

# Money and social class in great expectations and pride and prejudice

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Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* focus on the themes of money and social class. In both novels, money plays a significant role in shaping and directing human motives and actions. A direct connection can be drawn between the two protagonists Pip and Elizabeth Bennet. Pip is lower on the social scale than Elizabeth, but both characters climb a metaphoric ladder to find happiness in society. Elizabeth rebels against her options to escalate in the social world through marriage and Pip embraces his chances to rise to the level where a marriage with Estella would be feasible. The characters start off in different directions, and both veer from their set courses as the novels progress. Elizabeth eventually embraces a life with her social superior Mr. Darcy, while Pip accepts a life without Estella and high society by realizing what is truly important in life: love and connections, not wealth and money. Another connection can be made between Mrs. Bennet and Miss Havisham. Although the techniques used to create Miss Havisham and Mrs. Bennet differ, the two characters share several traits. Mrs. Bennet is clearly not an exemplary female role model. Because of her station in the leisure class, she is preoccupied with money, marriage, and all other factors in climbing a social ladder. Her ideas are made all the more difficult and frantic by the notions of feminine propriety that Elizabeth so unbecomingly holds. Mrs. Bennet becomes very distressed and confused that a simple social phenomenon like marriage could become so complicated by love and politics and what not. In Mrs. Bennet, Austen draws up the most obvious caricature of traditional values of the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. Miss Havisham is the unhappy casualty of a male-dominated society. The main connection between these two women is

that neither is the least bit interested when it comes to their daughter's finding love. Mrs. Bennet just wants her daughters to marry a man of "good fortune" and Miss Havisham has actually blinded Estella from the light which metaphorically represents love in *Great Expectations*. The moral theme of *Great Expectations* is quite simple: affection, loyalty, and conscience are more important than social advancement, wealth, and class. At heart, Pip is an idealist; whenever he can conceive of something that is better than what he already has, he immediately desires to obtain the improvement. When he sees Satis House, he longs to be a wealthy gentleman; when he thinks of his moral shortcomings, he longs to be good; when he realizes that he cannot read, he longs to learn how. Pip's desire for self-improvement is the main source of the novel's title: because he believes in the possibility of advancement in life, he has "great expectations" about his future. However Pip's advancement is soon focused on one thing, the accumulation of money in order to win Estella's hand in marriage. When Pip first meets Estella as a boy she tells him he has coarse hands. Pip, from that encounter on, believes the key to Estella's heart is money and wealth. His longing to marry Estella and join the upper classes stems from the same idealistic desire as his longing to learn to read and his fear of being punished for bad behavior: once he understands ideas like poverty, ignorance, and immorality, Pip does not want to be poor, ignorant, or immoral. Pip makes the mistake of associating these things with a lack of money; therefore, the entire novel he is motivated to accumulate money in order to become a gentleman. A true gentleman however, has nothing to do with wealth and everything to do with a good and sincere heart. Pip creates the idea in his head that Miss

Havisham is his secret benefactor and that she is turning Pip into a gentleman to marry Estella. When Pip later finds out that Magwitch, the convict from his past, is really the one responsible for his rise in society his ideas of high society are shattered. When Pip becomes a gentleman he immediately begins to act as he thinks a gentleman is supposed to act, which leads him to treat Joe and Biddy snobbishly and coldly. Similarly, when Elizabeth Bennet thinks of marrying Darcy she imagines taking her relatives through his massive estate and then quickly reminds herself that her relatives would not be coming to visit because they we're below Darcy in society. "'And of this place', thought she, ' I might have been mistress! With these rooms I might now have been familiarly acquainted! Instead of viewing them as a stranger, I might have rejoiced in them as my own, and welcomed to them as visitors my uncle and aunt. — But no,' — recollecting herself, — ' that could never be: my uncle and aunt would have been lost to me: I should not have been allowed to invite them' This was a lucky recollection — it saved her from something like regret" ( Austen, pg. 161). A similar situation is found when Joe comes to visit Pip and the meeting is awkward because Joe feels below Pip and Pip wants nothing to do with the poor, modest lifestyle that is attached to Joe. Joe says, " Pip, dear old chap, life is made of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man's a blacksmith, and one's a whitesmith, and one's a goldsmith, and one's a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come" (Dickens, pg. 310). Joe says these words to Pip as a farewell in Chapter 27, after their awkward meeting in London. Pip, now a gentleman, has been uncomfortably embarrassed by both Joe's commonness and his own opulent lifestyle, and

