

## On “Great Dreams” in *Great Expectations*

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*Great Expectations* is one of Charles Dickens’ great works, and it tells the story of Pip, an orphan boy brought up by his sister, who has good luck and great expectations, and then loses both of them. Through the rise and fall, however, Pip learns how to find happiness. He learns the meaning of friendship and love, and, of course, becomes a better person for it. *Great Expectations* reveals the hypocrisy of the Victorian civilization in England from the perspective of capitalist humanism and discloses the serious problems and nature of the society. This paper aims at interpreting Pip’s “Great Dream” and analyzing the influence of the social and historical backgrounds on Pip’s “Great Dream”.

**Keywords:** Great Dream, *Great Expectations*, Pip

### Introduction

Charles Dickens is a famous English novelist in Victorian period. As a critical realist writer, his works not only reflect the life experience of whole generation, but also reveal, in a more intensive and extensive way than any other novels of the same period, the social realization of England during the 19th century.

*Great Expectations* is a novel by Charles Dickens. It depicts the growth and personal development of an orphan named Pip, the protagonist and narrator of the work. The novel was first published in serial form in *All the Year Round* from December 1, 1860 to August 1861. There are three major themes in *Great Expectations*, namely, ambition and self-improvement, social class, and crime, guilt, and innocence. Dickens establishes the moral theme that affection, loyalty, and conscience are more important than social advancement, wealth, and class and shows Pip to learn this lesson, largely by exploring the ideas of ambition and self-improvement—ideas that quickly become both the thematic center of the novel and the psychological mechanism that encourages much of Pip’s development.

### The Interpretation of Pip’s “Great Dream”

In *Great Expectations*, the “great dream” has two meanings. On the one hand, the dream can be called “great”, for on the way to win the love the protagonist also realizes his own self-improvement. So in this way, his dreams’ greatness lies in his great ambitions of his future and the persistence in pursuing his ideal dreams. On the other hand, due to the unrealistic characteristic of his dreams and the whole process of the realization, his dream cannot really be called “great”.

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The protagonist of the *Great Expectations* is Pip, who is a sensitive child, orphaned and lived under the care of his sister and her husband. At the beginning of the novel, Pip is characterized as a harmless, caring boy, who draws much sympathy from the reader even though he is at that point content with his common life. During his first visit to the Satis House, Estella, the heroine, who considers herself much too refined and well-bred to associate with a common boy, scorns Pip, while Pip seems to fall in love with Estella during their first meeting. After just one afternoon at the Satis House, Pip develops a desire to become more acceptable to Estella, hoping that her callous attitude towards him would change. As a result, while walking back to the forge, Pip begins to feel ashamed of his life and his position in society because he believes that it will ruin his hopes of Estella loving him. Unfortunately, as Pip develops unrealistic hopes and dreams for his life, all his positive characteristics are replaced by undesirable ones. Then, when Mr. Jaggers informs Pip of the "Great Expectations" that have been placed on him, Pip begins to believe that Miss Havisham has destined him to be married to Estella. Almost immediately, Pip's ego grows tremendously, and he becomes arrogant as he looks down on his "common", yet caring and loyal friends. As the arrogant and ungrateful Pip continues to believe that Miss Havisham has chosen him to be the recipient of her money and, hopefully, of Estella's husband in marriage, he also continues to be ashamed of and look down on his past life. For many years, Pip has believed that he and Estella were destined to be married. But when Pip finally learns that Abel Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is his benefactor, his unrealistic dreams and expectations start to fade, and his genuinely good nature begins to overcome the negative traits that he had developed.

The story can be divided into three phases of Pip's life dreams and expectations. In the first expectation, Pip lives a humble existence with his ill-tempered older sister and her strong but gentle husband, Joe Gargery. Pip is satisfied with this life and his warm friends until he is hired by an embittered wealthy woman, Miss Havisham, as an occasional companion to her and her beautiful but haughty adopted daughter, Estella. From that time on, Pip aspires to leave behind his simple life and be a gentleman. After years as the companion to Miss Havisham and Estella, he spends more years as an apprentice to Joe, so that he may grow up to have a livelihood working as a blacksmith. Such a kind of life is suddenly turned upside down when he is visited by a London attorney, Mr. Jaggers, who informs Pip that he is to come into the "Great Expectation" of a large property and be trained to be a gentleman with the help of an anonymous benefactor.

The second stage of Pip's expectations is the time when Pip is in London, learning the details of being a gentleman, having tutors, fine clothing, and joining a cultured society. Whereas he was always engaged in honest labor when he was younger, he now is supported by a generous allowance, which he frequently lives beyond. He learns to fit in this new milieu, and experiences not only friendship but rivalry as he finds himself in the same circles as Estella, who is also pursued by many other men, especially Bentley Drummle, whom she favors. As he adopts the physical and cultural norms of his new status, he also adopts the class attitudes that go with it, and when Joe comes to visit Pip, Pip is embarrassed to the point of hostility by Joe's unlearned ways. At the end of this stage, Pip is introduced to his benefactor, which again changes his world.

The third and last stage of Pip's expectations alters Pip's life from the artificially supported world of his upper class strivings and introduces him to realities that he realizes he must deal with, facing moral, physical, and financial challenges. He learns startling truths and finds that he cannot regain many of the important things that he has cast aside so carelessly, and turns into a good-natured person again.

Earlier in his life, he has changed from an innocent, caring boy into an arrogant young man as a result of his unrealistic hopes and dreams. However, when those hopes and dreams come to an end, so do his undesirable traits, as he is shown to be a truly good-natured person.

