Oppression, And Moral Decline: Society’s Degeneration In Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations

Lawrence Kappel, the book editor of Greenhaven Press Readings on Great Expectations, emphasizes the idea that Dickens’ novel, Great Expectations, illustrates social commentary on Victorian society: “Great Expectations is the most unified and concentrated expression of Dickens’ abiding sense of the world, and Pip might be called the archetypal Dickens hero” (11). As a critic and social reformist, Dickens uses Great Expectations, and as other of his novels such as Oliver Twist, to bring attention to social ills and corruption that characterized Victorian England. In the online site “The Victorian Web”, Andrzej Diniejko, a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Warsaw University, provides background on Dickens’ life that allows him to become a social critic of Victorian England. Dickens first hand experiences with the corrupt legal system originated from his father’s imprisonment for debt as a result of the Insolvent Debtors Act of 1813. Living in poverty, Dickens was forced to work at a factory at the age of 12, which gave him a standpoint to attack the social ills that plagued society. Dickens incorporated his social commentary in many of his novels including Oliver Twist, where he explores various social themes such as the abuses of the legal system, the evils of the crimes in London, and the exploitation of the young. In Great Expectations, Dickens follows a classic rags-to-riches story with Pip, whose false expectations reflect society’s underlying principles of oppression, decay, and moral degeneration. By doing so, Dickens shines a light on the valuable truth that only through the loss of selfhood and the disposition to make sacrifices can one truly overcome the agony of the struggles in the individual conscience and gain a better understanding of one’s self.

Dickens explores irony in the first opening scene of the novel to allude to the degeneration of society. As Pip finds himself in the churchyard studying his parents’ tombstone, he is struck with the thought that he has no clear impression of the identity of things such as his parentage, or his own place in the world. The violent encounter between Pip and the convict Magwitch illustrate Pip’s first introduction to a battle with his individual conscience when accepting the overbearing emotion of guilt as he decides to aid the convict. Pip’s disposition to help the convict immediately draws a bond between them, suggesting that the boy and the criminal are alike in their helplessness against society. Their vulnerability is illustrated in Pip’s hunger for a sense of belonging and in Magwitch’s image as a victim of society’s prejudiced use of oppression: “he looked into my own eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in” (Dickens 14). Although Mrs. Joe, Pip’s sister, adopts her place as a mother figure to Pip, she never treats him with care and sympathy. She rather enforces a stern and overbearing influence on him and Joe, who together, find shelter in his other’s company. In the opening scene, Pip empathizes with Magwitch for being a victim of social and economic injustices, finding that both lack their place in the world. G. Robert Stange, a Tufts literature professor, analyzes the perspective of society that Dickens depicts in this scene as an opportunity to view social standards and norms upside down— “Dickens’ satire asks us to try reversing the accepted senses of innocence and guilt, success and failure, to think of the world’s goods as the world’s evils” (Stange 2). Pip’s ability to empathize with both Joe and Magwitch when facing abuse, highlights the social theme of oppression in Victorian England as Pip faces his first battle with his individual conscience.

Pip, Magwitch, and Joe stand out as humanitarian characters being the only ones concerned with the well being of someone besides themselves. These three characters work as a contrast to the other minor ones, which come to represent the society of Victorian England consumed by materialistic desires. Their portrayal contributes to Dickens' beliefs on the value and importance on human life, and the lack thereof. Pip is first exposed to the evils in society when he visits Satis House and meets Mrs. Havisham and Stella.

The first detail Pip notices is the abandoned brewery which similarly to Satis House and its residents, shows no signs of life:

"...there were no pigeons in the dove-cot, no horses in the stable, no pigs in the sty, no malt in the storehouse, no smells of grains and beer in the copper or the vat. All the uses and scents of the brewery might have evaporated with its last reek of smoke. In a by-yard, there was a wilderness of empty casks... ." (Dickens 65-66)

Miss Havisham represents decay. From his visit to Satis House Pip acquires his false admiration for the upper class; he falls in love with Estella and fails to see that she is Miss Havisham's pawn for revenge on life. When Pip learns he may expect a large fortune from an unknown source he wrongfully assumes that Miss Havisham is his benefactor; she does not contradict his assumption. Money, which is also depicted to represent decay, is appropriately connected with Miss Havisham rotting away in Satis House.

