

Great Expectations: Pip's Moral Journey as a Message for America

“We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did” (340). When Charles Dickens penned these words to describe Pip's mindset in *Great Expectations*, he couldn't have known how they would apply to the world in 2009. But the ideals put forth in *Great Expectations* are just as poignant and relevant in the midst of the American economic crisis as they were in the 19th century. Pip's moral journey, from his “great expectations” to his downfall and the reshaping of his values, mirror America's realization that our own “great expectations” were also based on misguided notions and falsities. Just like Pip, we were so intent on achieving our American Dreams—our “great expectations—that we became completely self-centered and lost sight of what was truly important. Even in today's radically different social climate, Pip's story presents a valuable message—that genuine relationships and compassion, not self-indulgence and social status, provide the path to true happiness.

Pip's desire to attain gentility so that he can impress Estella mirrors the recent American path toward self-centeredness and a sense of entitlement. Dickens portrays Pip as motivated by shame, by a desire to impress Estella, even during their first meeting, when Pip cries after she criticizes him as “coarse and common.” Dickens illustrates Pip's shame of his own commonness and simplicity when he writes:

“...My coarse hands and my common boots...had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages. I determined to ask Joe why he had ever taught me to call those picture-cards jacks which ought to be called knaves. I

wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so, too” (75).

Even in this passage, after only one meeting with Estella, Pip is beginning to lose sight of what is truly important in his life, to shift his focus from his friendship with Joe to the pursuit of status and attaining the unattainable—Estella. Just like Pip, Americans headed down the path toward self-centeredness and financial irresponsibility because of a compulsion to “keep up with the Joneses,” a desire to want something simply because we didn’t have it. Just as Pip wants Estella because she is unattainable (and not because she makes him genuinely happy), so we began to focus on what we wanted instead of the needs of other people and our relationships with them.

Although Pip eventually emerges from the relative poverty of the Gargery household and fulfills his “great expectations,” his experiences in London illustrate the high price of his newfound social status. Essentially, he exchanges one type of poverty for another. He goes from a home that is materially lacking (at least compared to the Havisham household) but filled with rich relationships (with Joe and Biddy,) to one that has a liberal amount of “portable property” but no emotional fulfillment. Throughout his time in London, Pip explains how he rarely visits Joe and Biddy because he is so ashamed of their “commonness” and instead attempts to fill the emotional hole by pampering himself— he hires the Avenger, buys expensive furniture, and goes out to dinner with the Finches. Dickens uses these examples to illustrate that Pip has sacrificed true happiness for self-indulgence and false “pleasures.”

Pip explains the emotional distress that arises from his fiscal irresponsibility when he says, “As we got more and more into debt, breakfast became a hollower and hollower form...I went so far as to seize the Avenger by his blue collar and shake him off his

feet...for presuming to suppose that we wanted a roll” (340). While Pip’s tribulations with money and status are strictly individual, they are also a near-perfect reflection of American society’s pre-recession mindset. Like Pip, we began to focus more on ourselves than our interactions with others, to spend our money recklessly because we felt a sense of entitlement. Just as Pip forgot what was truly important to him, so did we. We became a nation more concerned with shallow “pleasures”—FaceBook and vacuous pop stars like Miley Cyrus and Britney Spears— than pressing political issues and genuine human interactions.

Dickens highlights the devastating consequences of this moral emptiness and monetary irresponsibility when Pip’s “great expectations” come crashing down with his discovery that Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is his anonymous benefactor. Suddenly, Pip is faced with the truth that his “great expectations” are simply that—expectations, not realities— and that they are based on false hopes and fantasies. Pip describes the shock of discovering his benefactor’s identity in vivid detail when he says, “All the truth of my position came flashing on me, and its disappointments, dangers, disgraces, consequences of all kinds rushed in such a multitude that I was borne down by them and had to struggle for every breath I drew” (394). America experienced a similar shock, albeit on a societal, rather than a personal scale, when the “American Dream” collapsed with the recession, when we were forced to realize that it held true to its name, that it was an unsustainable “dream.” Our greed and our desire for the unattainable—just like Pip’s— led us to shift our focus to ourselves, to monetary irresponsibility, rather than our morality and regard for others.

Dickens uses Pip's moral journey to assert that a financial and emotional upheaval can ultimately lead to something more positive—to the realization that genuine relationships and a moral self are more important than shallow pleasures and social status. When Pip no longer tries to impress Estella, when he no longer puts himself above others, he is able to become a more compassionate and likable person. He eventually appreciates Magwitch for his good intentions (and even goes so far as to try to save his life), reconciles with Joe and Biddy, ends his extravagant spending habits, and separates himself from Estella and the misery and snobbery that she symbolizes (at least in Dickens' original ending).

Pip's renewed focus on the important things in life at the end of the novel provides a valuable lesson to America, which is precisely why Dickens remains so relevant to this very day. American society has traveled a similar path to Pip's individual one, a path of desire for monetary gain, achievement of that monetary gain, its collapse, and the realization that it was built on a foundation of false hopes and greed. Dickens' central message, that genuine relationships and true happiness are more important and fulfilling than social standing and concern for self, rings even more true as American society stands at an economic and cultural turning point. We can choose to continue overspending, to judge ourselves based on our possessions, and to idolize empty celebrities, or we can follow Pip's path and return to what is truly important in life.