Great Expectations As a Criticism of Society: Analytical Essay

Dickens used the growth of his characters in Great Expectations, particularly Pip, in relation to others to write about social reform, and most effectively illustrated this by using the first-person narrative style. In Great Expectations, Charles Dickens has written a social commentary using the development of his characters to illustrate his message. With Great Expectations Dickens strongly criticizes three social problems that afflict Victorian England: the treatment of children, the injustice of the social class structure and the inhumanity of government and law. Dickens expresses criticism of the abuse of children in Britain through characterization in Great Expectations. The most poignant example of this is the story's protagonist Phillip Pirrip, referred to throughout the novel as Pip.

Pip portrays the abuse of children through example. Philip Pirrip, or Pip, encounters first-hand the experience of child abuse. His sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, is often described as executing some form of corporeal punishment and Pip knows "her to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon[Himself]" (Dickens 8). Mrs. Joe Gargery is portrayed as a cold, hard, cynical and authoritarian figure who subjects Pip to not only much physical, but also mental and emotional abuse. His only comfort is Joe. Pip therefore, grows up in a very loveless home. This was very much the common in Victorian England, where children were often considered miniature adults and were valued for their potential earning power.

Dickens continuously shows the result of the cruel instruction Estella has received, while at the same time showing that what Miss. Havisham has done is no different than what is being done to children all over. "That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride, found vengeance in, I knew full well" (Dickens 394). Dickens recognized this horrible issue of child abuse, and was a strong promoter of children's rights in a time when children were still considered property, with no protection or rights under the law but still subject to the law as equally and harshly as adults. The highly emotional scene in which Pip is trying to extract from Mr. Jaggers the history of Estella's origin brings this point to life in the most evident way. When Pip demands to know why Jaggers separated Estella from her mother and gave the child to Miss Havisham, Jaggers asks Pip to put himself in the lawyer's place, where 'he lived in an atmosphere of evil'. Jaggers then goes on to point out that "here was one pretty little child out of the whole heap, who could be saved" (Dickens 408). What Estella experienced at the hands of Miss.

Havisham was better than what she would have experienced at the hands of society. Such a picture of a child, forced to choose between two cruel options, neither one any better than the other and neither of which will result in happiness for the child, strike sharply in the reader. Forced to pause and think about the situation, it causes the reader to think about how realistic the scenario is and how likely the reaction would be. Dickens highlights the injustice and cruelty children were facing in his time. He reflection on the view that their society is supportive by questioning the morality of his time. As far as the criticism of social class is concerned, Dickens' provides the reader with scathing insight into the social standard of this time/era. The class

system in England began with the introduction of feudalism which followed the Norman Conquest of 1066 and has been the social guideline for hundreds of years. The class system consists of an upper, middle and lower class. These classes and the differences between them, are evident in the plot and interaction of the characters in Charles Dickens's Great Expectations. Dickens paints a biting portrait of the English class system where the undeserving upper class is omnipotent, the middle class consists of those envious of the upper class, and the hard workers of the lower class who are unable to succeed due to their birth status. These injustices are personified through the outlandish characters of Miss Havisham, Mrs. Pocket and Magwitch, who satirize the upper, middle and lower classes.

These characters embody many of the traits, which Dickens found to be indicative of the various classes. Through colorful narrations and descriptions, these characters come to life and guide us through the many social guises of nineteenth century England. Miss Havisham's lazy and indulgent nature is seen through Pip's many vivid descriptions of her as he became progressively more embroiled in Miss Havisham's games. Miss Havisham personified the idle rich as she sat in her mansion, brooding over the past, while still wearing her disintegrating wedding dress. Miss Havisham was obsessed with her failed marriage and created another doomed relationship by manufacturing Estella to break Pip's heart. The absurdity of Miss Havisham's life is used as the framework that Dickens utilizes to satirize the upper class. Her upper class, lavish lifestyle and ridiculous idiosyncrasies illustrate that despite all of the wealth and social education of the upper class, they are fools who are power hungry and unable to cope with adverse life situations. While the upper class that Dickens portrays is of garish, childish and lazy individuals, the middle class at that time wished to emanate the qualities of the upper class. Those in the middle class were always envious of the power and wealth of the aristocrats and tried to be accepted into this elite class by flattering those in it.

