

Joe gargery: ironic virtue in great expectations

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Within Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Joe Gargery is presented as the epitome of human compassion and kindness, the moral center of the novel. He is a strange mixture of wisdom, stupidity and generosity, being the most human of all the characters with his strengths and weaknesses, which the readers grasp by reading between the lines of Pip's description, Joe's own actions and his interactions. 'Joe' is a common name, and Dickens' clever play with nomenclature instantly makes us see Joe as a short, simple and common man. Dickens' has presented Joe as a paradox, 'a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness', having a gentle nature that contradicts the toughness the blacksmith requires for his job. He is described as physically strong, nevertheless, we are made to see how he suffers through his wife's physical abuse.

Joe's manner of speaking indicates his slow brain and illiteracy, calling epileptic fits 'purple leptic' and taking time with his speech. His dullness and stupidity is apparent when he keeps talking, stunned by the disappearance of Pip's bread, staring at him in 'wonder and consternation'. However, the fact that he is aware that Mrs. Joe won't be happy if he becomes a scholar for fear he might rise, shows that he isn't dull in all accounts. He is aware of Mrs. Joe's harsh personality, yet calls her a 'fine figure of a woman' repeatedly, seeing the positive side of her that chose to raise Pip by hand. His statement that 'it were lonesome then' and 'living here alone' implies that loneliness might have driven him to get married and he seems to have consciously made a decision to tolerate Mrs. Joe rough treatment.

Through his actions towards Pip, Joe is shown to be a generous and kind character, taking in a boy he isn't even related to by blood. Being a

blacksmith, it is apparent that Joe is of a low working-class and doesn't earn as much, yet he tell Pip's sister to 'bring the poor little child' with her and that 'there's room for him at the forge!' Joe wishes he could take the Tickler 'all on myself' for Pip and we see how much love and care he has for him. He is a nurturing figure, lecturing Pip about 'Bolting' as he is concerned for his 'elth' and taking Pip on his back when it started sleeting during their search of the convicts. Joe's morality is apparent when he reproves Pip for 'bolting' the bread, and it seems to influence Pip, which is why he feels guilty and 'tenderness of conscience' only in reference to Joe. Joe is an emotionally strong character, considering how he was able to cope with a dysfunctional family as a child, and now with his wife's verbal attacks. He is able to take in the emotional blows without breaking down.

Enduring Mrs. Joe's abusive treatment also indicates how he is a submissive man with no ego or power. He loves Pip yet he never stand up for him against Mrs. Joe. We take this as cowardice in his part, however, later, when Dickens has Joe tell his own story, we are made to realize and understand what drives Joe. He endures as much as he does for he is 'dead afeerd of not doing what's right by a woman', not wanting to hurt Mrs. Joe and not have her 'drudging and slaving like his mother. This shows his sweet temperament, tenderness and the respect he has for women. Joe is a truly compassionate man, even towards the convict who admits to stealing food from his home. Joe says that the convict is 'welcome to it' and that 'we wouldn't have you starved' no matter what his crime. His attitude towards the memory of his father is rather naïve and blind for even though he 'hammered' him, he believes his father 'were that good in his hart'.

Nonetheless, it points out the nobility of his character and forgiveness. Joe's powerlessness and submissiveness is evident in many occasions when he is unable to protect Pip from Mrs. Joe's beating, only able to 'quietly' fence him after he's been thrown at him, when 'he had been put upon the kitchen doorstep', and when he can only offer Pip comfort by giving him gravy, not even chicken.

On one hand, Joe is presented as a weak character, but besides his tender heart, we are shown other good qualities as well. In his working clothes, Joe is a 'characteristic-looking blacksmith' while in his Sunday's best, he is compared to a scarecrow, which depicts how Joe is comfortable in his blacksmith clothes for he is unpretentious, and not hypocritical. He does as he is told when the soldiers barge in and tell him to fix the handcuff, but there are two viewpoints to this; one that he is obedient and easily dragged about, however in a good light, we see him the sharpest and most professional looking at this point of the story, hardworking and skilled.