

# Great expectations: dicken's idea's on gentility

[People](#), [Charles Dickens](#)



Dickens criticized the world of his own time because it valued the status of being a gentleman over someone doing a useful job. Those who thought they were gentlemen often mocked ordinary citizens. Show how he achieved these aims through the language used and his description of the way Pip and the other characters behaved in the novel. In his numerous literary works, Dickens strong sense of right and wrong, and his recognition of the many injustices present in Victorian Society are clearly displayed. There is no better an example of these strong set of ideals then those portrayed in his novel, *Great Expectations*, which tells the story of Pip, a young boy who is initially fooled into believing that material wealth is a substitute for the real moral values a gentleman should posses. However, through the many trials and tribulations he is forced to go through, he is finally able to identify what it means to be a " true gentleman", one that has acquired true wealth and value. It is only then that he is able to see the real meaning behind Matthew Pocket's wise words, that: " No man was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was since the world began, a true gentleman in manner." (page 175) In Dickens novel, society's idea of a gentleman is perceived as someone of great affluence and breeding, who did not necessarily posses the moral values and graces a true gentleman should have. After his initial visit to Satis House, Pip was infatuated by Estella's beauty, wealth, and self importance. He allowed himself to be degraded by her scornful references to his " coarse hands", and " thick boots", not realizing at this point that these factors are unimportant on the route to becoming a true gentleman. At that very moment, he deludes himself into believing that if he were to meet Estella's interpretations of gentlemanly conduct, that she would regard him as her

equal. Unfortunately, he completely fails to recognize the true moral values present in Joe and Biddy, and is attracted instead by a fantasized version of Miss Havisham's and Estella's lifestyles. He sees his visit to Satis House as the first link in the long chain of events which will lead to his eventually becoming a gentleman. Dickens leaves the reader with no doubt that position and rank were major contributory factors as to how a person was regarded in Victorian society. He portrays this with the changed attitudes of the tradesmen towards the gentleman Pip, who no longer look out of the window whilst they are serving him. It is also amusing to witness Trabb's extravagant attempts to satisfy Pip's every need, a stark contrast to the manner he treats his own boy. Another change that has taken place in Pip is his inability to perceive Pumblechook as the "Impostor" he so readily recognized him to be as a boy. What he would have once seen to be the fawnings of a "bogus humbug", he now observes to be the "sensible, practical good hearted" conversation of a "kind fellow". He readily accepts the endless handshaking and congratulations from his Uncle as an indication of his ever rising status in society. We see more falsity on Pumblechook's part later on in the novel, regarding his patronizing and nauseatingly forgiving nature towards a Pip who has declined in fortune. We see also how Pip's gain in affluence is an automatic guarantee in his ascension up the social ladder. He now feels embarrassed by his long time friends and confidants, Biddy and Joe, feeling they would no longer fit in to the social group he has chosen to become part of. Therefore, he comes to the conclusion that it would be in Joe's best interests to refine his manners, and asks Biddy to cultivate his social airs and graces, never giving a second thought to Joe's needs and

wishes. He completely fails to see his rude and patronizing tone when asking Biddy to cultivate Joe's manners, in order for him to be less "open to Estella's reproach". He has become so disillusioned by his own expectations, that he seems to have lost touch with one of the best friends he could ever wish to have. He snobbishly assumes that because Joe is a working man, he will lack the pride that will prevent anyone taking him "out of a place he is competent to fill and fills with respect" (page 146). And as if that were not bad enough, he has the audacity to even think that Biddy may be envious of his supposed "rise" in society, so deceived is he by his aspirations, and confident of the wisdom of his superior opinions. It was almost as if snobbishness and repugnance to those less fortunate were seen as attributes of gentility. This attitude was not only restricted to "gentlemen", as the younger Estella more than displayed to us, feeling herself by far the superior of the "common laboring boy". Not only was she proud and conceited, but insulting and cruel, not what one could possibly call genteel traits. She took obvious delight in addressing the young Pip as "Boy", further displaying the rudeness of one supposedly belonging to the gentlefolk. However, at the beginning of his fortune, Pip is little better than his beloved, feeling disdain towards his neighbors: "...sublime compassion for the poor creatures who are destined to go there, Sunday after Sunday, all their lives through, to lie obscurely at last amongst the low green moulds." (page 143) Dickens is also highly critical of the criminal justice system of his time. Apparently, not even this just institution could escape the false notions of class and gentility. Both Judge and Jury alike are swindled into believing that the older, hardened, "ragged" Magwitch corrupted Compeyson, the young "

