

Great expectations: themes

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* is not so uncomplicated as to suggest that wealth is a destructive force. Instead it attempts to highlight the apparent dangers associated with becoming preoccupied with money and social status. In Pip, the book's chief protagonist, Dickens presents us with a character that misguidedly follows these ideals in a journey of self delusion. The abandonment of his childhood father figure - Joe - and his earlier virtues of decency and compassion are the consequences of his misconception that with wealth will come 'gentility'. Dickens' underlying message is that wealth and class are superficial, failing to give any indication of a person's quality or true gentility.

This being said, it must be understood that Dickens' aim is not to condemn wealth and social 'niceties' such as good manners and a formal education, instead it is those who worship these false ideals and become preoccupied with them that are criticized. In characters such as Herbert and Mathew Pocket and, to an extent, Wemmick and Jaggers, we are presented with benevolent and harmless forms of class and privilege. Yet juxtaposed against this we have Pumblechook, Magwitch and Pip. Failing to realize what truly counts, these characters delude themselves into believing that by assuming the outward trappings of gentility they will become gentlemen. However, by making wealth and status their most worthwhile aims, they succeed only in becoming grotesque and quite repugnant.

The dangers involved with such illusions include pretentiousness, wasteful lifestyles and an inability to appreciate true and noble 'gentility'. These become most apparent in Pip as his wealth gives him the illusion of greatness without the substance. He changes from the innocent blacksmith's

assistant to the humbug 'gentleman to be'. At times his pretentiousness is unbearable, its absurdity highlighted in the quote " The (servant) was ordered to be on duty at eight on Tuesday morning in the hall (it was two feet square)".

He is so lost in his fixation with wealth and class that he treats Joe and Biddy - his childhood mentors - patronizingly and with contempt; " If I could have kept (Joe) away by paying him money I certainly would have." This leads him to turn his back on these noble characters, removing their wisdom and decency from his life, leaving him only with his wasteful and highly pretentious lifestyle. At one stage Pip himself admits "(the effect of my expectations) influenced my own character, I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very well that it was not all good."

In highlighting these dangers, Dickens preaches that social status and external appearances are doubtful measures of a person's true quality. Pip's journey clearly exemplifies this message, being most repugnant at the height of his expectations yet being most worthy when he has lost everything. Supposed gentlemen such as Pumblechook, Drummle and Compeyson who mock the false surface of gentility but are really hideous and unworthy characters are further variations on this theme.

However, it is Estella, Miss Havisham and the world of Satis house that are best used in the attack against the simple-minded notion that money and status are a guide to 'quality'. The lovely Estella charms Pip with her beauty, yet as she herself admits " I have no heart" and is incapable of love. Miss Havisham and her attractive Satis house have the showings of happiness and

glamour. The truth is, however, that she has been eaten away by bitterness in a house that is "strange" and does not permit love. Therefore, Dickens strongly argues that external appearances fail to count for what lies beneath.

Instead Dickens holds up truly noble characters such as Joe, Biddy, Wemmick and Clara, who understand the importance of compassion and fellow feeling, for our admiration. He attempts to show the reader that these are the values that should be made the most worthwhile aims of life. His protagonist finally comes to this realization at the conclusion of the novel, as he appreciates the true gentility of Joe as a "good Christian man". By making these characters the moral centre of the book Dickens is able to highlight the greater importance of such values over wealth in determining the quality of a person.

Even the 'darker' characters of the book such as Miss Havisham and Mrs Joe are able to understand this (though it comes far too late), with Miss Havisham asking for Pip's forgiveness "Prey if you could ever right under my name 'I forgive her' ... prey do it." and Mrs Joe's final words "Joe... Pardon... Pip." Clearly the moral of the novel is based on the importance of love and compassion over wealth and class.

Dickens, therefore, argues that money and social status fail to act as indicators of a person's true worth. Instead it is values such as compassion and the ability to love that define their gentility. Although Pip in his journey misguidedly believes that his re-invention would lead to bettering himself, he is eventually able to realize what truly counts are the virtues of love, compassion and decency.