

Charles Dickens' novel "great expectations" essay sample

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" He will choose you, disarm you with his words, and control you with his presence. He will delight you with his wit and plans. He will show you a good time, but you will always get the bill. He will smile and deceive you, and he will scare you with his eyes. And when he is through with you, and he will be through with you, he will desert you and take with him your innocence and your pride. You will be left much sadder but not a lot wiser, and for a long time you will wonder what happened, and what you did wrong. And if another of his kind comes knocking at the door, you will open it."

-From an essay signed " A sociopath in prison."

The character of Estella from Charles Dickens novel " Great Expectations" is a sociopath. Identical to 3% of our population, Estella has no conscience, or any true emotional attachment to another human being. Dickens adds fuel to the ' nature versus nurture' debate on sociopaths, as Estella's sociopathy is apparently taught to her by Miss. Havisham. The identification of sociopaths is difficult, and great care must be taken not to make erroneous diagnosis.

The positive identification of sociopaths in our society could prove extremely useful to both law enforcement officers and to general members of society, in determining who they should lock away from society, and who they should trust.

Estella exhibits many of the traits of a sociopath, which will all be looked at in detail.

Estella is not unique, sociopathy is the most prevalent psychiatric disorder in Australia and the world, but is given far less publicity than other disorders. Schizophrenia, which occurs in less than 1% of our population, receives far more media coverage than sociopathy, which occurs in a staggering 3% of our population. The eating disorder anorexia occurs in 3.43% of our population, a similar proportion to sociopathy, yet anorexia is classified as an epidemic, whereas sociopathy is almost unheard of by most people.

Sociopathy is a personality disorder classified under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), and is generally considered to be the same as antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy. The DSM-IV defines sociopathy as pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others. Sociopathy is characterised by a lack of emotion, especially emotional attachment to others, and the absence of a 'conscience'. These two key characteristics result in the other characteristics often displayed by sociopaths.

Sociopaths generally display three (or more) of the following characteristics: callous unconcern for the feelings of others; gross and persistent attitude of irresponsibility and disregard for social norms, rules and obligations; incapacity to maintain enduring relationships, though having no difficulty in establishing them; very low tolerance to frustration and a low threshold for discharge of aggression, including violence; incapacity to experience guilt or to profit from experience, particularly punishment; and marked proneness to blame others, or to offer plausible rationalizations, for the behaviour that has

brought the sociopath into conflict with society. These will all be look at closely below.

Sociopaths themselves experience little or no emotion, and cannot empathise with other people. Sociopaths seem unable to “ walk in the shoes” of others, except in a purely intellectual sense. The feelings of other people are of no concern to sociopaths. This inability to appreciate the feelings of others causes sociopaths to be capable of behaviour that normal people find not only horrific, but also baffling. Sociopaths view people as little more than objects to be used for their own gratification. The weak and venerable - whom they mock, rather than pity - are their favourite targets.

Sociopaths do not conform to the rules and morals of society and have a persistent attitude of irresponsibility, and rejection of social norms. An ongoing need for excitement often causes sociopaths to break societies rules, through committing a crime or often hurting animals. The lack of emotion a sociopath experiences is in part to blame for this, as to attain ‘ normal’ levels of excitement a sociopath must take part in acts that normal people classify as evil, disgusting or inhumane. Obligations and commitments mean nothing to sociopaths, statements such as “ I’ll never cheat on you again” are promises written on the wind. The irresponsibility and unreliability of sociopaths extend to every part of their lives, from their jobs, to their relationships and family life. Sociopaths view the rules and regulations set up by society as a hindrance to their lives, and consistently reject them if it helps to achieve their purposes.

Through their extremely refined powers of manipulation, sociopaths quickly form relationships, but all of these relationships are eventually doomed to fail, when the victim discovers the sociopath's true nature, or the sociopath is no longer making a gain from the relationship and ends it. Sociopaths are most often glib and superficial, and very articulate. These qualities make them amusing and entertaining conversationalists, and can tell unlikely but convincing stories which cast themselves in a good light. People are naturally drawn to sociopaths because of their glib and manipulative behaviour. These relationships all eventually fail when the victims discover that they have been deceived, and discover what the sociopath is really like. When someone is no longer serving a useful function to a sociopath, they see no benefit in continuing the relationship and simply end it, even if they are married with children.

Sociopaths are generally very impulsive, and have extremely poor behaviour controls. Sociopaths are highly unlikely to spend much time weighing up the pros and cons of a decision, and a common response to why they did something is "I did it because I felt like it". Sociopaths give little thought to the future, and worry about it even less, and also have no concern for how little they have done with their lives. Besides being impulsive, sociopaths are highly reactive to perceived insults. Most normal people have naturally powerful controls over their behaviour, even if they wish to respond violently they are usually able to calm themselves. Sociopaths lack these inhibitory controls, and even the slightest provocation is usually enough to overcome them. Sociopaths can thus be described as very volatile, and respond the

criticism, frustration and discipline with sudden violence, threats or verbal abuse.

