

## Pip's and Estella's Attempts to Transcend Class in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Sarah Barker

St. Olaf University

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jason Ripley

In Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, both Pip and Estella are expected to strive toward a social class into which they were not born. Pip slowly acculturates into high London society despite his low class origins and questionable origin of income. Estella's access to Miss Havisham's nouveaux riche funds grants her an entrance into the London Season. However, both Pip and Estella find the middle ground between the pre-established classes of the aristocracy and the masses disconcerting.

The novel explores Post-Industrialist England, where the rising wealth of industrialists allowed select members of the working class to challenge the authority of titled gentry. *Great Expectations* is no American rags-to-riches story—but it may nevertheless reflect a truth the myth of the American Dream would have us forget. There is inherent complexity to navigating social hierarchies, whether in Post-Feudalist England or in the capitalist mecca of the United States. While Pip's and Estella's lives certainly turn out better than their benefactors' do, the novel's ending nevertheless suggests that attempts to assimilate into upper class culture do not necessarily lead to happiness.

Pip's arrival in London makes for an obvious study in class transcendence. Chapters 19-28 showcase Pip's eager attempts to become fashionable, despite the setbacks he faces from the start. Immediately he recognizes that the location of his residence will hinder him from becoming a gentlemen. Barnard's Inn is located in

Hammersmith, a bit away from the pinnacle of the social scene in England—Hyde Park. In *The Party that Lasted 100 Days: the Late Victorian Season*, Evans and Evans point out that Hyde Park was *the* place for the upper-class to drive, stroll, and mingle (55). As the Countess of Warwick remarked of the park, “Here the small circle of Society with the big ‘S’ was sure of meeting all its members . . . in what was practically a daily Society Garden Party!” (qtd. In Evans 56). In order to be a part of the inner circle of London society, Pip would have to live in the Berkeley, Grosvenor, Mayfair, St. James, or Belgravia sections of town (Evans 28-30). Indeed, even Magwitch recognizes Pip’s misfortune at not living closer to Hyde Park: “He considered the chambers and his own lodging to be as temporary residences, and advised me to out at once for a ‘fashionable crib’ near Hyde Park (345). Pip’s fancy for reupholstering furniture (218) may be his attempt to compensate for his unideal housing arrangement.

In the context of London aristocracy, Pip’s expenditures are not as frivolous as he makes them out to be. All of his purchases work in his favor to establish him as a gentleman in the eyes of London society. For instance, he hires a boy to help him around the house (218). While this detail seems arbitrary to modern readers, having servants indicated that one was a member of the upper classes. The fact that the servant is male makes the hiring decision even more prudent. As Daniel Pool, author of *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens* asserts, “When you really arrived, you hired a manservant, an index of social propriety” (47). Pip’s application to be elected into a gentlemen’s club (34) profits him another mark of the gentleman (Evans 48). Because he doesn’t have a title or land, his education and expenditures are the only means he has to establish himself as a member of the upper classes. Subsequently, the

debt Pip incurs buying fashionable dress, entrance to gentlemen's clubs, opera tickets, and miscellaneous other entertainments represent practical investments designed to bolster his reputation as a gentleman.

Estella's move to London would be less astonishing to Victorian readers than Pip's adjustment there. It was common practice for well-to-do women in rural areas to live with London relatives for weeks at a time. In fact, this migration had a name—the London Season. From late April to late June, it was the fashion for women to move to London and attend as many social functions as possible in order to attract a spouse (Evans 22). Pip's description of his time spent with Estella clearly indicates that they were participating in the larger practice of the London Season. "I used often to take her and the Brandleys on the water," Pip states. "[T]here were picnics, fete days, plays, operas, concerts, all sorts of pleasures, through which I pursued her"(Dickens 301). Estella's stay in London is a logical step in Miss Havisham's plan for her to charm a man to heartbreak.

At the same time that Miss Havisham's wealth buys Estella a ticket into the London Season, Miss Havisham's poor parenting and nouveaux riche sensibilities hinder Estella from fitting in with the more elite members of society. Havisham never mentions a title or land, and the wealth her father made as a brewer likely came as a part of the industrial revolution. Havisham's ill-behaved relations further indicate her distance from the inner circle of English society. Thus her fury at the cancellation of her marriage to the "gentleman" Compeyson is likely fueled by more than heartbreak; a union with him would have ensured Havisham a fuller inclusion into the London society. After the cancellation of their marriage, Havisham apparently gives up any attempts at

class transcendence and allows her social connections, like her house, to decay. She instead focuses solely on preventing another person from falling in love as she did. In the pursuit of this goal, Havisham fails to expose Estella to the genteel members of society who would prepare her for London society. Moreover, by indoctrinating Estella in misandry, Miss Havisham prevents her from enjoying courtship, the entire reason for the London Season. Miss Havisham tells Pip that she adopted Estella to “rear and love, and save from my fate” (400), but in her fervor to save Estella from being heartbroken, she only prepares her to share her fate in liminal class between the aristocrats and the proletariat.

