Great Expectations Versus Howards End

Both novels explore the latent importance of the class system in society despite the difference in eras. Charles Dickens, in Great Expectations (1861), examines how the Victorians expressed attitudes, based on stereotypes, towards people of different social classes. Whereas Forster, in Howards End (1910), seeks to reveal the diversity within each class. Whilst doing this, both authors expose how the 19th and the 20th-century societies controlled one's ability to succeed in life as the rigid class system meant that the upper class were supervised whilst the lower class were concealed beneath the poverty.

Similarly, the lower class characters (Phillip Pirrip in Great Expectations and Leonard Bast in Howards End) adopt a continual yearning and desire to climb the social class hierarchy and escape from their impoverished lifestyle. Ultimately, this suggests that society often created a callous demeanor of those from lower class backgrounds and which, in turn, restricted their opportunities available to them. Estella's immediate perception of Pip as a 'common laboring boy' allows the reader to gather the notion that stereotypes often stuck based on the wealth of one's family. Dickens choice of description illustrated the contrasting lifestyles between those of the lower class compared to those of the upper class as Miss Havisham wore 'Bright jewels' which 'sparkled on her neck and on her hand' and 'was dressed in rich materials' (page 48). The paradox between their clothing and their possessions contradict each other as when Pips pockets were emptied 'there was nothing in them but bread' (page 4). As Dickens often used realism, he highlights this to reinforce how the Victorian society treated people of a higher class compared to those of the working class and therefore exposes the nature of society in which favoured the rich and undermined the poor. Although Pips origin as poor common boy often sets him back in the novel, just as Leonard's does, he continues to pursue his desire to become a gentleman and faces struggles which he did not believe existed. Prior to this, Pips impecunious background had too hindered his social advancement, just as he was a young boy where Estella ridiculed his lack of knowledge: 'he calls the knaves jacks this boy!' (page 51) canoting the conception that he was not worthy to even play with a child from a wealthy background. Pips embarrassment continued throughout the novel where Pip had to learn that 'in London it is not the custom to put the knife in the mouth' (page 153) expressing that Pips lack of manners separated him apart from the others who knew the correct way to behave. I believe that Dickens emphasises Pips lack of manners to reveal how the opportunity of education and manners was something that only seemed accessible to those who could simply afford it and therefore again created a divide within society between the rich and the poor. This supports Karl Marx idea that 'the social classes were being increasingly driven apart' and evokes the notion that the wealthy obtained enough power to influence society and create a segregated britain.

The character of Leonard Bast, in Forster's Howards End, also tries to create a demeanor that is far from his reality through the works of literature and art . His desire to educate himself, despite his extreme poverty, signifies that creating a life far from their own was something that became significant to those that had nothing. Bast held the belief that if he obtained great understanding and appreciation towards literature and art he would have the skills to advance socially in society and separate himself from the rest of the poor. His desperation to 'acquire culture' and 'to be well informed' (page 39) suggests that this character represented the

aspirations of the lower class, as like Pip did, and soon became obsessed with self improvement and literature. It also reinforces the idea that the lower class were restricted by their stance in society and were limited by their background and wealth so were unable to truly grasp the concept of culture and literature.However, his ongoing desire to please the schegal sisters and ultimately develop a relationship with them, based on intellect, soon failed as he was perceived as having a ‘brain filled with the husks of books and culture’ which did not in fact impress them. Forster’s meaning for this was to reveal that in a society where a class system dominates, it is almost impossible to escape from your origins therefore suggesting that the idea of social advancement was nothing but a dream to those of the lower, working class. Forster also uses the characters of Helen and Margaret to imply that although a relationship may develop, it will only ever be futile as even Leonard realises that ‘it would always be a failure’ proposing that wealth and power dominates all aspects of one’s life during the early 20th century and therefore a relationship between those of different classes could never be successfully sustained. The notion that the lower class can never escape from their impoverished lifestyle is also reinforced at the end of the novel through Leonard Bast’s sudden death.

