

# Soiled conscience in "great expectations"

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In Great Expectations, the word "taint" describes Pip's soiled conscience and shame for his identity, which he confuses with low class status and physical filth (Dickens 249). Pip's usage of it in the passage about his feeling of 'taint' shows the way he conflates its multiple meanings. He acquires this stain on his morals and self-worth at the marshes when he gives Magwitch the file, and he first becomes consciously ashamed of this lowness when Estella insults him for his clothing and skin. The next decade of Pip's life sees him attempting to bury this contamination underneath fancy frocks and elitism so he can physically remove the feeling of taint and win Estella. However, Pip's coming of age occurs when he realizes the futility of substituting superficial scouring for the inner cleansing he finds by the novel's conclusion.

Pip's experience with the convict in the marshes leaves a stain on his conscience that stays with him into his adulthood. The incident not only makes him feel a sense of guilt that follows him throughout the story, but makes him view crime itself as a literal contaminant that can blemish his identity. As he grows older, the guilt of disobeying his sister and Joe mixes with the shame of associating himself with the lowness of a convict.

Even as Pip ages, prisons and their inmates still recall the mix of fear, discomfort and regret that he first experienced at the marshes. In the passage about Newgate prison, he says that the feeling he got in his encounter with the convict had stuck with him "like a stain that was faded but not gone." It reappears at Newgate, indicating that in his mind he's tethered the grime of criminals and their living conditions with his personal shame. The convict's past eclipses all of his generosity in Pip's mind because

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it means he's indebted to a common criminal, something he finds both morally and socially repulsive.

Pip's tainted feeling is made worse when he contrasts it with his view of Estella. His obsession with ridding himself of physical dirt and coarseness grows when Estella insults him during his first visit to Ms. Havisham's. Before this, he was never conscious of his poor status or unkempt appearance because he had no higher level of wealth to compare it to. All at once, he finds that he is rough and common, that society deems this shameful, and that the first beautiful girl he's met is disgusted by him. The contrast he sees between his own ragged appearance and that of Estella's causes Pip to view his background with as much disfavor as she views him. He then is self-conscious about any physical dirt that covers him, as when he feels "absolute abhorrence" when contrasting her beauty with the soot and stench he picks up from Newgate. In his infatuation, he mentally transforms all of his insecurities into impurities he can try to physically shake off or disguise.

This attempt to literally remove the dirt from himself is manifested in Pip's bid to become a gentleman. Rather than confront his fear of the convict or his remorse for how he parted with Joe and Biddy, he drapes them in clothing that society deems presentable. Ironically, he was most happy at the forge, and his raising social class only serves to sink his spirits.

The fact that this struggle to change his nature by elevating his class is in vain is foreshadowed twice in the novel. First, Pip tries to improve Joe's dress when he visits Ms. Havisham only to find that his new clothes make him seem clumsy and birdlike. His second failed attempt at transforming a

commoner comes when he dresses Magwitch in ornate suits but finds that the more he disguises him, the more he looks like a convict. Similarly, the entire thread of the narrative sees Pip fitting awkwardly into a gentleman's garb, gaining wealth and favor but never feeling as happy as he did when he was living with Joe in his impoverished home.

The recurring theme of the various kinds of taint is closely linked to the greater theme of Pip understanding that surfaces are poor indicators of what is beneath them. He finds poverty, criminals, and coarseness tainted, but it is actually coming into contact with these elements that make him evolved by the story's end. To finally sanitize his shame, Pip gives money to Herbert that could have been his own, accepts that Estella will never be his, burns his hands saving Ms. Havisham, and reaches out to Magwitch as the convict dies. By allowing himself to become coarse, dirty, and poor, he is able to rid himself of the deeper moral taint and be happy for the first time since he lived with Joe. He was unhappy the entire time of his expectations, but describes his life working as a clerk as contented. By the story's end, his battle with these varieties of taint teach him that he is richer for his loss of wealth, that men of the lowest station can be of the highest value, and that the cleanest conscience can lie beneath the coarsest exterior.

## **Works Cited**

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Boston, MA. Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996. Print.