
Social Darwinism And Classism In Censorious Victorian England And Great Expectations

“One man’s a blacksmith, and one’s a whitesmith, and one’s a goldsmith, and one’s a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come” (Dickens 224).

Throughout history, people have experienced discrimination or prejudice based on their social class and societies have created ideas, attitudes, policies, and practices for the benefit of the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Specifically, in the Victorian Era, social class determined someone’s behavior, where the upper class was viewed as noble and the poor were seen as unprincipled. In Charles Dickens’ novel, *Great Expectations*, a working class boy called Pip is satisfied with his life until he visits Satis House, where he encounters and experiences class prejudice and desires to become a gentleman. When he goes to London with his newfound wealth, Pip does not find fulfillment as a member of the snobby upper class, but rather feels diminished of his self-identity. Written during the Victorian era, characterized by snobbish classism and ideas of social Darwinism, Dickens uses the recurring theme of class division to remark upon the negative effects of classism and to condemn the belief that goodness of character is defined by one’s social class.

Victorian society revolved around rigid social class structures. Upward social mobility was extremely difficult, and the upper class treated the lower class with contempt. The significance of social class in Victorian England engendered ideas of classism and social Darwinism which affected the values of society.

The upper class highly valued the severe social divisions of the Victorian era, reasoning that they were entitled to their position of superiority due to inherent virtuousness. During the Victorian era, men and women of higher class had a patronizing attitude towards the working class. Janet Sacks, the author of “Victorian Childhood,” asserts, “[t]he Victorians were tremendously snobbish [...] It was deemed of the utmost importance to maintain one’s social status or improve it, and this principle was instilled into children from an early age” (Sacks 23). During the Victorian era, Queen Victoria was seen as the ideal model of civility, and British society became driven by propriety. Parents aspired and arranged for their children to marry into a higher-standing or wealthier family in order to move up the social ladder. People in all levels of society complied to the rigid social hierarchy, with the lower classes inadvertently deferring to those of the upper class, while those at the top assumed a position of superiority. Moreover, the upper class believed that they were entitled to their prestigious standing. Two experts in 19th century society, Neil Schlager and Josh Lauer, state that, “[...] members at the top of society, either by virtue of hard work or birth, were the best-adapted citizens” (Schlager and Lauer). In Victorian England, this was a popular belief, especially among the higher-ranking members of society. They valued their position dearly, and social Darwinists manipulated Darwin’s evolutionary theory to justify their eminence. Victorians also placed an emphasis on one’s character, reasoning that goodness of character equates to higher social standing. Additionally, the wealthy treated the lower class with condescension. BBC portrays how the upper class perceived the poor, remarking that a working class citizen: “[...] is not an ordinary person, but one who is constitutionally a pauper, a pauper in his blood and bones. He is made of inferior material, and therefore cannot be improved up to the level of the ordinary person” (BBC

Bitesize). Upper class citizens presumed that the poor were inherently inferior to them. The lower class was capable of working, but no matter the amount they labored to try to improve their social standing, the aristocrats believed that since they were born poor, they deserved to be poor. Their attitude was extremely harsh, as many wealthy Victorians viewed that the working class did not live in hardship due to unfortunate circumstances, but rather that they lacked the innate capability to live with noble-minded morals. The upper class, therefore, justified that they were inherently superior in intellect and goodness of character, and maintained the classist ideology of the Victorian era.