The Pocket family is an example of those who flatter the upper class. Dickens the Pockets are seen mockingly as they make their yearly visits to Miss Havisham, falsely flattering her with compliments of how well she looks. When the Pockets visit Miss Havisham, they feign affection so that they may be included in her will. The small middle class comprised of intellectuals and professionals, of whom Mr. Pocket was one as he had 'been educated at Harrow and at Cambridge, where he had distinguished himself and taken up the calling of a grinder.' The Pockets were a moderately well off family, but they would never be part of the aristocracy solely because they do not have a title to their name. Through the hilarious descriptions of the Pockets, Dickens trivializes titles. ' Still, Mrs. Pocket was in general the object of a queer sort of respectful pity because she had not married a title ;while Mr. Pocket was the object a queer sort of forgiving approach because he had never got one.' Mrs. Joe and Pumblechook were not as close to the upper class as the Pockets, nonetheless, their behaviour was indicative of their slavish attitude towards the upper class. While the prison/criminal motif runs throughout Dickens's novel, the injustice of the judicial system of Victorian England is clearly illustrated in certain chapters. For example, in Chapter XX when Pip first arrives in London, he discovers that the office of Mr. Jaggers is located on a 'grimy street' that is near Old Bailey where the courts are located and around the corner from Newgate Prison. As Mr. Jaggers approaches, he is rushed by rather unsavory types of people, whom he addresses in the quote: 'Now, I have nothing to say to you," said Mr. Jaggers, throwing his finger at them. "I want to know no more than I know. As to the result, it's a toss-up. I told you from the first it was a toss-up. Have you paid Wemmick?"'

Apparently, then, the judicial system is based upon money and court influence. Obviously,

Jaggers is a man of great influence as the people waiting outside his office beg him to help them and fear his wrath lest he not take their cases. Also, that Jaggers is rather unscrupulous is indicated in his selectiveness of only those with money as well as his constant washing of his hands that Pip interprets as his attempt to rid himself of his guilt in defending such clients. The most salient example of the unjust legal system comes in a later chapter as Provis/Magwitch relates his personal history in which he grew up as an orphan and gamin in the streets who survived by thievery. As a younger man, he met Compeyson at the races and was exploited by him to put his stolen notes into circulation. When the two men were on trial, the superficial standard of value, social class, allows the upper-class Compeyson, the greater criminal, to receive a lesser sentence that the 'common sort of a wretch' which Magwitch appeared. Magwitch tells Pip, 'Of course he'd much the best of it to the last and his punishment was light. I was put in irons, brought to trial again, and sent for life.' This system of 'justice' for the rich is figuratively expressed in Chapter 33 after Pip and Estella dine and they near Newgate. When Estella asks what place this is and Pip replies, she shudders and remarks, 'Wretches.' Of course, the irony is that she herself is the child of such wretches, but she has the veneer of the upperclass as the adopted daughter of Miss Havisham. Earlier, in Chapter XXXII, there is an illustration of the injustice of the legal system as Pip talks with Wemmick, who informs him that he is on his way to the infamous Newgate prison where Mr. Jaggers has been hired by a robber. When Pip asks if the man is guilty, Wemmick replies, 'Bless your soul and body, no....But he is accused of it.' Without doubt, the narrative of Great Expectations portrays a criminal justice system that dehumanizes certain people and corrupts others. In this way, Charles Dickens makes sweeping social criticism in Great Expectations, some of which are still relevant to our own times, which shows the universality of the novel. The reader is made to share the attitude of Pip towards these issues and it also develops a tolerant attitude in us and teaches us how to survive in this system of injustice without getting corrupted.