gentleman" with no criminal record. He tells how Magwitch was condemned before the trial even began, because of his villainous appearance, while the public school educated Compeyson was able to manipulate the trial, receiving seven years imprisonment as opposed to Magwitch's fourteen. This provides yet another example of Dickens message not to form an opinion of someone based on external appearances alone. In the poor and deprived world Dickens portrays in his novel, society fawns upon the rich and exploits the poor. Due to wholly superficial reasons, such as his "coarse voice, laborers tobacco and jack knife," Magwitch will always be branded a criminal by Victorian society. The gentlemanly Pip is repelled and disgusted at his first encounter with Magwitch at Barnard's Inn. He is also utterly horrified by the "uncouth, noisy, and greedy" table manners the convict displayed, likening him to a "hungry dog." Instead of being grateful to Magwitch once he finds out that he is in fact his true benefactor, he is instead sickened by the news that his whole lifestyle has been fueled by a convict. While he is able to so precisely pinpoint all of Magwitch's faults and failings, he finds it harder to find fault with Bentley Drummle, who is probably less of a true gentleman than Magwitch. Of course his clothes, manners, and membership of Finches satisfy society's shallow criteria for the definition of a gentleman. However, beneath this false facade, lies the capacity to do evil, and to fulfill his "spider-like" potential. Dickens obviously believed that every human being is capable of doing good, and within everyone, there is some hope of reform. He showed this by Magwitch's striking transformation from a hardened criminal, into a softened human being. Although he was to be executed for his crimes, he experienced the kindness and love from both

Herbert and Pip which his upbringing denied him. This tames the rough side of his nature. He is able to die with dignity and beauty, knowing that his dreams have been fulfilled. Dickens shows there is also some hope for the withered, old, estranged from humanity Miss Havisham, who is finally able to understand the pain Pip is going through, due to his unrequited love for Estella. Only then does she acknowledge the suffering she has willingly inflicted upon Pip, and her hardened shell seems to break into "pity and remorse." Once again, Dickens has shown us that the only time Miss Havisham gained any respect from the reader was in her acceptance of her responsibility, rather than all her assumed wealth and gentility. While wealth and status were often portrayed as a vital means for survival in a brutal, harsh and unjust Victorian society, Dickens shows that these factors do not necessarily generate true happiness. Miss Havisham, with all her wealth and social status, was no less likely to fall victim to life's cruelties than the next person. And while Jaggers may have found in law, a job which offered affluence and security, he is clearly dissatisfied with it, hence the ritualistic hand washing, scraping of nails, and the strong scent of soap which accompanied his person. Due to this obvious job dissatisfaction, we were only made aware of his kinder qualities towards the end of the novel. The "toadies and humbugs" eagerly awaited Miss Havisham's death, in the hope of gaining from it in some way, and even Mrs. Joe and Pumblechook looked forward to some "handsome premium". All of these people were obviously disinterested in the quality of life Miss Havisham led, being only interested in gaining from her death. Even Magwitch is determined to revenge society, using Pip as a tool. At some points, he treats Pip almost as a possession,

someone who will be greatly admired and envied for his gentlemanly status. All these examples show that the pursuit of wealth is very prone to bringing out the worst in people, and can often be compromising to one's moral values. Dickens also shows that aspirations to lead a life of gentility can have its problems. For Example, whilst Pip's coming into his fortune is cause for great celebration, it is barely worth it for the tremendous gulf that is created between him and Joe, his treasured friend and ally. There is a marked stiffness and formality between the old friends when they meet at Barnard's Inn, with Pip casting aside common courtesy and kindness in favour for the shallow values he has acquired. These feelings of superiority do little to put Joe at ease, who is already feeling out of place in a stiff suit rather his more homely blacksmith's attire. He stumbles over words which would have normally caused him no problems, and the atmosphere of the room becomes so heavily laden with unease, that he even starts to address Pip as " Sir", which helps to wedge the gap between the two friends even further. In the later stages of the novel, Dickens also shows that despite Pip's growing " gentility", it has done nothing to help him conquer Estella's heart. She displays her evident coldness towards him, described by the heartbroken Pip as: " I, trembling in Spirit, and worshipping the very hem of her dress, she, quite composed, and decidedly not worshipping the hem of mine." (page 230) Pip lived in hope that that Miss Havisham would make his fortune on a " large scale". However, on discovering that his benefactor was in fact a convict, Pip's world crashed around him, and he was left shattered and demoralized. He believed that he had sacrificed everything of value for a dream of a genteel life with Estella which had been impossible from the

start. Dickens indicates further that the chance for reform is in all of us, gentility aside. He shows this in the way that Pip realizes at long last that it is not wealth and status which make a gentleman, but the moral values and virtues which have been present in Joe and Biddy all along. At this discovery, we see Pip's whole way of life change for the better. Defying all the rules of class and status, he compassionately holds hands with the "hunted, wounded, shackled creature" that Magwitch has become. He finds himself bound to a man he has once loathed and despised: "I will be as true to you, as you have been to me." (page 438) He later goes on to secure a place for Herbert at Clarrickers, modestly attempting to conceal his identity, and knowing full well that in doing so he is letting go of a most valued friend. He is even able to forgive the eccentric old Miss Havisham for using him to attempt to inflict some suffering on mankind. He has finally achieved his life long ambition, to become a true gentleman. The reunion between Pip and Estella is an indication that Pip has been freed from all false desires of wealth and social status, thus proposing a future between him and Estella at the very close of the novel.