

# Not-so-great expectations



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As simplistic and politically impartial as Victorian novels and their common familial themes of love and companionship may seem, there is customarily a greater sociopolitical concern inserted within the narrative for the reader of the time to have registered. Paul Thomas Murphy expresses this in *Toward a Working Class Canon: Literary Criticism in British Working-class Periodicals, 1816-1858* with “Literary discourse in every working-class periodical is both an attempt to influence and the product of influence” (Murphy 13). The same can be said for Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. The societal undertones within had their own pseudo-manipulative propaganda-esque intentions for the hierarchical dynamics of such lower-tiered classes, particularly in regards to consciously quelling social unrest and constructing a transparent parallel between Dickens’ perception of those poverty-stricken individuals and women.

Manipulative notwithstanding, Dickens nevertheless had arguably a rather sound motive for his want to foster certain dispositions in his audience. For instance, an intellectually empowered lower class was something that he tremendously feared, as Peter Scheckner explains in his article “Gender and Class in Dickens: Making Connections,” something that could spark an organized revolt targeted at the upper tiers of the social ladder. Much of these anxieties were perhaps more explicitly expressed in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the lower class men and women were equally “portrayed as lunatic as and possibly even more malevolent than the aristocracy they are trying to pull down” (Scheckner 244). That is not to say that Dickens meant to antagonize the lower classes in any way – so many of his integral and endearing characters reside in the lower classes – only that he represented

them in such a way so as to mollify their potentially fermenting rebellion. It is perhaps best stated in the introductory line of Scheckner's essay, that, "Charles Dickens preferred workers the way he preferred Victorian women: grateful for favors received, humble, patient, and passive" (Scheckner 236). It is these exact sentiments that are reflected throughout the bulk of *Great Expectations*, aimed largely at pacifying the potentially unruly.

However, it should not be said that Dickens' apprehension was more akin to an unfounded paranoia. In fact, at twelve years old, Dickens knew first-hand how the working class thought and operated, slaving away during ten-hour shifts at Warren's Blacking Warehouse in London to support himself and his family following his father's imprisonment. An utterly sordid establishment, his experience working there under such harsh conditions created an all too bleak awareness of working-class trials and tribulations, so much so that in his adult years it "became a source both of creative energy and of the preoccupation with the themes of alienation and betrayal which would emerge, most notably, in *David Copperfield* and in *Great Expectations*" (Cody), just to name a few of his influenced works. It is thus that he acquired such a deep understanding of just how tested, vulnerable and malleable the working class really was.

Aside from the elder members that comprised the working class, *Great Expectations* also directed its societal commentary at the younger readers also born into such economic standing. With Pip being seven years old at the novel's start, the reader is presented his entire coming-of-age character arc, through his teens and into his young-adulthood. Thus, those more situated around Pip's age range were more liable to empathize with his plights. Not

surprisingly, this notion is pertinent with Dickens' writing styles and preferences. As David Paroissien states in his essay " Ideology, Pedagogy, and Demonology: The Case Against Industrialized Education in Dickens's Fiction," Dickens " held firmly to a belief in the ability of imaginative literature to encourage salutary mental habits in young readers growing up in an age dominated by industrial and manufacturing concerns" (Paroissien 261).

Perhaps the strongest insight into Dickens' outlook on the lower classes came with the characterizations of his female characters in *Great Expectations*. With the exception of Bidley - who he saw as the " true" representation of womanhood - the bulk of the female characters in *Great Expectations* personifies how the lower classes were inclined to behave, according to Dickens. Scheckner singles out Mrs. Joe, who " when she gets too assertive she becomes very unattractive and may even deserve a strong smack on the head—which she gets, as we know, from Orlick" (Scheckner 240). As austere as the concept is, it is difficult to ignore the arrant and excessive consequences imposed upon the women in *Great Expectations* who affront men: Molly is subjugated into Mr. Jaggers' employment; Estella is beaten and eventually widowed; Mrs. Joe is beaten so much she becomes an invalid; and Mrs. Havisham is burned alive. Furthermore, though Dickens was undoubtedly sympathetic to the justification of the lower-class struggle, he nevertheless believed that " should women be counseled by understanding men," " workings should appeal to the ones in authority to save them from themselves, from the fires of rebellion which rage in their hearts sometimes out of control" (Scheckner 245). Considering that his perception of women

was similarly crafted during his dark childhood, with his mother readily opting to keep young Charles in the Warehouse longer than necessary, it becomes increasingly evident the extent to which he associated the place of the working class with the place of women.

Penning the novel itself with all the precise themes implanted alone would not be sufficient to communicate them to his intended audience. In fact, the morals expressed within the text were so vital and lower-class in essence that Dickens needed an alternate medium so it could be conveyed to the proper demographic. The method by which he elected to issue *Great Expectations* - along with other works, such as *A Tale of Two Cities* - was to publish it in his weekly periodical *All the Year Round*, partly so as to stimulate the fanatical fervor of his readership as it would grow ever more restless upon their reading the unresolved stories of each published segment, anticipatory for the next one and further developments of the narrative that would come with it. Moreover and weightier, it was less expensive and easily accessible to the more destitute lower classes that comprised most of his target audience. Thereby, the lower class would in fact procure the text specifically intended for them and afterward unconsciously absorb the sociopolitical morals and values Dickens imbedded within the narrative.