Sociopaths do not experience guilt, regardless how heinous their actions are, and are unable to be deterred, even with the threat of punishment.

Sociopaths lack what many describe as a conscience, the awareness of a moral or ethical aspect to one's conduct, preferring right to wrong. Sociopaths realise that other people have a 'sense of decency', but regard people with consciences as inferior. Sociopaths show a stunning lack of concern for the devastating effects their actions have on others, and truly experience absolutely no guilt, the following quote is from a sociopath who killed as many as one hundred young women:

"Guilt? It's the mechanism we use to control people. It's an illusion. It's a kind of social control mechanism - and it's very unhealthy. And there are much better ways to control our bodies than that rather extraordinary use of guilt."

Another sociopath allowed her boyfriend to molest her five-year-old daughter because "he wore me out. I wasn't ready for more sex that night". Many sociopaths are clever, and learn what to say to keep them out of trouble. A sociopath will verbalise that he has experienced remorse regarding their actions, such as a murder, but when pressed further say that they didn't "feel bad inside about it". Sociopaths are not deterred from committing crimes by the threat of punishment, even a punishment as severe as the death penalty. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of foresight a

sociopath has, and their inability to plan for the future. Sociopaths are likely to be repeat offenders, and will continue to repeat until they are killed or sentenced to life in prison.

Sociopaths frequently blame others for their misdeeds, and attempt to create plausible (although untruthful) explanations for their actions. Sociopaths have learnt to blame their behaviour on their upbringing, knowing that it will create sympathy for them, while at the same time excusing their actions. They frequently lie to explain their actions, such as for stealing, "My mother is sick and she needs the money". Surprisingly, through great manipulation skills, sociopaths often get away with their actions based on simple excuses such as the one above.

Whilst all of the characteristics outlined above are common in many sociopaths, it is the lack of conscience, emotion and remorse, which are constant for all sociopaths, as well as the ability (and will) to manipulate. A scientific test was set up to determine if a sociopath's brain behaves 'visibly' different to the brain of a normal person. The people who took part in this test simply had to sit in a chair, as various words flashed on a screen in front of them, emotional words (such as love, hate, cosy, pain, happy, mother) flashed up, as well as neutral words (such as chair, brick, twelve, later). An electroencephalogram (EEG) was used to measure the brain wave activity of the people taking the test. Normal people reacted faster to the emotional words, and processed these words using a different part of the brain than they used to process neutral words. Sociopaths did not differentiate between the emotional words and neutral words in reaction time, or the part of their

brain used to process the words, demonstrating a real lack of emotional experience or understanding by sociopaths.

Many sociopaths become criminals, with about 20% of all prisoners being sociopaths, and 50% of all serious offences being committed by sociopaths. Although this is a large portion, most sociopaths do not commit crimes that they can be tried over. Most sociopaths get through their lives manipulating people out of money, and staying just on the right side of the law. These sociopaths ruin the lives of the countless people they encounter, leaving a trail of shattered hearts and empty wallets wherever they go. Most sociopaths rely on their skills of manipulation to get through life.

Estella, from Charles Dickens' novel "Great Expectations" demonstrates many of the characteristics of a sociopath, and would most likely be diagnosed as a sociopath by a psychiatrist. Estella is being brought up by Miss Havisham, who was stood up at the altar, to wreak revenge on all males by breaking their hearts. To be diagnosed as a sociopath, someone must conform to at least three of the characteristics mentioned in the DSM-IV guidelines, and outlined above. The three that will be analysed in terms of Estella being a sociopath are: Estella lacks any real emotional attachment to others, is quickly able to start relationships but cannot sustain them, and does not seem to have a true sense of guilt.

Estella barely shows any emotion during the course of the novel, and lacks any true emotional attachment to another human. Miss Havisham, a rich excentric old woman, raises Estella, yet Estella seems to hardly interact with

Miss Havisham, when Pip gestured to Estella to go into Miss Havisham's room, she replied "Don't be ridiculous, boy; I am not going in". Estella also has a callous indifference to the emotions of others, and has no concern regarding the pain she causes Pip when she insults him, and degrades him through commenting on "what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!" Even though Estella gets married to Drummle, there is no real love between the two, and Estella is happy to be released from the marriage when Drummle dies.

Estella is able to charm countless men with her beauty and skills of manipulation. From when Pip first meets Estella he falls in love with her, even though she was extremely cruel and condescending towards him. By manipulating Pip, Estella is able to maintain Pip's passion for her, and control him. On several occasions, Estella allows Pip to kiss her before she goes away, to keep his passion for her alive even in her absence. Estella dominates the male gender through seduction and manipulation, as she was brought up to do by Miss Havisham.

