

From Sham to “Gentle Christian Man” in *Great Expectations*

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Charles Dickens believed that his society wrongly valued economic transactions over natural human interactions, which resulted in a ruinous transference of commercial interests from the public sphere into the private. Among the middle classes, this inhumane, mercantile manner of assigning social status was born, as Walter E. Houghton suggests, from the Victorian “passion for wealth [that] was closely connected with another, for respectability”: part and parcel of an “economic struggle . . . focused less on the comforts and luxuries which had hitherto lain beyond their reach than on the respect money could now command” (184). Repeatedly in his novels, Dickens berates his readers for conflating the family home with the counting house in their quests for respectability, whereby human worth is no longer measured by one’s capacity for sympathy, affection and moral integrity, but by one’s ability to climb the social ladder through self-interest, artifice, and simple greed.

In *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), Dickens delivers a powerful example of what he feels to be the prime evil of his time: the power of money and its role as a prime indicator of status in the social system. The novel’s protagonist, Phillip Pirrip, or Pip, rejects his original place in the social system and seeks an entirely new station to which he has no claim other than the size of his pocketbook, over which he has no actual control. In doing so, he eventually learns how to reject snobbery and how to be a “gentle Christian man” who practices what Robert R. Garnett calls “the usual Dickens Virtues” that are “domestic and childlike rather than heroic” (26). Once Pip

discovers that his life as a gentleman is a sham, he sees the social system itself as a sham and learns to live in it without sacrificing his integrity. Thus, Dickens insists, even more forcefully than he had done in *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), that true respectability can be found in all levels of society and has less to do with prideful wealth than with humble compassion.

Before he began work on *Great Expectations*, Dickens re-read *David Copperfield*, partially in fear of repeating himself in another story of a boy growing into a man (Forster 734). Despite those efforts to avoid duplication, many similarities exist between *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* beyond those of plot and theme; the most obvious point of comparison is that both novels are semi-autobiographical works in the form of memoirs delivered by first-person narrators. Additionally, both Pip and Copperfield are orphans and consequently lack verifiable social status until they forge their own roles in society as adults. Although the basic plot elements of the *bildungsroman*--“a novel of all-around self-development” (Hader par. 1)--exist in both novels, Dickens’s treatment of Pip’s growth into manhood and his search for a place in society are radically different from his treatment of Copperfield. As Robin Gilmour argues, “Pip’s story stands in ironic relation to that of David Copperfield, reversing or subverting the motifs of the earlier novel” (*Novel in the Victorian Age* 101). In comparison to Dickens’s evident complicity with the social system in *David Copperfield*, in *Great Expectations* Dickens highlights and renounces the prejudices and injustice of that system. For example, Copperfield seeks to regain his birthright to his non-laboring, middle-class station; in contrast, Pip rejects his laboring-class roots and seeks an entirely new station to which he has no claim beyond his mere expectations of bestowed, not earned or even inherited, wealth. Like Copperfield, Pip tries to live in a manner outside that of his true class; however, whereas Copperfield places great importance on his past history and relationships, Pip takes to it wholeheartedly, completely rejecting the life he had led

and the people with whom he had lived. Furthermore, both Copperfield and Pip dream of raising themselves to an even higher social status through marriage, but Copperfield succeeds in marrying Dora Spenlow, while Pip fails either to woo or win Estella.

Indeed, Pip's failure to marry Estella marks a definitive departure from *David Copperfield*, since that failure indicates that Dickens no longer complies with the social system, arguing instead that it is as an artificial and potentially disastrous means of distancing oneself from a laboring past. For covering up his time in the blacking (shoe polish) factory, Copperfield reaps the rewards of a flourishing career as an author and its subsequent riches, just as his creator had done. Pip, on the other hand, eventually discovers that his life as a gentleman--and the social system itself—are a sham, and he exiles himself from it.

