, fails to recognize the true worth of Joe's character. However, Joe, being unselfish and understanding, does not hold Pip's behaviour against him. His unwavering loyalty and quiet dignity underscore his inner strength.

Joe's character becomes even more significant as Pip undergoes his moral awakening. When Pip falls into debt and illness, it is Joe who selflessly comes to his aid, paying off his debts and nursing him back to health. Pip, now humbled, finally understands the depth of Joe's generosity and moral superiority. Reflecting on his past arrogance, he acknowledges, "I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe." (456) This

realization marks Pip's redemption and reinforces the novel's central message: true gentility is not determined by wealth or status but by one's character and actions.

Joe Gargery serves as Dickens' critique of a society that values material success over virtue. Through Joe, the novel upholds the idea that moral worth is independent of class and that genuine kindness and integrity are the highest forms of nobility.

Conclusion

Through Pip's journey, *Great Expectations* serves as a powerful critique of the rigid class structure of Victorian society, challenging the deeply ingrained belief that wealth and status equate to virtue. Dickens uses Pip's transformation to illustrate the dangers of blindly pursuing social mobility, demonstrating that true nobility is defined not by one's financial standing but by one's character. Pip's evolution from an impressionable young boy, eager to rise above his humble beginnings, to a mature man who recognizes the true worth of integrity and kindness, reinforces Dickens' central argument: the illusion of class distinctions often obscures the reality of human worth.

At the start of the novel, Pip, an orphan raised by his abusive sister and the kind-hearted Joe Gargery, is largely unaware of class differences. He is content with his modest life until his visit to Miss Havisham's estate introduces him to the concept of social hierarchy. When Estella mocks his coarse hands and thick boots, Pip becomes painfully aware of his lower-class status and begins to equate refinement with superiority. He internalizes the belief that becoming a gentleman will grant him self-worth, a misconception that shapes much of his journey. His initial assumption that Miss Havisham is his benefactor further fuels this illusion, reinforcing the idea that wealth is a gift bestowed upon those who are deemed worthy.

However, as Pip moves through the upper echelons of society, he realizes that wealth does not necessarily indicate goodness. His time in London exposes him to characters like Bentley Drummle, a man of noble birth but despicable character, who serves as a stark contrast to Joe Gargery. While Drummle possesses everything Pip once aspired to—education, status, and wealth—he lacks the fundamental qualities of kindness and honor. In contrast, Joe, the humble blacksmith Pip once

regarded as simple and embarrassing, proves to be a figure of unwavering goodness. Pip's growing dissatisfaction with his life as a gentleman, and his eventual acknowledgment of Joe's virtues, marks the beginning of his moral awakening.

The greatest turning point in Pip's transformation comes when he discovers that his benefactor is not Miss Havisham, but Magwitch, the convict he once feared. This revelation forces Pip to confront the reality that his social aspirations were built on a false foundation. Initially repulsed by the idea that his fortune comes from a criminal, Pip gradually comes to recognize Magwitch's true nature—his generosity, resilience, and unwavering loyalty. As he nurses the dying Magwitch, Pip acknowledges, "I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe." (456). This moment signifies Pip's ultimate realization that nobility is not defined by birth or wealth, but by moral strength and selflessness.

By the end of the novel, Pip has come full circle. His disillusionment with wealth and status leads him back to the values he had abandoned—loyalty, humility, and love. His transformation aligns with Dickens' broader social critique: the true measure of a person lies not in their position in society, but in their capacity for kindness and integrity.

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