

"great expectations" by charles dickens essay sample

Literature



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“ Great Expectations” by Charles Dickens Essay Sample

” Pip and the nature of his ‘ great expectations’ illustrates another theme in the Victorian novel – the definition of a true gentleman. It was a question that Victorians debated endlessly – the gentleman’s definition, his nature, his function – as old ideas about traditional hierarchy were challenged or exploited.”

(Barbara Dennis OCR, page 19)

“...No man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner...no varnish can hide the grain of the wood; and that the more varnish you put on, the more the grain will express itself.”(Chapter 22, Great expectations)

Both of these above statements are questioning the definition of a gentleman. Gentleman defines it self in the Oxford dictionary as “ polite well-bred man; a man of high social position and a polite name for a man.”

Dickens wrote this novel in the Victorian Era, at this time there was a separation in the society, the poor, the rich – the peasants, the gentlemen. This time of social change was induced by the Industrial Revolution. In the Victorian period, there was a definite ‘ failure of religion’ due mainly to the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change. Society became much more ‘ class conscious’ and the divisions between the rich and poor became much wider.

Novels seen as a replacement for religion, it prouded a liberal, humanising influences to an increasing liberal, public novels became to be seen as ‘

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liberating force of the romantic imagination.' Although industrial was an advantage for upper members of society, for lower class, poverty in despreding. Frequently people were laid off and because they had no farm to fall back on, most then starved and died. At least ten percent of the population lived at deaths door. Cholera ravaged society and in 1851 child life expectancy just reached nine years of age. People became selfish and their only concern in life was to make money and stay alive, the upper class it little to help.

Dickens London was essentially the subterranean world of poor. Huddled together in what came to be known as 'Rookeries' - the poor stayed together in large numbers. As Dickens success develop, he left the back streets of Camden Town and moved near Regents Park, the better place in town. But the life that he led here and in fashionable society - riding in the new cabs, and shopping at the Fortnum Mason's seems not to have stirred his imagination at all. It was the poorer, but more colourful, districts that repelled but also attracted him, to which he returned time and again for inspiration.

As Graham Martin expresses: " In his own life Dickens became a gentleman." There area a lot of contrasts between Pip in this novel, and Dickens. As in 1984 dickens father got into severe difficulties and was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Prison for debt. Like Pip, Dickens grew up without a father figure in his life. Magwitch represents fatherhood to Pip, a criminal just like Dickens father, met pip on the marshes. Magwitch, the narrative suggests, is not so easily dealt with. Dickens suggests in addition that possession by devils is a

cynically convenient way of labelling and dismissing those whom society decides to reject. Dickens point is that Magwitch is no more legion than Pip or his readers are. He is outcast, alien and marginal for reasons which spelled out for us in chapter 42 when Magwitch narrates his autobiography, and which are all too close to those discoverable from the life stories of the underprivileged of our own day for us to feel complacent about them.

Magwitch as scapegoat is not just a psychological reality for Pip, though. By making him a convict Dickens suggests that mid nineteenth century English society needs its criminals as scapegoats, too; so that Magwitch as outcast convict, on society's margins, is a passionate reformists accusation aimed at a loathsome complacent a social structure and hierarchy. Magwitch's name, compounded of Latin ' magus' (magician) and witch, indicates that there is something demonically irrepressible about him, that he has a magician's power over pip's destiny. The description of Miss Havisham as the ' Witch of' Satis (chapter 11) and as weird in one way in which dickens pairs the two, making her the partner of Pip's Magwitch father and so completing Pip's horrified and grotesque recreation of his long lost parents.

Dickens develops the theme of gentlemen throughout the novel in Pips progression. It seems Pip went to Satis House one day, " a common labouring boy" (pg. 60, chapter 8), and came back a boy with a dream. Henceforth he dominant purpose in his life will be to become a gentleman and win Estella. Estella plays a big role in Pips long life dream, to become a gentleman. As she made Pip feel like he was not good enough, and he did not deserve her love as he was in a different class to her. Dickens depicts

Estella as "la belle dame sans merci" until the last chapter of the novel so, though one understands the enchantress-like spell she casts over Pip, she does not command our sympathy as a woman.

Dickens pleads her case by presenting her as one of that 'heap' - the children of convicted criminals "Generated in great numbers for certain destruction", rescued by the stonyhearted Jaggers. This information about her parentage has to be concealed until Chapter 51 so Dickens is unable to erase the harsh impressions Estella has made on the readers mind up to this point. On Pip's second visit, in chapter 11, she taunts and strikes him and later allows him to kiss her, but makes certain he knows it is worthless: "given to a coarse common boy as piece of money might have been". When Pip the gentleman returns to Satis house in chapter 29 Estella exerts a goddess like power over him. Not deterred by her haughty tone, he worships the ground she walks on and thinks that they are both destined to fall in love with each other. Estella's cruelty to Pip appears he is her victim because she has made him to begin to think and act as an insensitive snob.

This is obvious when Joe visits him in London. The most recurrent image of Joe is the picture Dickens creates in the opening section of 'Great expectations'. Symbolically he places Joe at the heart of the home, in the kitchen corner by the glowing hearth, where Pip as a small child, shielded by the blacksmiths huge physical frame is cheered and warmed by Joes love.

As Pip develops as a character and 'gentleman' I come across some other characters that have an impact on Pip's life. We, the readers are introduced to Jaggers in chapter 18. It was the fourth year of Pip's apprenticeship. One

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Saturday night a stranger enters the bar. It's Jaggers, a London lawyer with a bullying manner, and he makes Wopsle look foolish. On Pips arrival to London we find out more about Jaggers, and his qualification, his ' gloomy office' near the prison. Jaggers seemed to be a very powerful character. The only reason he is classified as a gentleman is because of his seeded, powerful job.