

Romantic love and marriage in "great expectations" essay sample

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Romantic Love and Marriage in “ Great Expectations”

Essay Sample

It is possible to classify the types of relationships in this novel into three categories: Established marriages, marriages which occur during the story, and failed love affairs.

It is interesting to note the way Dickens looks at marriages in the novel. He was, by all accounts, a person who had something of a problem with relationships, they were far free from problems or pains. Work on ‘ Great Expectations’ commenced in late September of 1860 at what proved to be a peak of emotional intensity for Dickens. His own marriage, with Catherine Hogarth, broke down after 24 years and eight children and he spent the last years of his life with his mistress Ellen Ternan. His unsuccessful affair with his first and greatest love, Maria Beadnall, seems to have affected his whole perception of women, love and marriage.

In ‘ GE’, few of the relationships between the sexes are wholesome. With the exception of Herbert and Clara, Wemmick and the enigmatic Miss Skiffens and later in the novel, Joe and Biddy, all the other couples are, to a greater or lesser extent, dissatisfied or hostile in their loves together.

The writing of ‘ GE’, and by extension the creation of leading character, Pip, can also be viewed as an attempt to come to terms with the painful facts of his childhood. His family experienced financial instability, culminating in his father’s imprisonment, Dickens himself was put to work at the age of twelve

as a child labourer leading to his subsequent separation from his family as a result.

We can see, looking at Dickens' life, that some of his experiences are reflected in the novel 'Great Expectations'.

One of the first relationships the readers hear of is one between Joe and Mrs. Joe. This is an abusive relationship where Mrs. Joe continuously throughout the novel beats and verbally insults Joe. Despite the abusive behaviour shown to Joe by his wife, he still insists that she is,

"a – fine – figure – of – a – woman!".

Joe is typically a gentle giant and one can sometimes be amused by the picture of Mrs. Joe's constant assaults upon this great man, who never retaliates, for fear of becoming like his bullying father.

Mrs. Joe is also somewhat of a caricature; even Joe admits that she is "rather bony and red-faced". She is a busy housewife, but her exertions are made it seems mainly to make Pip and Joe suffer, and to seek credit for bringing Pip up "by hand".

Mrs. Joe is constantly complaining and expressing her disadvantages, "It's bad enough being a blacksmith's wife (and him a Gargery)..." thus when she dies she is not much missed with the exception of Joe, who continues to express "Such a fine figure of a woman as she once were, Pip".

Joe's lack of retaliation towards Mrs. Joe's relentless manner is due to his past childhood experiences with his own parents. The reader hears of Joe's father as beating his wife. "...my poor mother...drudging and slaving...breaking her honest hart..."

Having encountered this as a child, Joe finds himself "dead afraid of not doing what's right by a woman..." and thus ends up with himself in the same position as his "poor mother" was once in. He thus breaks the cycle of abuse, saving his great strength to help and support others.

Magwitch and Molly are another example of a violent relationship where the woman is violent. Magwitch and Molly married when Molly was very young and they lead "tramping lives". They had a young child together, however when Molly found out about Magwitch's unfaithfulness she, in "a case of jealousy" murdered the other woman involved and "swore" to Magwitch "that she would destroy the child".

The reader knows of this child as Estella however, neither parents saw or were involved in her upbringing. The father, Magwitch, did not even know of her existence until Pip confessed at the end of the novel and Molly saw her child being taken away by Jaggers and did not see her since.

Undoubtedly, one of the main relationships occurring is Pip's major love interest through the story with Estella. When we first meet Estella at Miss Havisham's she is at once very beautiful and also very cruel to our hero. Pip is smitten by Estella's loveliness but, until the end of the novel, his love for her is largely unrequited.

One of the main reasons why Pip and Estella's relationship was so unsuccessful was due to the fact that they had completely different view of love. Pip's definition of love is explored over and over again " the theme that so filled my heart, and so often made it ache and ache again..." While Estella believes she is not able to love at all, " Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot at...but you know what I mean. I have no softness there..."

Pip's heart is full of those things that Estella doesn't understand, sentiment, emotion, or as Estella knows it, " nonsense".