During the Victorian era, popular ideology such as social Darwinism and self-help were used to rationalize that social standing was attributed to one's character. Victorian philosophers used Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory to justify social class divisions. William A Darity Jr., the editor of International encyclopedia of the social sciences, asserts that, "Social Darwinism sees a direct corollary between struggle in the biological world and struggle in the social world, with winners moving upward to success and losers eliminated: losing organisms fail to reproduce, losing firms go bust, losing people starve" (Darity). Major changes occurred in 19th century Britain, such as urbanization, technological innovations, and industrialization. The idea that the naturally superior people succeed became increasingly relevant in Britain's capitalist economy. Herbert Spencer, a philosopher, argued that only the strong survive, and assisting the weak, such as ameliorating the lives of the poor, was erroneous. This engendered a laissez-faire policy, that competition would make the economy flourish. However, some of the wealthy manipulated this idea, using it to validate their position and to condone the horrid working and living conditions that the poor experienced. Additionally, the idea that someone could improve their condition and social standing through their own effort became increasingly widespread throughout all the social classes. Samuel Smiles, a political and social reformer of the Victorian era, wrote that "[t]he spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength" (Smiles 1). During the Victorian era, hard work was one of the virtues of the middle class. Smiles believed that poverty existed due to a lack of personal responsibility, and that industriousness was the solution. While unintended, the idea of self-help created an egocentric society, where all members of society sought to improve their own station through whatever means necessary. Coalesced with Darwin's evolutionary theory, many affluent Victorians misattributed their wealth to an innate strength of character. Furthermore, the wealthy believed they were morally superior due to their social rank. Samuel Smiles, the author of the popular book "Self-help", remarks that "[r]iches and rank have no necessary connection with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor man may be a true gentleman,—in spirit and in daily life" (Smiles). While the Victorian upper class firmly believed that only the wealthy could be gentlemen, there was a growing belief that being a gentleman was not derived from social class or wealth, but rather one's inner character. However, the upper class generally used social Darwinism to contend that they were prosperous because of inherent "gentlemanly qualities", and that the poor lived in poverty because they lacked these qualities. Nevertheless, there was a growing belief among the working class that anyone could be successful through hard work, but that morality was of paramount significance. They believed that virtue was not limited to only the citizens in the upper class, but all were equally competent in attaining virtuous qualities. Thus, Victorian society employed the concepts of self-help and social Darwinism, expressing that social standing and prosperity was attributable to one's morality.

The classist values of Victorian England were brought about ideas like social Darwinism and the significance of class divisions. These ideas adversely affected people from all social classes,

particularly towards one's goodness of character. In the novel *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens uses animal imagery and characterization to show class divisions in Victorian England, conveying that social class does not define one's character.

Dickens utilizes animal imagery, through Pumblechook, Miss Havisham's relatives, and Drummle, to satirize Victorian beliefs that higher social status denotes superior innate characteristics. When Pumblechook comes over for Christmas Dinner, Pip describes him as a "large hard-breathing, middle-aged slow man with a mouth like a fish, dull staring eyes, and sandy hair standing upright on his head" (Dickens 24). Using animal imagery to describe Pumblechook as "a fish" suggests his slimy and suspicious nature. Dickens uses a simile to show that he has "a mouth like a fish", which indicates him being a loudmouth. By describing him as "slow" and with "dull staring eyes", it conveys that he is vacuous and dimwitted, as fish are commonly thought of as having small brains and limited memory. While Pumblechook is a member of the middle class, using imagery to relate him to a fish shows his shallowness, as he values monetary gain above virtue and acts in an obsequious way towards anyone above him in social rank. Additionally, after Pip's first visit to Satis House, he overhears Miss Havisham's relatives conversing. Pip observes that "they somehow conveyed to me that they were all toadies and humbugs" (Dickens 80). Through this amphibious and insectival imagery of Miss Havisham's relatives as "toadies and humbugs", they demonstrate the corruption of the upper classes. "Toadies", or toads, are ugly, slimy creatures that are often associated with witchcraft and evil, demonstrating the filthy nature of the wealthy. By describing them as "humbugs", it further emphasizes their repugnant character and creates a nauseating image. They are dehumanized through this description, showing the deterioration and decomposition of the aristocracy. While the upper class regards the lower classes as inferior, it is truly the wealthy who are dishonorable and greedy in conduct. Charles Dickens satirizes Miss Havisham's relatives to expose the hypocrisy and corruption present among the ranks of the upper class. Moreover, when Drummle starts to take an interest in Estella, Pip notices him following her, and dislikes this. He remarks that "[t]he Spider, as Mr. Jaggers had called him, was used to lying in wait, however, and had the patience of his tribe. Added to that, he had a blockhead confidence in his money and in his family greatness [...] So, the Spider, doggedly watching Estella, outwatched many brighter insects, and would often uncoil himself and drop at the right nick of time" (Dickens 310). Jaggers originally calls Drummle a "spider" and Pip similarly uses this imagery to show his contempt for Drummle. By describing him as "lying in wait", Pip demonstrates Drummle's behavior of habitually creeping around and stalking Estella. The usage of the verb "lying" elicits the imagery that spiders are repulsive and dangerous creature. In contrast to Drummle "the spider", the other gentlemen in the Finches of the Grove are referred to as "many brighter insects", suggesting Drummle's baseness and stupidity, even among the ignorant. Spiders are also inhuman creatures, demonstrating how despite his high social standing, his character is below that of a human. So, while the description of "spider" represents his animalistic and unscrupulous nature, it also shows Estella's vulnerable position to him. Drummle would "uncoil himself" and "drop", demonstrating that through his actions, he denotes a position of dropping down and being low in terms of humanity and virtue. This imagery intends to show Drummle's true qualities, and that even though he has all the outward characteristics of a gentleman, he does not have the inner qualities of one. Therefore, Dickens implements animal imagery to exhibit a character's inner morality, criticizing the belief that the members of the wealthy upper class were inherently superior.

