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Altered Perspective

Jaymee L. Wagner

Liberty University, jwagner39@liberty.edu

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Jaymee Wagner

Dr. Carl Curtis

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Altered Perspective

In 1861 Charles Dickens published one of his most well-known novels of all time: *Great Expectations*. Set in early Victorian England, this book allows us a peek into the life of Philip Pirrip, otherwise known as Pip. Through this character's idealistic outlook on life, Dickens conveys some poignant themes that are surprisingly relevant to today's readers. Over the course of the story, Pip's ideals about life subtly but drastically alter as he discovers a reality far different than his imagination. Men and women contain more layers than we can observe on the surface, and Pip learns that there is more to evaluating people than just their social standing. Slowly, reality twists Pip's conception of social classes into a muddied, gray mess, as "he finds himself fallen from a world where pure vertical release seemed possible—where one might reach 'the stars'—into a world of horizontal entanglements" (Kucich 93-4). Throughout the course of the novel, Pip gradually comes to understand the common misconceptions of social ranks and the definition of a gentleman.

Using his characters and setting, Charles Dickens unfolds a story that discusses the injustice and misunderstandings of the social classes of nineteenth-century England. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens discloses his own opinions about society through the eyes of Pip: "In following Pip's adventures we perhaps come closest to the intimate center of Dickens' apprehension of the world" (Miller 250). Cleverly, Dickens creates the voice of Pip to communicate a clear and crucial message to his readers, based on his own life experience. Like

his protagonist, Dickens naively trusted the nature of the established social classes because he knew nothing else. But as he grew older, and especially during his father's imprisonment at Marshalsea, young Charles' eyes slowly opened to the realities of "the intricacies of lawyers and the absurdities of their clerks; the full meaning of 'shabby-genteel'; the ways of landladies and lodgers; the social pretensions of obscure men" (House 20). Throughout his life, Charles continued to lose faith in the justice of the class divisions, and by the time he wrote *Great Expectations*, Dickens "had long despaired of the institutions of social power . . . [and] a profound questioning of such basic conditions of Victorian life as class privilege and the effects of capital became the ground bass [sic] of his work" (Cheadle 78). In many ways, Dickens suffered the same disappointments as Pip when he realized that social standing does not define a person's morals insofar as he had always believed in the stereotypes included in the class structure. Pip's story expresses Dickens' disappointment in the sufficiency of the social structure of his time. Through experiences very similar to Pip's, Dickens' "world becomes a world of great expectations cruelly disappointed" (Shaw 70). When Dickens penned this famous novel, he masterfully revealed his own convictions by showing Pip's journey from innocence to understanding.

At the beginning of the novel, Pip knows little outside of his cottager-class world. Although he clearly dislikes parts of his village life, young Pip has never encountered higher-class living and he can only imagine the luxuries of that existence. But his story takes a drastic turn when Miss Havisham summons him to Satis House. His perception of social classes slowly starts to change as he begins to interact with people of a higher rank. Almost from the moment he sets foot on the grounds of Satis House, Pip succumbs to the longing to better himself, and the seeds of this desire grow rapidly as Estella coldly disdains his poor upbringing. He tells us that

Estella's "contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it" (Dickens 55). Once he realizes that there is a glamorous world above him, he longs to annihilate all evidence of his common roots in order to rise into that higher class. As a young boy, Pip becomes "hopelessly smitten by Estella's beauty; in the presence of her superior manners he realizes the crudity of his own upbringing and the vast difference that stretches between Joe Gargery's forge and the polite world" (Pickrel 160). Pip's discontentment with his common breeding begins with this first visit to Satis House, and continues to grow over the time that he spends visiting Miss Havisham and Estella. Overcome with dissatisfaction and "no longer content with the humble expectations Joe Gargery had foreseen for his 'prentice days'" (Pickrel 161), Pip acquires an insatiable desire to escape from his lower-class world. This eventually leads him to passionately exclaim to Biddy: "I want to be a gentleman . . . I am not at all happy as I am. I am disgusted with my calling and with my life" (Dickens 120). So begins the next leg of Pip's journey away from childish innocence.

Just a little while after this confidential conversation with Biddy, a stranger appears with the astounding news that Pip "will come into a handsome property... [and will] be immediately removed from his present sphere of life and from this place, and be brought up as a gentleman—in a word, as a young fellow of great expectations" (Dickens 130). Elated, Pip believes that his wildest dreams to become a genteel member of the upper class have actually come true, and "that Estella and all the privileges possessed by a gentleman are destined for him by Miss Havisham... He will suddenly be transformed from the class of the exploited to the class of the exploiters" (Miller 261-2). Pip cannot believe this unexpected upheaval of his future, but he gladly completes his education as dictated by his benefactor, who remains unknown, and decorates himself as a gentleman. However, he surrenders so completely to his own pleasure that "he is

determined to turn away completely from his humble origins and live with his new social identity” (Umunc n. pag.). As time passes and Pip merges into the world of the gentleman, he “becomes very conceited and snobbish upon the sudden and unexpected change in his social status from a downtrodden orphan and apprentice to a gentleman; pride or conceit becomes his hamartia” (n. pag.). Tragically, Pip becomes so consumed with his own genteel existence that he finds himself “caught in active struggles of his own for superiority, wanted or unwanted—his accusation that Biddy envies him, his involuntary humiliation of Joe, his feud with Bentley Drummle, and, most especially, his entire project to win Estella” (Kucich 110). Very shortly after receiving his great expectations, Pip becomes so wrapped up in his own desires that he treats his family with disdain and enmeshes himself in the upper class. He soon discovers that his childish imagination of what it means to be a gentleman does not match reality.

