

Qualities expected of 19th century victorian gentlemen, and dicken's criticisms o...

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Charles Dickens was a man who often used his writings as a tool to explain to the public his criticisms of the various facets of Victorian life. These criticisms included the penal and judiciary system, the maltreatment of children and the idea of the Victorian gentleman. The latter is the predominant theme in *Great Expectations*, a novel about the 'son' of a blacksmith becoming a 'gentleman' after he is given a large sum of money by a mysterious benefactor. I shall discuss the Victorian perception of the qualities of a gentleman in this essay and then comment on how Dickens criticises these perceived qualities, especially through *Great Expectations*.

Perhaps the word 'gentleman' should be defined before it can be analysed. The Collins dictionary gives two definitions: 1. A man regarded as having qualities of refinement associated with a good family; 2. A man who is cultured, courteous and well educated. It is interesting to note at this early stage that it only mentions one truly personal quality, courtesy, whereas being cultured and coming from a good family are highly prized qualities. I mention this definition because it almost exactly mirrors the Victorian definition of a 'gentleman' and summarises it well. 'Image' – money, clothes, culture, accent, was 'in'; honourable personal qualities were 'out.' A 'healthy disregard' for those below you on the social and economic scale was encouraged and snobbery and one-upmanship were seen as acceptable and valued qualities in high society. This is the basis for the Victorian gentleman, which I shall discuss throughout this essay.

To be a gentleman in Victorian England, one needed a start in life. This almost always meant either being born with money, a title, or both. Without

money especially, a gentleman was nothing. However, anyone with money could easily become a gentleman. Dickens, however, subscribed to the theory that “ money maketh not the man”. Dickens believed that the content of your character, not your wallet, was more important as a gentlemanly quality. This is one of the most prominent themes in the book: money does not make a good person, and that money is all it takes to be a ‘ gentleman’. The way in which Pip develops is a perfect example of this. When Pip comes into money, he begins to consider himself superior to those around him, especially Joe and Biddy, who are working class, and he distances himself from them and finds a new peer group, which contains many gentlemen, but not those kind that Dickens considers a true gentleman. Conversely, when he loses his money, he becomes a better person because money is no longer central to his life. Magwitch, the man who made him a gentleman through money, says it himself:

“ you’ve been more comfortable alonger me, since I was under a dark cloud, than when the sun shone.”

What he means is that he and Pip have got on better since Pip lost all his money.

The Victorian era was, above all, one of superficiality. This superficiality ran through all aspects of life, especially for the Victorian gentleman. Correct etiquette was prized above all things, and people were judged on their behaviour at the dinner table, rather than their personality. Dickens disagreed vehemently with this. He believed that although politeness was an

attractive and necessary attribute, holding a spoon correctly or putting your hat in the right place should not be seen as all-important.

“ And that the fork is reserved [to put in the mouth], it is not put farther in than necessary.”

This clearly shows how pedantic and superficial the Victorians were. Although manners are important, and Dickens shows this in a humorous light, which probably only the upper classes would find funny, does it really matter how far in the fork is placed? Dickens says no. I believe he also implies that these intricate rules of etiquette were a way for the upper classes to make themselves look, and feel, superior to the lower classes. A perfect example is when Joe goes to see Miss Haversham, and doesn't talk directly to her but to Pip, for fear of making a mistake or appearing disrespectful.

The way one spoke in the Victorian era was heavily connected to etiquette and much to Dicken's disgust, related to one's social status. To be a true gentleman in the eyes of Victorians, one had to speak with an affected upper class accent and use words that many 'common' or lower class people wouldn't use:

“” He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!” said Estella with disdain.”

Again, I believe that Dickens implies that his was another way that gentlemen could exercise their 'superiority' over the lower classes. Another example is the difference in the way Jaggers talks to his clients, i. e. with

disdain, rudeness, etc., and the way he talks to Pip – in a polite manner, almost as equals.

Dickens believes that your accent and words don't really matter, or give an accurate representation of the person you are. In effect, it is more important what you say, rather than how you say it. An example of this is Joe, a working class character. He does not speak with an affected accent, yet he is almost always polite and succinct and always conveys his message clearly.

“ If you're a bull-baiting and badgering me, come out!” says Joe when Jaggers attempts to cajole Joe into asking for money.

It is important to note how Pip's changing status, or more accurately acquisition of money, affects the way he is treated and spoken to by those around him. Dickens was very concerned with the way money affected peoples' actions and shows this through characters such as Trabb and Pumblechook, who become extremely obsequious as soon as Pip comes into money. “ May I?” Mr. Pumblechook keeps repeating, wanting to shake Pip's hand, but then begin to look down on him again when he loses it all.

““ What else could be expected!’ as he extended his hand with a magnificently forgiving air.”

I began by discussing the importance of money, and I shall end in the same way. This was exactly Dickens' concern – money had become the be-all and end-all of the Victorian gentleman's world. Dickens did not dislike those with money, for he had much of it himself, but he despised the way a gentleman

was often not only judged on his wealth, but could become a 'gentleman' through it. Bentley Drummle is Dickens' prime example of this – a man with no honour, kindness or desirable personal qualities at all, but still considered a gentleman on the merit of money and prestige alone. This is the main theme in his book, and is the basis of Pip's development. Through Magwitch, Dickens shows that money can 'make' a gentleman. Dickens believes that to be a true gentleman, money is only of value through work, and that even so, there are more important things in life, such as loyalty, friendship and honour. Joe, being Dickens' example of a true gentleman, shows this when he uses all the little money he has to pay off Pip's debt and despite this making him penniless, is still happy because Pip's health is improving. Although Pip eventually makes it on his own, and pays off his financial debt to Joe, he is left with an emotional debt he can never repay.

Dickens believed in karma. He believed that if you sow the seeds of goodness, you will receive goodness. He also believed it worked the other way – badness begets badness. Pip's only worthy deed in his development – starting a fund for Herbert to set up in business, later provides him with a job, and makes him into a true gentleman, because he works hard, he makes it on his own, and he pays off his financial debt to Joe. Bentley Drummle, on the other hand, treats Estella with violence and disrespect and dies a violent death when he is killed by his horse. So it would seem that we all reap what we sow.