the unpretentious Joe has felt like a fish out of water in Pip's sumptuous apartment. With this quote, Joe tells Pip that he does not blame him for the awkwardness of their meeting, but he chalks it up instead to the natural divisions of life. The blacksmith concocts a metaphor of metalsmithing to describe these natural divisions: some men are blacksmiths, such as Joe, and some men are goldsmiths, such as Pip. In these simple terms, Joe arrives at a wise and resigned attitude toward the changes in Pip's social class that have driven them apart, and he shows his essential goodness and loyalty by blaming the division not on Pip but on the unalterable nature of the human condition. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the first time Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, money and social rank shadow all his words. Elizabeth is turned off because in his proposal he spends more time emphasizing Elizabeth's lower rank than actually asking her to marry him. "In vain have I struggled...He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth"(Austen, pg. 98 ). This scene is all about how Darcy is not motivated by money but by a sincere love and admiration for Elizabeth. That is why their romance will flourish in the end. However, at the point and time of this proposal Elizabeth has been given incorrect information about Darcy's character and she will not excuse his disregard for her feelings when speaking of her social class. The lines of class are strictly drawn in both *Great Expectations* and *Pride and Prejudice*. While the Bennets, who are middle class, may socialize with the upper-class Bingleys and Darcys, they

are clearly their social inferiors and are treated as such. Austen satirizes this kind of class-consciousness, particularly in the character of Mr. Collins, who spends most of his time doting on his upper-class patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Though Mr. Collins offers an extreme example, he is not the only one to hold such views. His conception of the importance of class is shared, among others, by Mr. Darcy, who believes in the dignity of his lineage; Miss Bingley, who dislikes anyone not as socially accepted as she is; and Wickham, who will do anything he can to get enough money to raise himself into a higher station. Mr. Collins's views are merely the most extreme and obvious. The satire directed at Mr. Collins is therefore also more subtly directed at the entire social hierarchy and the conception of all those within it at its correctness, in complete disregard of other, more worthy virtues. Through the Darcy-Elizabeth and Bingley-Jane marriages, Austen shows the ability of love and happiness to overcome class boundaries and prejudices, thereby implying that such prejudices are hollow. Similarly, Dickens shows that a person's rank on the social ladder does not truly define that person as a morally good or bad person. Dickens creates characters ranging from the most wretched criminals, like Magwitch, to the poor peasants of the marsh country, like Joe and Biddy, to the middle class, like Pumblechook, to the very rich, like Miss Havisham. The theme of social class is central to the novel's plot and to the ultimate moral theme of the book: Pip's realization that wealth and class are less important than affection, loyalty, and inner worth. Pip achieves this realization when he is finally able to understand that, despite the esteem in which he holds Estella, one's social status is in no way connected to one's real character. Drummle, for instance, is an upper-

class jerk with no regard for others, while Magwitch, a persecuted convict, has a deep inner worth. Not long after meeting Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip's desire for advancement largely overshadows his basic goodness. After receiving his mysterious fortune, his idealistic wishes seem to have been justified, and he gives himself over to a gentlemanly life of idleness. But the discovery that the wretched Magwitch, not the wealthy Miss Havisham, is his secret benefactor shatters Pip's oversimplified sense of his world's hierarchy. The fact that he comes to admire Magwitch while losing Estella to the brutish nobleman Drummle ultimately forces him to realize that one's social position is not the most important quality one possesses, and that his behavior as a gentleman has caused him to hurt the people who care about him most. It is ironic that in the end of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* the two main characters do the exact opposite of what they set out to do in the beginning of each novel. Elizabeth marries the man she claimed to detest and Pip gives up on his ambition to be a gentleman and marry Estella because he finds deeper meaning in life. Elizabeth gets over her prejudices. Pip's blind journey is destroyed when he learns the truth about his benefactor and the horrible people that rule the upper-class society he once so desperately wanted to be a part of. From Elizabeth's first encounter with Darcy, one would assume the two would never come together. Darcy says, "'Which do you mean?' and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, 'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are