Dickens himself was conflicted about his right to respectability, and many of his characters suffer the strain of not knowing where or how they fit in. Dickens's father, John, was perpetually in debt, which led to Dickens's brief employment in Warren's blacking factory at the age of twelve (Ackroyd 69-74). Dickens was so ashamed of having been forced to leave school and do manual labor that he never told anyone in his own family about the incident (1057). After his father's debts were cleared and Dickens grew to manhood, he worked his way up the social ladder, initially applying his skills as a shorthand writer at the various courts of law in London and as a journalist. His nearly overnight success as a fiction writer began with the serialization of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837). No matter how famous or wealthy he became, however, Dickens never truly reconciled his early social setbacks with his later successes. Undoubtedly, this is why he chose to show his heroes and heroines in a similar light, always striving to be respectable while justifying their right to be considered as such. Anny Sadrin notes that *Great Expectations*, in particular, "expresses how difficult it was for Dickens to reconcile the meritocratic ideals of men

of his generation and social class and their attachment to more romantic images of success” (70) and “is in many respects Dickens’s final and very critical statement on Dickens the novelist as much as on the boy or the man Dickens” (72). In other words, the novel manifests Dickens’s inability to mesh the actual and the ideal both within and beyond the pages of a novel.

Pip’s tale begins in the virtual harmony of his life at the forge with his sister, referred to only as “Mrs. Joe” or “Mrs. Joe Gargery,” and her husband Joe Gargery. Other than the periodical beatings he receives from his sister, he lives a peaceful life, content in his station because he knows no better. Upon entering Satis House, however, his views radically change as Miss Havisham and Estella initiate Pip into the rites of class ideologies and abuses, informing him of his inferior class status by calling him “a common laboring-boy” (55). Grahame Smith explains the dynamic of Pip’s relationship with Estella: “having inspired him with a sense of his own inferiority, he sees her as the exquisite representation of a higher kind of life” (176). Pip quickly internalizes Estella’s opinions about himself and the importance of station, bemoaning his state to Joe, “she . . . said I was common, and that I knew I was common, and that I wished I was not common” (65). By accepting Estella as a superior being of sorts, Pip signals his willingness to comply with her ideal social hierarchy both within and without Satis House.

Estella’s opinions are quickly reinforced at home, where Mrs. Joe and Mr. Pumblechook discuss Miss Havisham’s intentions toward Pip, planting seeds of self-deceit in the boy that will later produce his class prejudices. Only Joe, who as a “gentle Christian man” represents the ideal of unprejudiced morality that supersedes class boundaries, knows the danger involved in filling Pip’s head with such fantasy, as well as the perils of the classes mixing so freely. Joe warns, “common ones as to the callings and earnings . . . mightn’t be the better of continuing for to keep company with common ones, instead of going out to play with uncommon [sic] ones” (66).

Although Joe agrees with Estella on the necessity of separation between the laboring and non-laboring classes, thus implying complicity in the *status quo*, his warning proves apt, as Pip will later learn. In this manner, Joe acts as the voice of reason throughout the novel.

Miss Havisham also helps Pip to formulate his class identity, as J. Hillis Miller asserts: “Miss Havisham and her house are the images of a fixed social order, the power which can judge Pip at first as coarse and common, and later as a gentleman” (267). Simply by being brought in to Miss Havisham’s home, as dilapidated as it is, Pip grows ashamed of his own humble surroundings at the forge. When Miss Havisham pays for Pip’s indentures to be apprenticed to Joe, she unwittingly intensifies that shame by dashing the lad’s hopes for something better. Pip no longer considers blacksmithing to be a noble profession, saying, “I had liked it once, but once was not now” (99). Like Copperfield’s complaints about having to labor for his own upkeep, Pip recalls, “There have been occasions in my later life . . . when I have felt for a time as if a thick curtain had fallen on all its interest and romance, to shut me out from anything save dull endurance any more” (100). Pip sees his indenture to Joe as the end of any hopes he had for a better position in society, as well as his aspirations toward Estella.

Pip’s transferring onto Joe his own feelings of inferiority and desires to eradicate their outward signs signal the young man’s first step toward adopting an immoral and inhumane ideal of respectability. Previously, in their joint sufferings under the “tickler” of Mrs. Joe, Pip admits that he and Joe are “equals,” while simultaneously “looking up to Joe in [his] heart” (45). This apparent equality between the comrades changes radically when Joe and Miss Havisham meet for the first time and Pip compares his two guardians in relation to their class, with Estella looking on. Joe appears completely uncomfortable in this new situation, and Pip offers him little aid. He recalls, “I

am afraid I was ashamed of the dear good fellow--I know I was ashamed of him--when I saw that Estella stood at the back of Miss Havisham's chair, and that her eyes laughed mischievously" (95).

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