Estella's coldness towards men, and especially Pip, is a result of being brought up by Miss. Havisham. When Miss Havisham adopted Estella, this was not a loving action on her part, but a calculated manoeuvre to turn the child into a haughty, heartless instrument of revenge against men. Estella is encouraged to practise her disdain on Pip and to break his heart.

If we look at this total refusal of love from Estella and compare it to Pip's emotional involvement to her " You are part of my existence, part of my self." We can understand why Estella and Pip's relationship became such a large part of the novel.

Even as a child Estella had the ability to hurt Pip, " she denounced me for a stupid, clumsy labouring-boy"

From Pip's first visit to Satis house and meeting with Estella, Dickens captures the imagery by using expressive and descriptive language. The imagery he uses refers to Estella's name, meaning ' star' in Latin. " Her

light came along the dark passage like a star" this bright pinpoint in the darkness could also represent his early admiration for her almost as if Dickens is preparing the reader for something significant to happen, almost introducing what is to come between Pip and Estella.

Pip gradually more and more became ashamed of himself. " What I dreaded was, that in some unlucky hour I, being at my grimest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella..."

Repetition in the sentence "...that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be." is used to emphasise " against". This word is very emphatic, Pip feels that so much is against him, this sentence is very graphic and is a very potent commentary on Pip's feeling.

Pip suffers much anguish throughout the story because of this love interest since his persistence toward Estella never really gets rewarded until the last pages of the novel.

Miss Haversham's love for Compeyson is of a passionate kind, this blinded her to his true nature, as Herbert remarked, " too haughty and too much in love to be advised by anyone." At Compeyson's desertion her anger and sorrow became extreme and she threw herself and Satis House into perpetual mourning as a monument to her broken heart, shutting the world out and herself from the world. Much of what followed in her life was a symptom of what love, in the form of Compeyson, had done to her. It had cut

her off from life, she had been unable to develop emotionally. She kept her dress on, she kept her heart broken.

After her betrayal, her thoughts turned to revenge, revenge against all men and so she adopted Estella. As a result of what Compeyson had done to Miss Havisham, her definition of love turned to " ...blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation..." Estella was brought up to " Break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!"

When the reader is first introduced to Miss Havisham, Dickens shows a great contrast between the normal language of the novel and that spoke by Miss Havisham. In a book full of long phrases and long sentences Miss Havisham's are short and sharp and almost exclusively monosyllabic. This language implies that she is weak and short of breath, adding to the imagery of an old, white, skeleton woman.

Like Miss. Havisham, Estella becomes a victim of her own machinations. She enters into a loveless marriage to Drummle, who is cruel to her. Drummle is heavily built, sulky, idle and stupid and Pip at once takes a dislike to him. Jaggers remarks on Drummle's stubbornness and persistence, calling him " the spider", which duly enable him to be Estella's chosen husband and victim. "...Don't be afraid of my being a blessing to him.... I shall not do that" This shows that no matter how heartless one tries to be, there is always someone more heartless. The instrument of revenge punishes the avenger and is punished in return. The sentence, describing Drummle's death, was added to both endings proving that Dickens obviously believed that this was

important to add to the story. Drummle's death, as well as being convenient for the novel's plot is a kind of poetic justice: he dies in an accident "consequent on his ill-treatment of a horse".

In Pip's relationship with Biddy, he is very condescending, and shows disregard for her feeling, "If I could only get myself to fall in love with you," is a prime example. Pip compares Biddy with Estella and overlooks her obvious good qualities. She is presented to the reader as a pretty and obliging girl. For this Pip likes her, but she cannot exercise the power over him of the haughty and distant Estella. "She was not beautiful – she was common and could not be like Estella – but she was pleasant and wholesome"

After his loss of fortune, Pip decides to honour Biddy by marrying her. "I would go to Biddy." Pip, still arrogant, thought Biddy would be glad to marry him. However, Biddy has married Joe. Though she was once half in love with Pip, Biddy recognised his obsession for Estella and wisely sought a partner elsewhere.

Biddy and Joe share the same values and are ideal partners. Throughout the novel Joe and Biddy represent all that is good, natural and honest. Both are reminders to Pip of his roots, and both remain his conscience in the novel. When Pip visits at the end of the story what he actually meets is himself had he not had the opportunity to become a gentleman. Dickens seems quite clear here to be applauding old values and to be making a statement that

people should never be ashamed to stay whom they are as that is the easiest way to contentment.