Lurking in the corners of the upper class, men like Bentley Drummle ruin Pip’s ideals of a basically righteous and genteel rank. Drummle, a lazy, cruel, arrogant young man, shatters Pip’s dreams by marrying Estella while Pip still clings to the hope that she will marry him. Brian Cheadle writes that “In Bentley Drummle, the coarseness of snobbish disdain is exposed; and the upper-class tendency to treat love as a heartless power-play is revealed as a degradation” (80). As Pip recognizes Drummle’s wickedness, reality mars his dreams and crushes his ideals when Drummle marries Pip’s beautiful, educated, genteel, and heartless Estella. She will have to endure eleven years of spousal abuse before Drummle’s evil ways kill him. A broken Estella then is ready and worthy to become Pip’s wife. Pip truly comes to understand that a person’s character cannot be determined by his or her social class. He has spent the majority of his youth striving to rise through the social ranks, and once he achieves his goal, he discovers that evil

exists in all classes. But Pip still has more to learn, for despite the wickedness in every rank, righteousness exists too.

Many years after Pip receives his great expectations, his benefactor finally reveals himself by unexpectedly showing up at Pip's lodgings. Horrified, Pip learns that he already knows his true benefactor: Magwitch, the convict from the marshes. During Pip's childhood, this man embodied for him "everything that a weak and passive child fears in the adult world: its capacity for wickedness, the brutality of its emotions, its strength and violence and consummate egoism, the threat of being utterly outcast and utterly alone" (Pickrel 159). As a grown man, Pip cannot believe that he owes his affluence to a despicable criminal from the lowest class. Dejected, he finds that his "rise in the world has not been an act of magic; it has actually been a reward for theft, for what he has regarded as the most shameful deed of his life" (165). The man who forced Pip to steal and caused Pip's shame and guilt for so many years now reveals himself as the source of Pip's delightful great expectations. Completely enmeshed in the attitudes of the upper class, Pip treats this man with disdain and even plans to refuse to accept his annual income from a convict. He vividly describes his feelings, telling us that 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" (Dickens 304). However, over the course of time "Pip proves his right to be the hero of his tale by turning repugnance into a love for the outcast" (Cheadle 79). Learning to look beyond Magwitch's outer branding as a criminal, Pip discovers the beauty and well-meaning intentions in his convict's heart: "Inspired by an altogether noble fixed idea, [Magwitch] had lifted himself out of his rut of crime and honestly made a fortune for the child who had fed him when he was starving" (Shaw 70). Up until this point, Pip has refused to believe that righteousness could be found among members of the lower

class. But here he again realizes that his childish imaginations were false, and some of the most genuine hearts exist in people of a lower rank. After years of growth, Pip finally understands that in order to judge a person's character, one must look past social rank because evil and righteousness exist in every class.

Throughout the course of the novel, Pip's perspective of a gentleman drastically alters, and his experiences lead us to ask some interesting questions. What is a gentleman? Is a gentleman a gentleman because he was born into the upper class? Can one rise to the position of gentleman? Can one be a gentleman and treat others wickedly? Can one be a gentleman while remaining in the lower class? Pip seeks answers to all of these questions, and through Pip Dickens shows us "his recognition of the bankruptcy of the idea of the gentleman" (Miller 269). By the end of the novel, Pip discovers "that the lowly Joe's trustworthiness and tolerance, and his payment of Pip's debts . . . best exemplify the essential bourgeois virtues" (Cheadle 81). Moral character is not necessarily found among the members of the upper class alone, and Pip comes to understand that "true gentility is an inborn moral quality, not deriving from wealth and status, and that Joe and Biddy . . . are the very embodiments of this quality" (Umunc n. pag.). Pip experiences some amazing pain and growth throughout this story, but by the end of it he "stands ready to face the truth which lies at the very center of *Great Expectations*: all the claims made by wealth, social rank, and culture to endow the individual with true selfhood are absolutely false" (Miller 271). Pip finds the definition of a gentleman not in social status, but in the heart.

Throughout *Great Expectations*, reality twists and destroys Pip's innocent ideals of a clear-cut, black-and-white world, and his experiences morph his innocent trust in the rigidity of human social classes into a mature understanding of a higher morality. Masterfully, Dickens creates the voice of Pip to communicate some critical problems with what was then the common

perception of the English social classes. Although Dickens never directly mentions God's law, he certainly implies belief in a supreme moral standard throughout his novel that looks deeper than human law. Pip chooses to judge moral character by looking past the human conceptions of society into the heart of each person. He realizes the masquerade of the class system, and learns to examine a person's integrity instead of merely observing his or her outer conformity to the law. After he spends some time among the upper class, his "expectations lose their greatness, and Pip is saved from the grosser dangers of wealth; but by the end he has gained a wider and deeper knowledge of life" (House 156). As his idealistic world crumbles into the mess around him, Pip comes to understand that people are made of much more than their social rank, for it is the state of their hearts that truly matters. Through the persona of Pip, Dickens seeks to communicate that an idealistic, clear-cut, social class system of morals cannot exist: evil slithers into the upper class, while righteousness shines through the lower class. Dickens urges his readers to look past the surface into the hearts of people, and evaluate each person by his or her character. Ultimately, when we choose to do that, we can discover genuinely sweet and loving friends like Joe, Biddy, Herbert, and Magwitch in all levels of society.

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