Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations: Pip’s Quest for Identity

Abstract

Charles Dickens’ novel Great Expectations details the interactions that the main character Pip encounters on his own quest for self-discovery. Through his transition from working in the forge alongside a blacksmith to his increase in status as a gentleman, Pip meets individuals who attempt to classify themselves and embody the various identities constructed by society or those that they associate with themselves. Pip struggles with categorizing other characters and himself due to the ambiguities that exist within their position in society and their physical appearance. Through the character of Pip, Dickens offers the perspective of a society less reliant on the concept of class. This lack of reliance is reinforced by Pip’s ability to move freely throughout classes by “trying on” various social identities, and his inability to maintain within one identity to his fullest.

Pip’s Relationships

- Pip’s relationship with Joe serves as a variable in identifying the transitions Pip moves through on his journey from a child at the forge to a gentleman.
- Initial equality with Joe: “I always treated him as a larger species of child, and as no more than my equal” (7).
- After beginning his education to become a gentleman: “If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money” (206).
- Expectations based on face value—i.e. Magwitch and Havisham

Pip’s Confusion

- Pip admits to his misinterpretation, “I read ‘wife of the Above’ as a complimentary reference to my father’s exaltation to a better world” (38).
- Dickens continuously places Pip in instances of confusion regarding the status of others.
- Pip “tries on” assumed identities of other characters throughout the text, contributing to his confusion as he attempts to find his own placement.
- Moves from low to a high standing position in society

Pip as a Gentleman

- The mid-Victorian gentleman: “It became little more than a term of social approval and moral approbation—gentlemanly character and a reasonable income were now what mattered” (Crossick 33).
- Opportunity to experience multiple positions
- Embodies multiple identities by taking on this role

Ambiguity of Class Definitions

- Class definitions shifted greatly throughout the 1800’s in England.
- Mid 1800’s middle class definition: “referred less to a social group than to the right-thinking, morally upright core of British society” (Crossick 31).
- Based on the defining characteristics of morality and occupation many characters could occupy positions in multiple classes.
- Root of Pip’s confusion for identity and perception of others.
- Gilmour argues that Dickens plays on definitions of the “civilized” and “uncivilized” to add to Pip’s confusion (116).

REFERENCES