

## Conscious Change

Rifling through a pile of magazines doomed for the recycling bin, I foolishly grab one, lured by The Economist's booming title, "Great Expectations." Barack Obama and his family wave charismatically amidst a blur of American flags and camera flashes. The column's subtitle underlines the gist of international reactions to Obama's election: "Barack Obama has won a famous victory. Now he must use it wisely." The article suggests that Obama will soon experience his own "limitations," just as Pip's social ascension in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* precipitates the protagonist's knowledge of his own shortcomings.

While The Economist article and Dickens's novel share the same title, one conveys a genuine international hope for a political leader's success while the other scornfully condemns the pretentious fallacy of Victorian social ideals. The themes Dickens explores in his novel—19<sup>th</sup>-century industrialism, social upheaval, and the exploitation of money, power and the poor—not only elaborate the problems faced by contemporary Great Britain, but also explore fundamental human relationships between self and society still applicable today. Through reading *Great Expectations*, readers gain an understanding of the Victorian Era and a new perspective of their own individual development. Pip's transition from an innocent boy to a rising egotistical snob reflects the tendency towards conforming to societal expectations; however, his eventual realization of his own unwarranted haughtiness shows the ultimate human ability to change. Pip overcomes his flaws. Dickens focuses on society's role in shaping Pip—specifically in exploiting his weaknesses—and the boy's continuation of this cycle of victimization; but Dickens also illustrates Pip's and others' ability to throw off the yoke of

conformity. Through portraying the orphan Pip as both a victim and perpetrator of exploitation, Charles Dickens condemns the stranglehold of Victorian values and society's abuse of its less fortunate.

Early in the novel, Dickens establishes Pip's low social status through the boy's own thoughts and others' reactions to him. An orphan cowering against the noise of the wind, the sea, and the marshes, Pip is painfully aware of his own existence in contrast to the "five little stone lozenges" signifying his brothers' deaths (Dickens 3). He immediately incurs a sense of guilt for his own survival, as he unduly deems himself responsible for his family's death. Pip's fear of his surroundings likewise highlights his own vulnerability. A "small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry," Pip accepts his inferiority, rendering him unable to defend himself against either verbal or physical attack (Dickens 4). Thus, the escaped convict Magwitch easily exploits Pip's weaknesses: his confusion about the death of his family, his guilt about his own survival, and his fear of his surroundings. From the first chapter, Dickens inextricably links the characters: both Pip and his oppressor Magwitch face the same societal rejection, and compensate for their pain by exploiting others. Instead of treating Pip lovingly, Magwitch perpetuates the dominant cycle of victimization by terrorizing the boy. He threatens to "cut [Pip's] throat," then "turns [Pip] upside-down and empties [the boy's] pockets" to assert his own power (Dickens 4). By having Magwitch exploit Pip in much the same manner as society has abused Magwitch, Dickens comments on the supreme rule of Victorian values.

While Magwitch's initial treatment of Pip reflects the corrosive nature of Victorian values, the relationship Joe cultivates with Pip reflects the individual capacity to reject these pressures. Joe, in bringing up Pip, shows unconditional affection for the boy and refuses to subscribe to the societal values driving the greed and self-interest of others. While Estella, Miss

Havisham, and Pumblechook all seek personal gain from relationships, mainly monetary compensation or social elevation, Joe raises Pip with the selfless ends of giving the orphaned child a good life. Prior to confronting societal pressures at Satis House, Pip's desire to reciprocate Joe's affection compels him to teach Joe to read while the two converse by the hearth, his generosity ignited not by his concerns for self improvement, but by his desire to aid Joe (Dickens 49). But the following day, stinging insults from the contemptuous Estella force Pip to contemplate "his vulgar appendages"—hands decried as "coarse" because of his working-class status—and to wish that "Joe had been rather more genteely brought up, and then [he] should have been so too" (Dickens 62). The shame of his origins prods Pip to eventually condemn his home and guardian, a fundamental illustration of society's power over the boy.