Although both novels explore how relationships are built between different classes, the way in which they are conveyed and explored differ. In Dickens' Great Expectations, he identifies how the class system, created by society, extends beyond wealth and associates itself with the lifestyle one chooses to lead. This idea is made evident through the ongoing relationship between Pip and his benefactor Magwitch. At the beginning of the novel, the characters are presented to one another in a disorderly fashion and do not spark an immediate connection due to their differences which separates themselves from one another however, when they are later reintroduced their relationship remains static and mirrors just what it used to be. Young Pip was terrified when he first became introduced with the convict and begged him: ‘don’t cut my throat sir… Pray don’t do it sir.’(page 4) just as he was when he later became reintroduced with his mysterious benefactor: ‘Pray what is your business?’ (page 268). Both the pleading and questioning implies that Pip’s positioning to this unknown man is nothing but reluctant to find out more. The man's poor appearance and common ways allows Pip to understand that he is not worthy of being with a gentleman (just as society has taught him to behave). I believe that Dickens does this to expose the differences between those of different social classes and how unwelcoming society was to people that were presented as being below them. Pips perception of magwitch did not change as stereotypes often dominated one’s life during the Victorian era and the opportunities it therefore faced. Although later on in the novel this perception changed and the two characters managed to build an intimate relationship which was viewed as unexpected. Their relationship turned from a ‘dreadful burden’ (page 277) into one that would be ‘heavy and anxious at parting’ (page 322) revealing that relationships can develop between those from opposing lifestyles and social classes as the hierarchy rests on force from society and not truth and meaning. It can therefore be argued that Dickens uses the intimacy between Magwitch and Pip to represent to society how social class is futile and how it is unable to determine one’s future.

Opposingly, Howards End does not explore relationships with those below the lower class as the viewpoint towards those (from the characters in the novel) is simply to ignore their existence in society. However, is does explore the mixing of social classes towards the end of the novel where they all come to live under one roof in the Wilcoxes family home. Firstly, the failed relationship between the Schegal sisters and Leonard Bast suggests how wealth and class was the utmost important thing and was often prioritised in society as Mr Bast soon became

disregarded due to the wishes of Mr Wilcox (now Margaret's Husband). The attitudes towards Leonard Bast, in the novel, act as a didactic tool to expose how extreme the treatment of the lower class was during the Edwardian period and how they were disregarded in society as a whole. This reveals how the upper class, represented by Henry and Charles Wilcox, often felt like they could behave and treat the poor as they desired too as their wealth and social class meant that society placed them on a pedestal above them. Charles ‘took him by the collar’ (page 342) and simply beat up Leonard as a consequence of his shameful intimacy with Helen yet the consequences for Henry Wilcoxes for his affair with prostitute Jacky does not become known. Forster has done this to explore the contradicting roles in society and the strength and power that wealth held as it suggests that those from higher classes were able to act however they chose and had the right to do so. The distinct divide between the treatment of the two classes explores how the rigid class system dominated society and how it gave those of greater wealth power and rejected those that were viewed as irrelevant and unworthy. This conception is again emphasised by the death of Leonard who was brutally murdered for his wrong doings and was crushed by a ‘bookcase, which came down over him’ (page 345). This irony is symbolic of the fact that no amount of literature and art would have been enough to allow Mr Bast to be the equal of the schegals and the Wilcoxes as his impoverished upbringing set his future from the beginning and made it explicit that he could not change his social class and society wouldn't allow it. Therefore revealing that Leonard was always unworthy of any sort of relationship with those of a higher social class from the very start and nothing could be done to change that, despite all efforts from the Schegal sisters to accept him in society.