Their marriage produces the 'new' Pip or as the old Pip describes him, "I again!" Pip feels like he has a second chance to be thankful and grateful for what Joe and Biddy did for him and believes he will stay at the forge and make amends.

Another successful relationship based on love is that between Wemmick and Miss. Skiffins. Wemmick is a man of letters who is able to guide Pip as well as separate his occupation from his home life totally. He commutes from his home to Jaggers' office and then returns to his Castle where he cares for his Aged Parent and occasionally entertains his love interest, Miss Skiffins. When Wemmick finally does marry Miss. Skiffins, he is careful to let his best man, Pip, be warned not to let Jaggers know for fear that his employer might think marriage be too unprofessional an occurrence in which to partake.

Wemmick and Miss. Skiffins are portrayed as a very comical couple and Pip makes the pleasant observation that once they were married "Mrs. Wemmick no longer unwound Wemmick's arm when it adapted itself to her figure..."

A sharp contrast to the Wemmick home but a family that looms as the novel's best example of a nuclear family is the household of Matthew and Belinda Pocket. This grouping may have all the characteristics of a complete family with both parents and a slew of children, but it remains a comical farce when compared to some other relationships in 'Great Expectations'.

What really makes the Pocket household a travesty is Mrs. Pocket. Mrs. Pocket has her head in the clouds and is more concerned with “family” rather than her family. To this end the Matthew Pockets need two nursemaids to care for their home and children. There is no serenity or sense of familial love here- only mass confusion at its best. Herbert describes his parents’ marriage as “not exactly suitable”.

For the original Victorian readers of ‘Great Expectations’, it would have been a weekly serial, such things common in Victorian times. By ending the weeks supplement with a new revelation, Dickens captured the readers and put them in suspense. This was a very effective way of encouraging the readers to carry on with the novel. As an example, we can see that Dickens ended Chapter 37 expressing that “I must give one chapter to Estella”. This tells us that the next Chapter is concerning Pip and Estella, a subject that, by now, the readers are captivated with. Another entrancing ending to an episode, is where we find out that Magwitch is Estella’s father. This is one of the main revelations of the story and the readers would be astonished. Ending like this evokes questions to mind such as, ‘what will happen to Pip and Estella now?’. This was all a plan by Dickens to captivate the readers until the next week’s episode.

The relationship between Herbert and Clara is “.. a little affair of true love.....redeeming youth and trust and hope...” this is one of the few happy and contented relationships which Dickens has added to the novel and their love is somewhat idealized in his portrayal.

Herbert courtship of Clara is a conveniently ideal relationship against which to judge Pip's problems with Estella, and Clara is somewhat of a cliché^{1/2}, with her mild manners "There was.... something so confiding, loving and innocent, in her modest manner..." and her tyrannical father, who dies at just the right time.

Pip is very proud of Herbert's relationship with Clara and could not have been happier if he himself was getting married. "...I would not have undone the engagement between her and Herbert, for all the money in the pocket-book I had never opened."

Once married, their love ceased to die. Clara was now "happily provided for" and their marriage was more than once described by Pip as simply "happy".

Orlick is a simple but evil character, abetted in his crimes by low cunning. He knows that Pip dislikes him for his attentions to Biddy "I was very hot indeed upon Old Orlick's daring to admire her; as hot as if it were an outrage on myself."

Pip was insulted and angry at the thought of Biddy being pursued by Orlick. "I told her so, and told her that I would spend any money or take any pains to drive him out of that country".

The portrait that Dickens is painting, of the novel, is on the whole, unhappy. Either ending of the novel is unusual, due to the fact that usually (except *Oliver Twist*) the people in Dickens books get married and there is always a bit at the end for children, or renewal. Here, there is only one child, between

Biddy and Joe. The hero, Pip does not take part in this. There are also very few children throughout the whole book, unusually for Dickens.

Pip suffers much anguish throughout the story because of this love interest since his persistence toward Estella never really gets rewarded until the last pages of the novel.