Dickens denounces the classism present in Victorian society, emphasizing the noble disposition of the lower class through the characterization of Joe, Magwitch, and Bidly. When Joe goes to

London to visit Pip, they have an uncomfortable reunion due to their different social positions. Joe remarks to Pip that “one man's a blacksmith, and one's a whitesmith, and one's a goldsmith, and one's a coppersmith. Diwisions among such must come, and must be met as they come. If there's been any fault at all to-day, it's mine” (Dickens 224). Joe does not place any blame on Pip for the uncomfortable situation, but rather says that “it's mine”. This shows his forgiving and loyal nature, as he does not hold Pip culpable, but rather the natural “diwisions” of life. His diction by saying “diwisions” reflects his working class status and shows the contrast between him and Pip, as Pip speaks like a member of the upper class. Joe states that “one man's a blacksmith, and one's a whitesmith”, using blacksmith imagery to describe how their divisions work, comparing himself to a “blacksmith”, and Pip to a “goldsmith”. Through this metaphor, Joe accepts that the differences in their social classes have divided them, yet he still has dignity by attributing the disparity not on Pip, but rather on the ambitious nature of humans. Furthermore, after Pip converses with Biddy about his love for Estella, he reflects that “I was clear that Biddy was immeasurably better than Estella, and that the plain honest working life to which I was born had nothing in it to be ashamed of, but offered me sufficient means of self-respect and happiness” (Dickens 132). Even though Estella belongs to the upper class, Pip proclaims that Biddy is “immeasurably better than Estella”. This hyperbole shows Biddy's gentle character is morally superior to Estella's cruel attitude. The fact that Biddy is “better” is not due to her status as a member of the working class, rather the fact that she has an honest and upright character. He also describes their social class to have a “plain honest working life”, showing that while common people may not live an extravagant or luxurious lifestyle, it is still more virtuous than living as a wealthy, but dishonest person. Through Biddy's goodness of character, Pip realizes that his low class still provided him with “self-respect and happiness”, as these inner virtues are of greater significance than external qualities such as one's social standing. Moreover, when the convict returns to visit Pip, Magwitch reveals to him that he is his benefactor, leaving Pip shocked. Magwitch announces, “Look'ee here, Pip. I'm your second father. You're my son—more to me nor any son. I've put away money, only for you to spend. When I was a hired-out shepherd in a solitary hut, not seeing no faces but faces of sheep till I half-forgot wot men's and women's faces wos like, I see yourn” (Dickens 320). Magwitch's diction, saying words like “yourn”, “wos”, and “wot” denotes his low social status. Through the discovery that a convict is his benefactor, Pip's idealized view of a gentleman's character and social status is obliterated compelling him to acknowledge that the only reason he is a part of the upper class is due to the gratitude of a criminal, who is considered the lowest of all the classes. Magwitch, who refers to himself as Pip's “second father”, also calls Pip “my son”, showing the tenderness of his heart and revealing that he cares more about “[his] son”, who is not even his biological child, than many upper class parents. He mentions his loneliness as a shepherd, yet how in his darkest times, “I see yourn”, depicting how Pip is his purpose in life. This reveals that while Magwitch seems like a threatening reprobate externally, he has inner dignity and nobility. Magwitch has remained grateful and loyal to Pip, illustrating how his outward guise does not reflect his noble-minded disposition. Thus, Dickens utilizes characterization through diction to contend that members of the lower class have a sense of righteousness that is absent in some of the upper class characters, showing that a low social status does not entail a lack of dignity and morality.

Written during the Victorian era, which is characterized by snobbish classism and ideas of social Darwinism, Dickens uses the recurring theme of class division to remark upon the negative effects of classism and to condemn the belief that goodness of character is defined by one's social class. During the Victorian era, the upper class used popular ideology such as social Darwinism and self-help to rationalize that social standing was attributed to one's inherent

character, perpetuating the classist ideology of the Victorian era. Charles Dickens utilizes animal imagery and characterization to denounce classism in Victorian England and beliefs that wealth and high social class denotes a noble disposition and superior innate characteristics. Through popular Victorian beliefs and *Great Expectations*, Dickens demonstrates that fulfillment and happiness cannot be found through superficial means, such as wealth, but rather through genuine and steadfast relationships.

edubirdie.com