

---

## Broken Homes and Shattered Dreams: Dickens' Realist Vision in *Great Expectations*

Dr. T. Sailaja

Assistant Professor (Adhoc)

Department of Humanities

JNTUA College of Engineering, Anantapur

### Abstract:

This paper explores the elements of social realism embedded in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, with a special focus on the representation of childhood innocence, poverty, class struggle, and moral development. Drawing on Dickens' own traumatic early life experiences, the paper examines how the novelist channels personal history into literary expression, particularly through the journey of Pip, the novel's protagonist. Pip's evolution from a vulnerable orphan to a self-aware adult mirrors the socio-economic turbulence of Victorian England and highlights the psychological cost of social mobility. The paper further analyzes Dickens' critique of the education system, child labour, and the dehumanizing legal structures of the time. By placing Dickens in the tradition of realist fiction while also acknowledging the novel's symbolic and Gothic elements, the study underscores how *Great Expectations* serves as both a social document and a moral narrative. Through close reading and intertextual comparisons with *Oliver Twist*, the paper illustrates how Dickens gives voice to the marginalized and calls for moral and systemic reform.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, social realism, childhood innocence, Victorian England, moral development, Pip, child labour, education, Gothic elements, poverty, class, industrial revolution

Charles Dickens was born at Landport in Hampshire on February 7, 1812. His father, John Dickens was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at Portsmouth Dockyard. Dickens' family was involved in debt and John Dickens was imprisoned for that when Charles Dickens was eleven years old. This was a crisis in the family fortunes. From his childhood onwards Charles Dickens was very intelligent, but the diverse circumstances compelled him to work for his living in a factory. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century industrial revolution had already taken place. The cessation of the Napoleonic war brought little alleviation to the poor. Their position became worse. At the close of the war all those who had been enlisted for war were thrown back on the labor market at a time when capital was scarce. The result of this was obvious. Poverty and starvation were rampant everywhere. A great number of social, economic, political and religious evils cropped up. It was a period of black horror for the child. Children were beaten and overawed at home, they were overworked and hunger-starved in factories; they were persecuted and tyrannized over in schools; there were all but killed in the parishes. It was during these stormy years that Charles Dickens was spending his unhappy boyhood in London and passing through experiences which were to inspire him throughout his life in the cause of suffering and privation wherever he might find it. Many of his important childhood characters, such as David Copperfield and Pip experienced similarly unpleasant childhoods.

## Broken Homes and Shattered Dreams: Dickens' Realist Vision in *Great Expectations*

Dickens observed and studied this life closely and minutely. He himself had been a victim of the harsh blows of poverty and so he knew the life of the poor living in the factories, mines or slums of London as few others have ever known it. He knew from painful experience the life of the workshop, the office, and the terrible life of the streets. Therefore, when he became popular novelist he naturally turned for material to the life he knew so well. It furnished him with an abundance of material for his novels. He portrays their lives and joys in most of his books. Compton Rickett said, "Indeed there is no better guide to early Victorian London than Charles Dickens.....For the motley multitude that pour through the streets, for the hole-and-corner places of the city, for London as an incomprehensible, terrifying, fascinating, delightful personality—every brick and stone alive with tragic humor....Dickens remains unrivalled."1

Arnold Kettle remarks that "Victorian novel is characterised by realism that the novel by its very definition is a realistic prose fiction, complete in itself and of a certain length" wherein the word 'realistic' is meant to 'indicate' relevant to real life as opposed to... 'Romantic'.2 According to Galsworthy, "the word 'realist' characterizes that artist whose temperamental preoccupation is with revelation of the actual spirit of life, character and thought with a view to enlighten him and others"3. Dickens' novels are specially meant for exposing the exploitation of children and societal problems. The realistic portrayal of states of mind of children and states of minds of adults are presented realistically in many of his novels.

Charges of inexperience and unreality have been brought against Dickens' portrayal of the higher ranks of society by almost all his critics and it has been emphatically laid down that he was ludicrously ignorant of high and polite society. This deficiency of Dickens is evident in *Great Expectations*. He concentrates his whole self to the heart of humanity; to simple, unsophisticated, poor people, and was thus enabled to present to the world inimitable pictures of these. In the faithful and sympathetic depiction of the life of the humble classes, Dickens is perfect. His pictures of its comedy and tragedy are truthful and touching.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens presents the pattern of evolution of the child from deprivation to restoration. *Great Expectations* picks up Pip's story later yet, while also encouraging us to identify with its hero: "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip" (1). Philip Pirrip, in short, Pip, the protagonist of the novel "starts with innocence, proceeds through experience to a near fall."4(GE,p.2). The novel contains elements of social realism and tragedy and some of Dickens' social attitudes emerge also. He believed that prisoners should be taught the kind of work they could do best and condemned the prison system at the time. However, Dickens reflects a fear about the criminal element in society and his portrait of Magwitch shows this repeatedly in Pip's reactions to him.