Though fairly literate - the estimates falling somewhere between sixty and seventy-five percent (Murphy 7) - the lower classes of the Victorian Period represented an extremely impressionable demographic yet at the same time one that could prove to be potentially threatening to the sociopolitical hierarchy under the right instruction. Lauren Watson expresses this in her <https://assignbuster.com/not-so-great-expectations/>

article " Mimics, Counterfeits and ' Other' Bad Copies: Forging the Currency of Class and Colonialism in Great Expectations" as "[mimicry] simultaneously marks both the institution, and the disintegration, of class and colonial relations within the conflictual economies of capitalism and imperialism" (Watson 493). Much like a widespread anarchist text could have swayed the working class to rebel, Dickens capitalized on this didactic susceptibility to instill in them what he ardently considered to be politically righteous or something that reflected his own moral compass in the prospect that those beliefs and values would be echoed onto his readers' sentiments.

One of the themes that Dickens sought to communicate was as Carolyn Lesjak details in *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel*, that literature of the time often presented this jarring rift in the relationship between individual attainments such as social status and monetary worth and intimate matters such as family and love in one's life. This as a concept is in particular featured heavily in *Great Expectations*, wherein Pip continually dismisses his common sense in favor of the delusion that his mysterious inheritance will lead to upper-class welfare and an intimate romance with the self-proclaimed cold-hearted Estella. However, in doing so, Pip willingly forfeits intimate relations with his brother-in-law Joe and tutor Biddy - the only ones who truly love him, humble beginnings and all - something he comes to recognize following his hardships. Evidently, Pip's quest to bridge the rift between these two virtues at the ends of the societal spectrum is wholly misguided. On the other side of the argument, Dickens inserts into the narrative another player to act as a foil to these characterizations in the form of John Wemmick, Mr. Jaggers' clerk.

Wemmick, as opposed to Pip, displays his mastery over the two aforementioned facets of life, having established himself professionally in Mr. Jaggers' office and domestically at his not-so-humble abode - a small-scale castle - caring for his father - whimsically dubbed the "Aged Parent" - and entertaining his fiancé Miss Skiffins. In conjunction with these two settings, Wemmick's demeanor and bipolarity adapts to fit both, calculating and tepid when in the domain of Mr. Jaggers and carefree and jovial when at home. However, Dickens does seemingly stress the importance of the home life in regards to individuality, though specifically and astutely not entirely devaluing the professional life simultaneously. Indeed, upon analyzing Wemmick's comparatively dry state when in the presence of Jaggers, Pip narrates that "there were twin Wemmicks and this was the wrong one" (Dickens 290). Both ostensibly alter their respective positions to fit this ideal by the novel's end, with Pip successfully appealing to Wemmick's "right twin" in the presence of Jaggers and with Pip fully comprehending the importance of his epiphany.

Nevertheless, Wemmick is meant to represent the ideal balance between humanity and professionalism and is, as Arlene Young puts it in *Culture, Class, and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents, and Working Woman*, "a character who remains uncompromisingly lower-middle-class in status" but "nevertheless commands some measure of respect" (Young 100). Dickens exercises this theme of innateness serving as the crux of one's humanity to instill both a sense of fulfillment and contentment in the lower classes in regards to their societal standing. However, in turn, these themes were also formulated to psychologically dissuade and stunt the working class

from aspiring to greater heights socially and economically, perhaps conveying through Pip's tale a warning under more of the aforementioned sociopolitical pretenses.

One way that Dickens executed the feat of speaking to this fragile target audience without simultaneously inciting an indignant outcry was in fact to appeal to their stereotypical qualities within the characters portrayed. These stereotypes serving as the foundations for the characterizations and settings allow for there to be an intrinsic parallel to the lower class readers who embody these traits, but it is the individualities and relative idiosyncrasies that "preclude the categorization of his or her character as a type or stereotype that simply represents the class or its features" (Young 96). For instance, Joe, one of the most endearing characters in *Great Expectations*, despite being provided limited character development, exists within what could be considered the confines of stereotypically lower-class economic circumstances. However, his kind-hearted and affectionate nature allows for the reader to identify with his character and past hardships the most, what with him being denied a proper education by his abusive and alcoholic father. Additionally, not only does his capacity to persevere through such an upbringing enable the reader to sympathize with him especially, but the way in which he describes his father's actions as "rendering unto all their doo, and maintaining equal justice betwixt man and man," and following with "my father were that good in his hart" (Dickens 41), he also justifies the conditions, some that assuredly resonated with certain readers. Considering all this, it is he who ultimately holds sway over the lower-class readers. Despite Pip's obstinate efforts to educate him, for the bulk of the novel Joe



shares none of Pip's aspirations to become anything greater than a blacksmith, perhaps the most economically content character of the bunch in the same vein as Biddy; his economic standing is presented as even more decent when he singlehandedly pays off Pip's debts. Furthermore, when Joe accompanies Pip to Satis House or visits him in London, he is confoundedly out of place mentally, fully resolute that such upper-class lifestyles were never suited for him. More contemporary readers would be less inclined to believe such modest resources could be considered virtues, but, as Dickens would hope, it is precisely the moral influence on Pip's ultimate epiphany and the attitudes and dispositions that Joe holds that the lower class of the time was liable to emulate and apply to their everyday lives.

With Pip acting as the main protagonist and the perceptual focal point throughout the novel, his own moral developments are meant to progress along with the reader's, both simultaneously being taught the same ethical lessons from supporting characters, be it Wemmick teaching equilibrium or Joe teaching contentment or even the female characters teaching discipline. It is with all these characterizations that Dickens sought to imprint upon the lower-class readers the integral themes of the novel, particularly that their expectations be not so great after all.

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