The irony becomes quite obvious when Pip's romantic perception of wealth and social status is originated from Miss Havisham and Satis House, both which are found in a state of decay, or more precisely in ruins. Their deteriorating state suggests similar rotten qualities about Pip's aspiration to rise to a higher social status and become worthy of Estella. Like so, Dickens use of satire to criticize society extends to the corruption of wealth. The decay around Miss Havisham and Satis House as well as how she abuses her power over Estella and Pip, illustrates the dehumanization that runs through the novel; repeatedly characters use others to inflate their own prestige and image, like Pumblechook constantly attempting to take credit for Pip's rise in society and by Mrs. Joe in raising Pip 'by hand.'

As Pip acquires his expectations to rise to gentility and become worthy of Estella's love (despite being treated with contempt), he slowly loses his sense of moral awareness. Pip is blinded by his romantic perception of the upper class and wealth, leaving behind the innocent and untainted view of the world he used to carry. His identity starts being defined by commodities and capitalist interests, tying to a progression towards moral degeneration. Clare Pettitt, a professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature & Culture at King's College London, analyzes how the society illustrated in the novel resembles the commodity culture of the Victorian Era concerned with capitalism and the dynamics of wealth and class. Additionally, the resemblance serves as social commentary on how capitalist interests are poisoned with misery and injustice. As Pettitt writes, the novel is largely about 'the pathological effects of capitalist restlessness,' a problem the novel reveals in several ways. Pip's insolence, his fixed motivation to become a gentleman, and the overall treatment of individuals as commodities are ways in which the problem is revealed, as well as the novel's engagement with commodities and social class as precursors for romance. Dickens' use of satire when depicting the rise to gentility and upper class reveals not only the moral decay caused by wealth but also, through Magwitch, the fact that wealth is always 'wrung from misery, hard labour, and injustice'. When adopting these expectations and social values of middle class society, Pip renounces his childhood. Although

the society depicted in the novel encourages Pip to use his newly acquired fortune to rise to gentility and meet his expectations, his wealth leads him to his own moral degeneration, and to a quest consisting of a journey of personal growth.

London soon becomes the setting for Pip's expectations, although his faint doubts of it being rather "ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty" (Dickens 155) alludes to Pip's aspirations also going awry. For Pip's second stage in life, Dickens centres on the conflict between man and social institutions rather than moral degeneration. As Pip leaves his childhood behind, severing ties with Joe, he ventures into the unknown world that was London in search of wealth and prestige. During his time in London, Pip relies on Mr. Jagger, the lawyer who informed him of the fortuned he had received and advised him to move. Pip's first encounter with Mr. Jagger leaves quite an impression on him and proves to be the opposite from Joe: " … I stood confronting him with his hands upon my shoulder, I checked off again in detail, his large head, his dark complexion, his deep-set eyes, his bushy black eyebrows, his large watch chain, his strong black dots of beard and whisker, and even the smell of scented soap on his great hand" (Dickens 130). Pip takes the impression that Mr. Jaggers is emotionally detached from others (contrast to Joe), living by facts and not feelings, holding an analytical view of experience. Right away, Mr. Jaggers proves to become an important figure in Pip's life, as Joe used to be, yet fails to actually care for him. He's character holding a unfiltered vision of society, where he both witnesses and mendles with other people's acts of corruption, and washes his hands constantly to rid himself of the horrors he encounters everyday. Similarly to Joe, Mr. Jaggers becomes a red flag to Pip about what his great expectations imply, Joe warns him about his own moral degeneration and Mr. Jaggers continually displays the dangers and abuses of power and corruption; Pip ignores both.