In *Great Expectations* one can see Dickens' concept of innocence, and of its possible loss and the ultimate growth of that innocence into experience. The whole novel centers round the protagonist's experience. Pip is presented as a victim, exposed to temptations and saved from these temptations by his essential innocence and goodness. Though Humphry House claims that the novel is about "a snob's progress,"5 it belongs to the class of "education or development-novel" and it describes the progress of Pip "from country to the city, from innocence to experience."6

Pip lives with his sister and her husband. Although, Pip receives familial care from his sister, she physically exploits him and he lives in perpetual fear of her:

"My sister, Mrs. Joe, throwing the door wide open, and finding an obstruction behind it,

## Broken Homes and Shattered Dreams: Dickens' Realist Vision in *Great Expectations*

immediately divined the cause, and applied Tickler to its further investigation. She concluded by throwing me – I often served as a connubial missile. . . . (GE,p.17).

His sister's physical abuse highlights the vulnerability of children who lack proper care and protection. Ultimately, he is emotionally affected because he feels like a burden to his sister, whose presence appals him, yet she should be his surrogate mother: "I think my sister must have had some general idea that I was a young offender whom an Accoucheur Policeman had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated on being in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion and morality. . ." (GE,p. 29). Moreover, Pip's experience in a dysfunctional family unit also resembles the Pockets family whose children were "tumbling up" due to lack of proper maternal care from their mother Mrs. Pocket, who had surrendered the responsibility of caring for her children to servants and child minders.

Through the creation of Pip and Jo as orphaned children, Dickens portrays the dynamics and paradoxes experienced by both characters. Jo's life is characterised by a world of marginalised existence, in an isolating society. Pip inhabits an ineffectual family unit with a violent sister and a weak brother-in-law who fails to nurture and protect him. Their behaviour parallels the exploitative nature of the workhouse authorities who were instructed to care for the orphans under their authority. Moreover, the parish clerk, Mr. Wopsle in *Great Expectations* says: "What is detestable in a pig, is more detestable in a boy" (p.33), which also reaffirms the harsh mentality of the church authorities who strongly believed that young children were not to be treated better than animals. If Mr. Wopsle thinks a young boy is more unbearable than a pig, then his statement accounts for the actions of the workhouse board of guardians.

Furthermore, Dickens' traumatic experiences are immensely echoed in Oliver who is stripped of his new clothes bought by Mr. Brownlow, ". . . Oliver in Fagin's kitchen, stripped of his 'good' clothes, deprived of Brownlow's books, and laughed at by the urchins...." 7(p. 89). This incident replicates Dickens' own experience which: ". . . imaginatively embodies the humiliation of the sensitive middle class Dickens amid the working – class fellow – employees, one of whom was indeed called Fagin. On the other hand, fear of this environment was matched by his hatred of middle class parents, who had so promptly abandoned him into it" p.89). *Oliver Twist* also mirrors Charles Dickens because they both belong to the middle class, but are abandoned into a workhouse. Although at this point the reader is not aware of Oliver's membership in the middle class, his innocence and failure to join a gang of criminals is synchronous to Dickens' exposure to the working class at the factory as a young boy of twelve.

The vulnerability of children and their subjection to child labour is further reflected in *Oliver Twist* when the man in the white waistcoat wants to sell Oliver to Gamfield as a chimney sweeper. Instead, Oliver is later sold to Mr. Sowerberry the undertaker and assigned the role of a funeral mute. The Industrial Revolution was a period in which many children were

As an innocent child, he feels so deprived of parental love that he visits his parents' tombs in the country marshes. Pip in his childhood innocence remembers his dead parents, brothers, Places, things and their identity in this way:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river.....and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip (GE, pp.1-2).