Once Pip leaves the hearth, he struggles with feelings of social inferiority, and reacts by shunning his humble origins. To validate his social ascension, Pip adopts an active disdain of others, especially of those who had previously stood above him in social class. Whereas Pumblechook, an emblem of "high society" because of owning a personal chaise cart, previously chastised Pip for his ingratitude to Mrs. Joe, Pip now calls him a sycophant for his attempts to secure Pip's favor (Dickens 108); Mrs. Pocket, once the "dignified" lady of the household, Pip soon deems "useless" because of his own pretension (Dickens 128). Furthermore, Pip's initial remarks that guests at Miss Havisham's "were all toadies and humbugs" who come simply to exploit Miss Havisham's resources shows a blindness to his own desires to use her money and status for his own gain—the pursuit of Estella (Dickens 80). Although Pip assumes a power and legitimacy conferred on him not by his own achievements but by the promise of money, he fails, in the process, to recognize how he himself is of the same greed and sycophancy of those he now decries.

Dickens uses the direct exploitation of Pip and his wealth to criticize society's regard for monetary riches. Early in the novel, Pumblechook intentionally focuses the dinnertime conversation on Pip's undeserved blessings. "Be grateful...to them which brought [the boy] up by hand," he says, demeaning the boy for his supposed ingratitude (Dickens 26). But after Pip learns of his promising future, Pumblechook claims credit as Pip's "favorite fancy and chosen friend," his fictionalized reminiscing entirely influenced by Pip's acquisition of money (Dickens 155). Pumblechook even makes false reports to the local newspaper about his role in Pip's greatness, reflected in the newspaper's "record[ing] HIM [Pumblechook] as the Mentor of our young Telemachus, for it is good to know that our town produced the founder of the latter's fortunes" (Dickens 231). Pumblechook's circulation of lies is an attempt to socially propel himself above his townsmen. However, Pumblechook is solely motivated by Pip's monetary prospects, which he hopes will reflect well on himself. Indeed, after Pip loses his source of income, Pumblechook claims the downfall was to "be expected"; he continues to seek social support of his veritable interpretation of Pip's position (Dickens 474). Overall, Pumblechook grossly exploits Pip to establish his own social standing.

The reciprocity of exploitation throughout the novel mirrors the continued victimization of those less fortunate within modern society. People still act based on social expectations, seeking independent glory. As a recent example, Bernie Madoff's fiscal scams reflect people's avarice and desperation to gain money and influence. Like Pip, many modern individuals allow societal pressures to deprive them of innocent love and a fondness for humble origins. The Victorian values responsible for corrupting Pip still remain intact today; magnified by media coverage, the pressure to conform and seek individual rather than group identity manipulates many people into selfishly pursuing only their own dreams at the expense of other people.

Dickens provides insight into this struggle between individual identity and conformity. Through exploring the cycle of victimization in Pip's relationships with Magwitch, Pumblechook, and Estella, Dickens identifies a fundamental societal problem: the failure to change, and the curse of repeating past abuses and mistakes. Dickens argues that until people decide to end their quests for individual greatness, the cycles of exploitation and conformity will maintain their dominance. Pip's greed, a self-interest fueled by societal values, is ultimately responsible for his corruption; however, many individuals withstand or find ways of reconciling these societal pressures. Even while Pip's development from a loving child to a spoiled and egocentric adolescent teaches readers of the human potential for corruption and subservience to societal values, other characters within the novel demonstrate the individual capacity to ignore outside pressures. Joe's love for Pip—untainted by the prospects of fiscal or social gain—Wemmick's conscious choice to keep his private life uncorrupted by capitalism and greed, and Biddy's continued support for Pip despite his growing condescension, all exhibit a kind of insulation from Victorian pressures. They refuse to perpetuate the cycle of exploitation. Through sweet Joe's providing of Pip's earliest fond memories, and compassionate Herbert's continued concern despite his modest wealth, Dickens demonstrates the fundamental ability to make conscious decisions and reject social pressures. The author believes in the potential to remain at least somewhat isolated from harmful social influences. As a social commentator exposing the prevalence of poverty and the iron reign of societal values, Dickens still conveys a crucial message to our modern world: all is not hopeless; society can change.