As Pip rises in society, Dickens depicts how divisions manifest now that Pip finds himself in a more highly capitalist–competitive environment. Pip's newly acquired wealth and social status makes him feel vulnerable and powerless, and despite his expectations, he faces cruel disillusionments. Stella marrying Drummle, and Pip's real benefactor appearing at the scene pushes him to his own sudden fall from a high pedestal built from spoiled expectations. When he realizes Magwitch is his real benefactor, it dawns on him that Estella was never intended for him as he had thought, and his wealth had originated from "dirty" money earned by a criminal. In a sense, this becomes Pip's epiphany as he uncovers society's principles of oppression, injustice, and his own moral decline. Miss Havisham's death finally draws a distinguishable connection between her and Pip— both were left with ruined expectations, the loss of special someone and their fortune. While Miss Havisham rots away in her wedding dress and burns to death after the same dress bursts into flames, Pip turns his life around and learns to feel that same empathy he once felt for the convict. Pip's renowned disposition to help the convict once again draws a bond between them as they find they are alike as victims of society's abuses. As Pip narrates his own story, the language he uses to create his life's sense and the details he chooses to highlight illustrate the relationship he sees between himself and Magwitch. From the first opening scene Pip calls Magwitch "my convict", but it's exactly his determination to help him that allows Magwitch to see Pip's innocence, untainted by society, as someone who "stood [his] friend". Bert G. Hornback, the author of Great Expectations: A Novel of Friendship states: "What changes Magwitch's life is the idea of friendship, which gives his life meaning: and meaning is more important than other animal sustenance or physical freedom" (Hornback 65). The question of morality in the novel is focused on relationships, but Pip's relationship with Magwitch stands out from his relationship with any other character precisely for the self-sacrificing love he develops for the convict when he learns his story, he's a good man hardened by the rough life he's lived.

Societal influence prevents Pip from truly accomplishing or meeting his expectations—expectations which were not ever really his own but rather instilled by society. Pip's expectations, distorted by false hopes, explore the Victorian era obsession with objects and material things, blurring the line between identity and property. Pip is pushed to pursue wealth and a higher social class by becoming a gentleman, and he does so without realizing that he had materialistic ambitions in mind instead of truly living his life under his own terms. Societal influence distorts Pip's life "expectations", but until he reunites with Magwitch he is able to detach himself from society. Joseph Hillis Miller discusses love in the book Readings on Great Expectations and argues that Pip's abandonment of all his "proud hopes" of becoming a gentleman and finding his place of belonging, as well as truly accepting and embracing his humble origin can he transform his character. Learning to accept and love Magwitch for his inner goodness instead of holding a prejudiced opinion based on his society-given label of criminal, Pip sets himself apart from Miss Havisham by refusing to let his failed expectations let him rot away.

Similarly to Pip, Estella finds herself trapped and oppressed by society, specially Miss Havisham as she uses her as revenge against men, raising her to be admired but never allowed to love. Marrying Drummle was her own act of defiance, her own choice yet unhappy. Although Pip and Estella do reconcile, it was all together different from what he had expected. It's until they overcome turbulent times in their lives that a new beginning rises for Pip and Estella.

In the novel Great Expectations, Dickens reveals various social abuses that defined Victorian England such as the corruption of the legal system, the moral evils of society, and the exploitation of the young,— all to emphasize their prepotent control over individuals. Dickens does an effective job at portraying the destructiveness of society and illustrates it through Pip's expectations and those around him. Pip's life story is affected by his personality fluctuations, his unwavering determination to help the convict comes from his humble origin, his desire for a high social position originates from Satis House, and his change of heart from his friendship with Magwitch. Like so Pip's life depicts a dialectic journey where he falls victim of society's evils yet finds his breakthrough. Like Pettitt write it: "Dickens may be dramatizing not only the pathological effects of a capitalist restlessness predicated on ideas of expansion and tireless exploitation of resources, but also his uneasiness about his own involvement in society" (244). Dickens attacks on society were based on humanism and moral beliefs of his own, all to emphasize the implications of social evils where love can mean redemption for people living flawed lives. It is despite Pip's moral deterioration and offences that he remains a sympathetic character; his unhappiness represented in his remorse at his ingratitude to Joe, doubts about his great expectations, and hopeless longing for Estella that the novel is able to express its darker purpose. In Great Expectations Dickens follows the dialectic journey that is Pip's life, whose false expectations reflect society's abuses through the themes of oppression, decay, and moral degeneration. Dickens not only reflects on his own anxieties about society, but also on the valuable truth that only through the loss of selfhood and the disposition to make sacrifices can one truly overcome the agony of the struggles within the individual conscience and gain a better understanding of one's self.