wasting your time with me'"( Austen, pg. 8 ). These words describe Darcy's reaction at the Meryton ball in Chapter 3 to Bingley's suggestion that he dance with Elizabeth. Darcy, who sees the people of Meryton as his social inferiors, refuses to dance with someone " not handsome enough" for him. Moreover, he does so within Elizabeth's hearing, thereby establishing a reputation among the entire community for pride and bad manners. His sense of social superiority, artfully exposed in this passing comment, later proves his chief difficulty in admitting his love for Elizabeth. The rudeness with which Darcy treats Elizabeth creates a negative impression of him in her mind, one that will linger for nearly half of the novel, until the underlying nobility of his character is gradually revealed to her. When examining the role of money and motivation in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* there are some characters that prove every action they take is under the assumption it will move them up the social ladder or acquire them more money. Mrs. Bennet is a humorous and tiresome character. Noisy and foolish, she is a woman consumed by the desire to see her daughters married and seems to care for nothing else in the world. Ironically, her single-minded pursuit of this goal tends to backfire, as her lack of social graces alienates the very people, like Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, whom she tries desperately to attract. Austen uses her continually to highlight the necessity of marriage for young women at this time in society. Mrs. Bennet also serves as a middle-class counterpoint to such upper-class snobs as Lady Catherine and Miss Bingley, demonstrating that foolishness can be found at every level of society. Miss Bingley is Mr. Bingley's snobbish sister. Miss Bingley bears inordinate disdain for Elizabeth's middle-class background. Her



vain attempts to garner Darcy's attention cause Darcy to admire Elizabeth's self-possessed character even more. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a rich, bossy noblewoman; Mr. Collins's patron and Darcy's aunt. Lady Catherine epitomizes class snobbery, especially in her attempts to order the middle-class Elizabeth away from her well-bred nephew. She is convinced that Elizabeth is below her and is astonished when Elizabeth disregards her noble status. In *Pride and Prejudice* a character that is solely motivated by the accumulation of money and advancement in social class is George Wickham. He is a handsome, fortune-hunting militia officer. Wickham's good looks and charm attract Elizabeth initially, but Darcy's revelation about Wickham's disreputable past clues her in to his true nature and simultaneously draws her closer to Darcy. Wickham is a character that will do anything for money. He runs off with Lydia and then uses her as a pawn to gain more money from Darcy. He is ruthless and places money above all moral acts. It is clear Lydia and Whickham are on the same page when Lydia's letter to Elizabeth at the end of the novel is read, " It is a great comfort to have you so rich, and when you have nothing else to do, I hope you will think of us. I am sure Wickham would like a place at court very much, and I do not think we shall have quite money enough to live upon without some help" (Austen, pg. 252). Lydia's motivations for contacting her sister lie solely in the want of a favor that will afford her and Whickham more money for their frivolous lifestyle. In *Great Expectations*, many characters are motivated by the accumulation of money. Miss Havisham's downfall can be attributed to her fiancé that swindled her out of her money and left her with the desire to punish the male sex through her daughter Estella; Pip being one of her prime victims. Compeyson was her

fiancé and he worked along with Arthur, Miss Havisham's half-brother. This shows that family ties can easily be destroyed with greed. In both Great Expectations and Pride and Prejudice money appears to be the root of all evil. The characters with actions motivated by money are left in the shadows of those that managed to see through this artificial system of a social hierarchy. Elizabeth and Darcy are able to overcome the restraints of society with love. Pip is able to become a true gentleman, not one classified by money but by happiness and love for those that truly care for him like Joe and Magwitch.