Pip's "Great Dream" can be seen from two different perspectives. On the one hand, we can see that Pip has great expectations and dreams towards his future, and it is reasonable for a young man like him to pursue his own dreams so as to have great expectations or a bright future. Pip wants to win the love of Estella through the means of becoming a real gentleman, which is actually one of Pip's great expectations for himself. During the process of winning the love of Estella, Pip focuses on self-improvement. So from this perspective, his dream thus can be called "great". On the other hand, on his way to realize his dream of winning the love of Estella, he sacrifices his kindness and friendship and at the expense of losing his positive nature, which finally destroys the greatness of his dream.

### **The Backgrounds of Pip's "Great Dream"**

*Great Expectations* was produced during the Victorian period. The tremendous changes that took place in England in the forties were described in the novels of Charles Dickens. By the early eighteen seventies England had become the workshop of the world and the world's banker. The factory had become the focal point of the nation's life. It was a period of complacency, stability, and optimism. During this period the Great Exhibition was held in the Crystal Palace, which was a display of the nation's advanced technology and industry as well as its prosperity. But the prosperity was on the surface, while beneath there were anxieties and worries, for in 1857 and the following years, the economy was hit by crises from time to time. *Great Expectations* wrote by Charles Dickens realistically exposed the darker side of the seemingly prosperous society.

The Victorian era of British history was the period of Queen Victoria's reign from June 20, 1837 until her death on January 22, 1901. Though Queen Victoria lived from 1819 to 1901, she did not come to the throne until 1837. Queen Victoria was on the throne for more than 60 years. During the long reign of Queen Victoria England grew from an agricultural country into an industrialized one and became the workshop of the world as well as its financial and political center. It was a long period of peace, prosperity, refined sensibilities, and national self-confidence for Britain. The era was preceded by the Georgian period and succeeded by the Edwardian period. Culturally there was a transition away from the rationalism of the Georgian period and toward romanticism and mysticism with regard to religion, social values, and the arts. The era is popularly associated with the values of social and sexual restraint. In international relations the era was a long period of peace, known as the *Pax Britannica*, and economic, colonial, and industrial consolidation, temporarily disrupted by the Crimean War in 1854. The end of the period saw the Boer War. At the same time, around 15 million emigrants left the United Kingdom in the Victorian era and settled mostly in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Victoria's reign lasted for 63 years and 216 days, the longest in British history up to the present day.

### **The Influence of Backgrounds on Pip's "Great Dream"**

The superficial prosperity of the British society made people pursue money and status blindly, and the *Great Expectations* is a vivid reflection of the whole society's status quo. At that time, people only saw the prosperous aspect of the society, and everyone went after wealth and status. Actually, Pip came from a poor family, and when

he saw Estella for the first time, he fell in love with her, and later in order to win the love of Estella, he hoped that he could be a real gentleman so as to match Estella. The sense of vanity influenced by the whole society drove Pip to become a member of the upper class. Pip changed on acquiring wealth and status, and his childhood home and friends were embarrassing to him. In trying to live up to his own dreams and expectations, he lost his sense of judgment and began to value material possessions and gentlemanly pretensions more than kindness and friendship. On realizing that his patron is a convict, Pip mends his way of life and returns to his good-natured self, which is more mature as a result of his experience. The significant changes that Pip’s deterioration from an innocent boy into an arrogant gentleman and his redemption as a good-natured person has illustrated the idea that unrealistic hopes and expectations can lead to undesirable traits.

Throughout *Great Expectations*, Dickens explores the class system of Victorian England, ranging from the most wretched criminals (Magwitch) to the poor peasants of the marsh country (Joe and Biddy), to the middle class (Pumblechook), and to the very rich (Miss Havisham). The theme of social class is central to the novel’s plot and to the ultimate moral theme of the book—Pip’s realization that wealth and class are less important than affection, loyalty, and inner worth. Pip achieves this realization when he is finally able to understand that, despite the esteem in which he holds Estella, one’s social status is in no way connected to one’s real character. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the novel’s treatment of social class is that the class system it portrays is based on the post-Industrial Revolution model of Victorian England. Dickens generally ignores the nobility and the hereditary aristocracy in favor of characters whose fortunes have been earned through commerce. In this way, by connecting the theme of social class to the idea of work and self-improvement, Dickens subtly reinforces the novel’s overarching theme of ambition and self-improvement.

### Conclusion

In this paper the author chooses *Great Expectations* to analyze the protagonist-Pip’s “Great Dream” based on the social and historical backgrounds in England. The protagonist Pip in *Great Expectations* has a humble origin when he fell in love with the young lady. Virtually, he hopes that they can have a bright future and great expectations to realize their dream of becoming a better man, while he twists his dreams and seems to be too eager to be successful. He regards winning his love of the heroine as his “Great Dreams”. So in order to live up to his unrealistic dream to become a wealthy man with a high social status, he throws away his positive nature, which in turn makes him suffer a lot in the end.

To conclude, the word “Great” in both the titles can be endowed with two layers of meanings. On the one hand, it sarcastically criticizes the unrealistic dreams of pursuing material values that the protagonist holds. On the other hand, at a time when extravagance and materialism comes first, the protagonist still harbors hopes and dreams, and can persist in them. By analyzing the protagonist’s characteristics and under the social and historical backgrounds, we can see that one’s real worth and value lies in the conscience and affection rather than wealth and social status.

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