
The Role of Social Class in Dickens's Great Expectations

The Start of it all

In *Great Expectations*, a novel by Charles Dickens, social class plays a big part in how the story twists and turns. The main character Pip is exposed to the whole spectrum of classes: criminals, lower class, middle class, and upper class. As Pip navigates his way through these social classes he forms relationships with people from all of the above. These relationships help him, and the reader, better understand the overall importance of life. From early on in the novel Pip builds relationships with characters like Magwitch, Joe, Pumblechook, Miss Havisham, and Estella to give him a taste of each class. Chapter 8 takes the reader through Pip's journey at Miss Havisham's haunted house and the readers sees Pip's perception of the upper class is flipped when he enters this rundown mansion and meets Miss Havisham a ghostly figure who is mourning decades later about when she was left at the alter. Later in the chapter as Pip is exploring the house he sees "a figure hanging there by the neck...and the face was Miss Havisham's"(64). This could certainly be foreshadowing Miss Havisham's death. However, it is not only the content of Chapter 8 of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* that shows Pip's first experiences and encounters with the upper class, that suggests Pip's relationship with people from all social classes help him understand what is important in life. The most significant formal properties of the chapter, too, suggest this theme. Specifically Pips exposure to social classes, the diversity of characters he meets, and how these two intertwine and lead him to a deeper meaning demonstrating the ultimate power of relationships as Pip climbs the social ladder.

Part of the excellence of *Great Expectations* is how Dickens brilliantly navigates the story of Pip through social classes. With Chapter 8 comes the introduction of the upper class into Pip's life. Right from the beginning Pip is taught that he is only allowed to come in contact with the upper class if a person of wealth requests it. But of course people of the upper class would never directly go to a person of the lower class; they must go through the middle class to ask. In this case Pumblechook is the messenger for Miss Havisham, and has to make his way over to the poorer side of town where Pip, Joe, and Mrs. Joe live. However, Pip is most greatly impacted not by the middle class, but by the upper class. Satis House, Miss. Havisham's mansion, is ironic in its name because Satis means 'enough,' but it is so rundown and decayed that it is no longer good enough for anyone to live in. This could symbolize the overall state of the upper class and how it is so corrupted. As Pip is sentenced to play with Estella he gets hit with insult upon insult. The insult that sticks with Pip the most is when Estella calls him a "common laboring-boy"(60). This one simple statement stays with Pip for the rest of his life. The word "common" really gets to him. Before Estella says this sentence Pip does not have a problem with where he comes from, but now he has become conscious about his low place in social class. When Pip walks the four miles back to his house he think about how, "[he] was much more ignorant than [he] had considered [himself] last night, and generally that [he] was in a low-lived bad way"(65). As Pip's relationship with Estella progresses throughout the book we start to see his transformation.

Dickens has created a very diverse group of characters that Pip comes in contact with. These interactions add a significant chunk of depth into the plot and Pip's overall story. Whether Pip is

being forced to play with an adopted girl who is being taught to hate men, or working as an apprentice to his uncle a blacksmith, he always seems to learn something from each relationship. Each character has their purpose in teaching Pip something. In Chapter 8 Pip is introduced to Estella who becomes Pip's greatest weakness. After his first day of 'playing' with her, Estella gets Pip some food, "She put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurred, offended, angry, sorry...that tears started to my eyes"(62). When Pip goes exploring through Satis House he sees Estella "walking away from [him]" but he also observes, "she seemed to be everywhere"(64). It is almost as if Estella is following him, but leading him at the same time. This is somewhat foreshadowing the way Estella treats Pip later on, and this is crucial to the storyline of the novel because it not only motivates Pip to pursue a certain lifestyle but also to leave his old life behind. Pip has a lot of friends, but when you think about it, why? All Pip does is disrespect and patronize his friends; however, they do not seem to mind and keep their loyalty to Pip. Nevertheless by the end of the novel Pip's friends have rubbed off on him and he now regrets treating the ones that care about him this way.

As Pip meets characters from all social classes, each one goes against the stereotype of how one should act from set class. He starts to realize that being in a higher social class is far less important than surrounding yourself with loved ones and those who stay loyal. From the beginning of the book Pip is around criminals, Magwitch in particular, but ironically Magwitch is one of the most caring and loyal friends Pip has. Then when looking at Miss Havisham, who fits in the upper class, you see the opposite. At first Pip expects Miss Havisham to be living a lavish life, but instead she is always mourning and uses Pip as a test subject for Estella to break his heart. How cruel. As Pip moves up into the upper class in hopes of achieving Estella's love, he distances himself from those who already love him, Joe and Bidley. As Pip evolves he starts to regret the lose of Joe's friendship the most.

Chapter 8 of Great Expectations not only shows Pip's first experiences with the upper class, but also is the starting point of his new life. Pip's life is defined by the relationships he makes with people from all social classes. These individuals help him in understanding what is most important in life. Social class plays a big part in how the story moves in between stories. As Pip has started from the bottom, he is able to see the whole range of classes. Whether it be with criminals, the lower class, the middle class, or the upper class. Through his journey to becoming a gentleman he forms relationships with people from all of the above. These relationships help him, and the reader, better understand that love, loyalty, and the people you surround yourself with are much more important than the social class that defines you.