Social class sets the poor apart from the rich in very distinct ways. In both novels, the poor are thought of as ‘unthinkable’ and ‘course’ as their lifestyle contrasts that of the wealthy upper class. The character of Pip and his transformation from a ‘course and ‘common boy’ into a young ‘gentleman’ allows the reader to believe that social advancement is reachable and turns out to be a successful dream of Pip’s. However, the underlying meaning of Pip’s transformation reveals that the social class system is one that is consuming and takes priority in the eyes of Pip. As he develops as a character in the novel we experience a change in which his love for his family, and in particular Joe, vanishes and is replaced with the idolisation of self image and wealth. Dickens does this to portray an extremely important message as it suggests that in the society they lived in, people often focused on materialistic gains as opposed to the things that really matter in life such as family. Pip began to ‘feel ashamed of home’ (page 90) as his working class, impoverished background created a future for him which he despised. As the novel went on, Pips embarrassment of his family grew more and more and therefore began to segregate himself from those that loved him dearly. Pip’s character felt trapped in a life which he did not chose and he could not begin to comprehend why he couldn't escape: ‘if i could have kept him away by paying him money, I certainly would have paid money’ suggests Pip’s extreme frustration to the embarrassment that he in fact represented. Pip’s ongoing desire to enhance and better his life was derived from the harsh treatment that he endured growing up as a poor boy. His resentment towards the wealth of Miss Havisham and Estella gave him the drive to aspire to be like them one day in the future and to become worthy of young Estella’s love as ‘Estella was the inspiration of it, and the heart of it, of course’ (page 197). However towards the end of the novel, when Pip is left with nothing, he rekindles his relationship with Joe and becomes aware that wealth and status isn't the utmost important thing, like he used to believe: ‘it is so delightful to hear you joe!’ (page 394) emphasizing Pip’s relief that although he no longer has wealth, at least he has love. It can be argued that Dickens has created Pip to reflect his life as a poor boy who transformed into a man of wealth and great status. The ending of the novel symbolises the importance of Dickens nobility as wealth is only

temporary yet family is permanent. Pip’s new found love and acceptance for who he is reveals the moral meaning behind the story as it suggests that society isn’t able to control one’s life despite all efforts against it.

At the beginning of chapter six in Forster's Howards End the presentation of the poor portrays the belief that they had limited opportunities and are held back by the social class system and the stereotype associated with them. ‘We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet.’ reveals the derogatory attitudes that the lower class had to endure day in day out and emphasises the power obtained by the upper class. The lower class had to work hard for the little money they earnt and was commonly laughed upon by those that held wealth and status. The novel suggests that the working opportunities for the poor were sparse which often caused frustration amongst the people: ‘if rich people fail at one profession, they can try another’ revealing how lower class citizens were treated unfairly and only had one shot in gaining limited success, whilst those that were rich had endless possibilities to succeed. It illustrates the idea that the rich were set up to succeed whilst the poor were set up to fail, again reinforcing how money had the ability to shape one's future and the life they lead. It also suggests that leonard is already aware of his own fate as society will not enable him to succeed, despite all the success that he may have. He was born into a poor family and will therefore live a poor life. The absence of social advancement evokes the idea that society was unwilling to accept change as it was dominated by those of the upper class who often controlled the lives of the lower class citizens as the hierarchy in the social class system allowed them too. Unlike in Great Expectations where Pip’s yearning for status dies, Mr Bast’s does not and remains with him right until his death revealing that although some manage to come to terms with their position in society, just as Pip did, others are unable to face the truth and hide away from reality. Alongside the character of Leonard Bast, Jacky also represents those from the lower class and places significance upon the extreme poverty in which they lived. Her life as a prostitute reveals the severity of the ill treatment of the poor in society as they were often used and abused by the rich as they were viewed as being worthless and inhumane. The character of Jacky implies how the upper class held that much power that they were able to determine the lives of those beneath them. However, her character also signifies the lack of compassion in society at the time as no act was deemed as too far in sustaining money which exposes the extreme lengths that the lower class would go to in order to provide for themselves and their family.