Havisham’s poor connections force Estella, like Pip, to settle for relations and a location that are outside the main circle of high London society. Mrs. Brandley and her daughter, who agree to introduce Estella to London, are, as Pip describes, “in what is called a good position . . . little if any community existed between them and Estella, but . . . they were necessary to her. . . and she was necessary to them” (300). Estella is more to the point when she says that “the mother is a lady of some station, I believe, though not averse to increasing her income” (270). Clearly, Miss Havisham is paying money for the Brandleys to show Estella around London, demonstrating that money was an in to London society. However, it also demonstrates the limits of Miss Havisham’s influence. As with her relatives, Miss Havisham only holds sway over the Brandleys because of their compromised financial status. The Brandleys do not have a title and do not live in a prime location for Estella to be introduced to the upper crust of society—Richmond is even farther away from Hyde Park than Hammersmith. Estella’s relationship with the

Bradley's exemplifies the fact that those of station in Victorian England often accepted the nouveaux riche as a matter of convenience rather than of affection.

Given her ill-fitting background, it makes sense that Estella only goes through the motions of the London Season. While initially appearing to play out Miss Havisham's plans for her by toying with Pip and the rest of her "admirers," in the end she takes the course of action which will break the fewest men's heart: she allows the careless Drummle to marry her. Estella makes her ambivalent attitude toward marriage clear when she asks, "On whom should I fling myself away? . . . upon the man who would soonest feel . . . that I took nothing to him?" (364). It is significant that Estella does not see life as a single woman as an option. Estella has no monetary reason or even desire to marry, but London society would have advised her to that marrying an heir but one to a baronetcy would be an obvious step toward becoming a lady. While the connection allows Estella to enter the aristocracy from which Havisham was denied, her background does not prepare her to enjoy her role in high London society.



Fraser, F. A "We sat down on a bench that was near." Illustration. The Charles Dickens Museum. London.

*This illustration, originally published in a household addition of Great Expectations circa 1877, showcases Pip's and Estella's dejection toward the end of the novel when neither feels completely accepted by any established social class.*

By using Bidley and Joe as a control, it becomes clear that Pip's and Estella's attempts to transcend their classes afford them mixed results. Whereas Bidley and Joe happily remain in the same occupation and place and change little throughout the novel, Pip's and Estella's lives lack all stability. After a brief period of inclusion into a higher

social class, Pip and Estella both experience falls from their stations. In the aftermath of Magwitch's death, Pip can only make the most of his connection with the businessman Herbert by becoming a clerk and saving in order to pay off his debts. After Drummle's death, Estella retreats back into the isolated lifestyle of Miss Havisham. Throughout the entire work, Pip and Estella's lives appear filled with strivings, distraction, and tragedy, but never peace within themselves or within any established class. They do not get to experience Biddy and Joe's romantic, happy ending; their ending comes closer to the unsettled endings emblematic of modern literature. While money certainly affords Pip and Estella an array of experiences that Joe and Biddy will never understand, it also leaves them feeling as if they do not fit in anywhere.

Evans and Evans sum up Pip's and Estella's predicament well when they state that London "[s]ociety was an elite, headed by the aristocracy, into which outsiders were permitted to break in to so long as they behaved themselves and offered something by way of inducement—money, or what money could buy; amusements; a talent for conversation; beauty" (11). The novel repeatedly suggests that all of the conventions surrounding Victorian upper class society bent to accommodate those with wealth; nevertheless, without being born into an elite family one always felt as if he was only playing a part when among aristocratic society. Rather than blindly supporting the pursuit of success (as is the fashion in many American novels), Dickens suggests that attempting to transcend a certain social class inevitably leaves one at conflict with one's inner self.

## Works Cited

- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. Book.
- Evans, Hilary and Mary Evans. *The Party that lasted 100 Days: The Late Victorian Season*. London: Macdonald and Jane's Publishers Ltd., 1976. Book.
- Pool, Daniel. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. Book.