

Pip's Forward Thinking: Dickens' Message of Moral Progression

By Ruth Li

"No story in the first person was ever better told." –George Gissing

As a story told in the first person, *Great Expectations* triumphs because of the significance in Pip's present voice narrating the entirety of his life with its realizations and changes. Pip's narrative guides our psychological journey as readers: as the story unfolds we are at first helpless and shameful like the youthful Pip, then longing and discontent as the plot progresses, and ultimately mature and reconciled because Pip makes it so. Through a person's voice and thoughts Dickens illustrates the struggle of the individual within society; Pip's discontent and his pains, faults, and successes in becoming a successful and moral gentleman are embedded in Dickens' message that individuals have the burden to face their own faults in order to enlighten themselves in a flawed society. By reading, we must realize our own roles as part of today's world.

That bleak page on which Dickens opens *Great Expectations* etches a lucid scene into our minds. The barren landscape of the churchyard, the marsh with "dykes and mounds and gates," and the wretched convict chained by iron, "soaked in water and smothered in mud," illustrate the utter depravity and ancient ways that expose the most haunting nightmares of Victorian England. To young Pip, a pale observer, society has dictated fate with a cruel and suffocating grasp. Magwitch is chained literally to iron, but Pip is chained figuratively to orphanage, Mrs. Joe's bringing-up "by hand," and limited education.

In today's world, crime, domestic violence, illiteracy, and poor prison and workplace conditions are still issues as much as they were in Victorian England. The blacksmith working in the forge now toils in America as a low-wage worker; poverty and illiteracy still plague both rural and urban areas. Dickens illuminates the negative impact of Pip's servile and lowly background; born into this society, the child learns to face a

convict and strive for a better place. Today, we perceive these situations as problems; government and social organizations work to improve the status quo. Dickens was ahead of his time, teaching us that by assisting those in lower social strata, we can raise a society's expectations, as well as our own.

Visits to Satis House expose Pip to the greater society outside his impoverished beginnings. Miss Havisham's estate reveals to Pip that he is chained to a life of poverty, mistreatment, and ignorance. Through Estella Dickens mocks Pip, taunting him with the idea that such a life is not attainable and that one must suffer in the environment of a higher status that is real and tangible, yet out of reach. The cruelly haughty Miss Havisham and the lovely, condescending Estella provoke Pip to strive for a life beyond the fate that Victorian hierarchy has assigned to him.

Determined to be accepted into the society at Satis House, Pip engages actively in business pursuits. However, Pip's own flaws are revealed as he and Herbert succumb to the temptation of dining expensively at Finches and Barnard's Inn, increasing their worsening debt. As Pip himself exclaims in exasperation, "My dear Herbert, we are getting on badly." This folly is apparent as we sense the self-forgiving attitude with which the pair drifts from thriftiness and good reason.

However, Pip takes the wrong turn: his disdainful rejection of Joe and Biddy and his insensitivity towards them are eventually turned into reconciliation after he discovers the emptiness of status without true friends and moral guidance. Pip's false values, grounded in snobbery, become real and honest as he ultimately establishes himself with Herbert's firm in Egypt, and goes back to England realizing the value of Biddy and Joe in his life. In the end, Pip comes to question the barriers of social class by rising above snobbery while striving to better himself through education, business, and society.

Through Pip's viewpoint, we realize that other characters are too complacent with their own fates. Dickens presents a myriad of examples: Joe Gargery is content in

marriage to the violent Mrs. Joe, and later to Bidley, who accepts her station as teacher in the Wopsle school. Estella Provis submits to her husband Bentley's Drummle's abuse as helplessly as her mother Molly accepts servitude to the lawyer Jaggers by his court decision.

Unlike many others, Pip observes the flaws and abuses of Victorian society; as Dickens' proactive, forward-thinking voice he is more akin to us today. Pip at first spurns the poverty and illiteracy of his origins, but his very station in life allows him the fortune to believe in a better world. The progressive world that Pip might imagine, a world that meets his true "great expectations," is one that Dickens pleads for through his lamenting illustrations of a torn and fragmented Victorian society.

In today's world, we might liken Pip's debt-riddled situation to the current sub-prime mortgage crisis in America. In the past banks lent generously, meaning borrowers benefit only when prices keep rising; but as prices drop, foreclosures force Americans out of their homes and onto the streets with no protection. Many are angry. The pride in home ownership emerges from age-old ideals – the "great expectations" instilled in us by society.

Today we also search for our "great expectations" because we believe in the ideal of a higher place in life. Like Pip, we sometimes gaze upon Satis House as an ideal without having the ability to be a part of that realm in society. Though times have changed, and we type on computers rather than make written records, Dickens' message is clear: people must realize the flaws of society's misplaced values and change themselves even if it takes a struggle to emerge victorious.

Though we might see ourselves as more enlightened today in other aspects, the gap between rich and poor creates tension and remains a large issue. The ambiguity of legal actions, like those of Jaggers and Wemmick, questions the legal elite's handlings of personal situations. Around the world, the power that business and government elite

have over subjected ordinary citizens and free speech demonstrates economic and political suppression from further opportunity.

We are fortunate enough to have better education, knowledge, gender and race equality, and social mobility than those in Victorian England. These ideals certainly provide us with a broader view and more experience than Dickens knew in his time. Still, the cruelly unfair situations in *Great Expectations* might expose the injustice and inequality in our world today. Dickens teaches us that we cannot solve everything, but we can at least realize our flaws and work toward better conditions for the future.

Pip's journey puts each of us through Dickens' lesson; by the novel's end Pip emerges as an individual engaged in business, freed from poverty, and humbled by his life experiences. This transformation shows us that society's forward evolution is necessary and ultimately worth it, even in the face of Pip's stumbling and inconsistent path. The honest and flowing personal narrative of an older Pip creates a consciousness of his final perception of reality. Pip has become conscious of his own narrow-mindedness; he has improved himself and thus a novel of discontent becomes less so. Pip reminds us that we must adapt to a changing society without losing moral conscience; characterized by faults and making very human mistakes along the way, he struggles to find his place in a chaotic society. Dickens fancied a world, only imagined in the Victorian era, that would solve problems by proactive, intelligent people with good character.

For us as readers, *Great Expectations* looms over our hearts as we take a step back to a romance imbued with startling realism, fairy-tale fantasy, and pessimistic acceptance of fate. The drama as an encompassing portrait of Victorian England is complex and riveting; reading opens our eyes to view the creator of the story as a thinker ahead of his time. Dickens' Victorian perspective lets us view humanity under

different conditions than we have now; the value of reading as a history lesson teaches us that we must also be forward thinkers in our own time.

As we close *Great Expectations*, we have not truly left, as its language, its vivid images and its beating pulse, its anxieties, its passions, and its longings, run freely through its veins and through ours. Its lessons now enlighten not only Pip, but enlighten us as well.