## Broken Homes and Shattered Dreams: Dickens' Realist Vision in *Great Expectations*

Pip soon begins to long for his identity. As a common boy, he longs for sophistication. He is brought up on the thief's money but when Magwitch reveals that he is his benefactor, Pip hates the thief:

To my thinking there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him. The more I dressed him, and the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes...and that from head to foot there was Convict in the very grain of the man.( GE, p.317)

This reveals the emptiness of Pip's sophistication. Later, however, as a London youth, he begins to find no delight at the end in his achieved sophistication in contrast to the value of innocence which he had enjoyed in the company of Joe Gargery, his brother-in-law, and Biddy. He decides to go back to his first home with a repentant heart:

“The purpose was, that I would go to Biddy, that I would show her how humbled and repentant I came back, that I would tell her how I had lost all I once hoped for, that I would remind her of our old confidences in ;my first unhappy time. Then I would say to her: ‘Biddy, I think you once liked me very well, when my errant heart, even while it stayed away from you, was quieter and better with you than it over has been since. If you can like me only as well once more, if you can take me with all my faults and disappointments on my head... I hope I am a little worthier of you than I was—not much, but a little (GE, pp.448-9)”

This shows that Pip is no longer a corrupt youth but a man with a child's heart and mind. It also shows that if Pip seems to stray from the state of innocence for some time, he does not take a long time to regain his essential innocence. On the whole the novelist shows the experience of life of Pip, ie., his growth. We may quote Robert Stange's observation on Pip's growth:” In the final stage of growth he returns, to his birthplace, abandons his false expectations, accepts the limitations of his condition, and achieves a partial synthesis of the virtue of his innocent youth and the melancholy insight of his later experience.”<sup>8</sup>As the novel develops we find Pip's responses becoming more and more complex. As he becomes experienced, he becomes capable of detachment and self-criticism and sometimes even a heartless self-analysis. In his description of the domestic life of Mr. and Mrs. Joe he could be not only humorous but sometimes even painfully humorous:

“ It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home., There may be black ingratitude in the thing, and the punishment may be retributive and well deserved: but, that it is a.... “(GE)

Dickens' novels also criticize the form of education offered to poor children as noted in *Great Expectations* when Pip attends Mr Wopsle's great aunt's night school, a model of a “Ragged School” (Dickens and Education 71). Dickens was concerned about children and education as he was removed from school at a young age and taken into a workhouse.

Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*, *Great Expectations* is no simple realist novel, but a mixed kind of fiction, incorporating popular Gothic elements such as dream, fantasy, and myth.<sup>9</sup> Said simply takes for granted that Dickens's novel falls within the realist tradition of Defoe Fielding, Jane Austen, and George Eliot, an assumption which limits the really subversive potential of such moments as that in which we witness through Pip's eyes the sentencing of Magwitch to death—a moment that takes us beyond realism, into a symbolic realm that declares the equality of the wealthy narrator and the deprived and brutal Magwitch, whose transportation to the colonies provided his wealth.

## Broken Homes and Shattered Dreams: Dickens' Realist Vision in *Great Expectations*

The novel demonstrates, in the repression of desire and activity associated with Satis House, one cost of becoming a gentleman. At the same time it promotes a kind of moral and spiritual gentility. This is shown in Pip's acknowledgement of the Christian ideals of love and forgiveness, as when he watches Joe from his sickbed, 'penitently whispering': 'O God bless this gentle Christian man' (p.458). Dickens asserts Joe's moral gentility at the same time as he acknowledges the social distance between him and Pip. Pip cannot join Joe and Biddy in the end, he has to go abroad to make his (modest) fortune.

Charles Dickens' works played tremendous role in the implementation of policies that changed the lives of the poor. Apart from his works, Dickens' active involvement in promoting social reforms raised public awareness in the fight against poverty, deprivation of education, child labour and prostitution.

### References

1. Rickett, Compton. A History of English Literature, UBS Publishers, New Delhi, Reprint, 1999. p.497
2. Kettle, Arnold, ed. An Introduction to the English Novel. London: Hutchinson, 1974.
3. Quoted from [http://www.enl.uoa.gr/synthesis/issue3\\_Walder.htm](http://www.enl.uoa.gr/synthesis/issue3_Walder.htm)
4. Dickens, Charles, *Great Expectations*. 1861. London: New Oxford Illustrated Edition, 1952
5. House, Humphry, *The Dickens' World*, London: Oxford Paperbacks, 1960, p.159.
6. Stange, Robert, "Expectations Well Lost: Dickens's Fable for his Time" in Kettle p.128
7. Dickens, Charles, *Oliver Twist*. London: Penguin, 1992
8. Stange, Robert, "Expectations Well Lost: Dickens's Fable for his Time" in Kettle p.127
9. Said, Edward, . *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994. p.143