Estella is void of an inner voice to guide her to pick between right and wrong, and has no real sense of guilt when she hurts others. Estella enjoys her role as Miss Havisham's avenger for the most part of the novel. Even after being abused by Drummle, and learning what it is like to be on the bad end of a relationship, Estella hardly changes her ways, and continues in the way she treats males. Estella remarks herself "I have no heart", showing a realisation of her sociopathy, and acting un-sociopathic like, she warns Pip that he is better off staying away from her. Estella doesn't feel any remorse for the

way that she treats others, and 'guilt' seems to be a foreign concept for her. Under the diagnosis of a sociopath, it is unlikely that Pip and Estella would ever be able to live happily ever after, as suggested by the closing remarks in the novel, "I took her hand in mine ... I saw no shadow of another parting from her". In the original ending (which Dickens decided to change, after advice from Edward Bulwer Lytton), Pip and Estella do not end up together, which is a more believable ending when Estella's character is taken into account.

Estella's caregiver, Miss Havisham, is portrayed as the reason that Estella is a sociopath, as Miss Havisham brought her up with the sole purpose of having revenge on all males. At a glance, Miss Havisham could be considered a sociopath, but upon closer examination it seems that she has simply lapsed into a state of hurt and anger. The main event showing the audience that Miss Havisham is not a sociopath is near the end of the novel, where she realises the hurt that she has caused Pip, and begs for his forgiveness. A true sociopath would not genuinely beg for forgiveness, and assuming that Miss Havisham was truthful in this section, Miss Havisham can be ruled out as being a sociopath.

Charles Dickens adds fuel to the 'Nature versus Nurture' debate, by making Estella's sociopathy come from the way she was brought up by Miss Havisham. The nature versus nurture debate centres around the various viewpoints as to what causes sociopathy. Nurture supporters argue that it is the way the child is brought up that determines whether they become a sociopath, and nature supporters claim that sociopathy is programmed into a

child's DNA, and there is nothing that can be done about it. From a compilation of research, it seems apparent that the answer lies somewhere between these two competing theories. It appears that a predisposition to sociopathy is present at conception, but the environment regulates how it is expressed.

There is strong biological evidence that at least part of sociopathy comes from genetics. The brain wave patterns of sociopaths are very different to those of normal people, a characteristic that appears in sociopaths from a very young age, before they had a chance to be shaped considerably by nurture. People who suffer from brain injuries later in life can 'become' sociopathic, demonstrating a strong physical aspect to sociopathy. Some of the absolute aspects of sociopathy suggest that it is wired into genetics, the complete lack of conscience, the complete lack of remorse. It is unlikely that someone could simply be brought up with such a complete lack of conscience or remorse.

There is strong evidence that the nurture a person receives can help to 'trigger' sociopathy in someone who is genetically predisposed to the condition. A study conducted in the United States, involving 3,226 pairs of male twins who were each placed in different foster homes, to measure the effect of nurture on psychiatric conditions. One of the conditions studied was sociopathy, and the analysts concluded that around 35-50% of our personalities is innate, with sociopathy being at the higher end of that scale.

There are people who hold strong beliefs on both sides of the nature versus nurture debate, and remain entrenched in their view regardless of the evidence presented. The question that inevitably rises from the nature versus nurture debate is: If the sociopath is born that way, and raised that way, why should they be punished for their actions?

Even though sociopaths are more likely to commit a crime, the choice still remains theirs, and there are some sociopaths that choose not to hurt others. The modern child rearing practices of 'praise the child' create a very self-centred emphasis, and as a result the number of sociopaths has grown in recent times. Modern society is geared towards creating sociopaths, with the explosion of the "me-first" philosophy. In highly nationalistic countries, such as Taiwan and China, the prevalence rate of sociopaths ranges from .03 to .14%, with western countries averaging at around 3%. Western society holds concepts such as 'individualism' high, while countries such as Taiwan and China put the masses before the individual, resulting in a much lower sociopathy rate.

Sociopaths present an unparalleled danger to our society, by committing violent acts such as murder, rape and robbery, to white-collar crimes such as extortion, and interpersonal disturbances such as divorce and conning. The most frightening part is that they seem to be able to slip through the cracks. Through their great manipulative skills, sociopaths can often get lighter sentences, and learn what to say to get out of trouble. Sociopaths learn to say they feel bad about what they did, and that they know they can change "only if you give me one more chance". Sociopaths do not change; the only

effective treatment is life imprisonment. Modern solutions such as 'group therapy' have made the situation worse, from these sessions they learn to say things like " my father molested me as a child", or " my mother was always drunk, and my father left me at 6", to gain sympathy and be given lighter sentences. They also learn to replicate the emotions of those around them, like to feel sad at funerals, even though they are experiencing no true emotions. Regarding emotions, it has been said that sociopaths " know the words, but not the music", they know the meanings of words such as ' love', ' sympathy' and ' mother', but do not feel any of the emotions involved with these words.

The only way to combat sociopathy is to know how a sociopath thinks, and to be able to recognise one. People continually make up excuses for sociopaths, such as " he must have been under duress", when these people deserve not your excuses, but your testimony against them! Until there is greater public awareness of sociopaths, they will continue to wreak havoc on our society, in the manner that Estella did to the males she met. Positive identification of sociopaths could be extremely useful to police, prosecutors, and judges, to ensure that these people cannot ruin more lives.