

**The Evolution of Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations***  
*The Influence of Social Environment on Personal Character Development*

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In “Great Expectations,” Charles Dickens masterfully narrates the story of Pip, an Orphan who must battle the challenges of social order and personal development in Victorian England.

The novel offers an insightful look at how social environments shape the evolution of one’s character. From the marshes of Kent to the bustling streets of London, Pip’s transformation from a humble blacksmith’s apprentice to a gentleman of “great expectations” is a testament to the complex interplay between the impositions of societal norms and the autonomy of personal decision-making. Critics often note that the real triumph of "Great Expectations" lies in how Dickens captures Pip's growth throughout the story. As the narrative unfolds, readers experience the full range of life's joys and sorrows alongside Pip, understanding that the tragedies he faces are deeply connected to the societal influences he encounters. The following essay explores the profound influence of the social environment on Pip's personal character development, tracing his journey through the trials of love, ambition, and identity. In doing so, it sheds light on the universal quest for self-improvement and the often-painful concessions made to the altar of social ambition.

The novel starts with Pip being a young child living under the care of Mrs. Joe Gargery and her husband. Being an orphan, Pip is unable to experience parental love and suffers greatly because of this. Mrs. Joe Gargery, as his sister, should have taken on the role of a mother and provided Pip with the love and care he needed. However, her priorities lie elsewhere; she is more preoccupied with upholding the social persona of a diligent caregiver than with genuinely fulfilling her duties.

Despite the façade that she puts on in front of the community, Mrs. Joe Gargery isn’t a good caretaker at all. She mistreats him and fails to provide him with any tender care or affection,

abusing Pip as if he were an object without a human dimension. Her actions are mainly driven by a desire for praise and admiration from outsiders. Instead of finding comfort in his sister, Pip begins fearing her. All these harmful experiences are detrimental to Pip's growth and contribute to his timidity and other weaknesses in his character.

The lack of love and care from Mrs. Joe contributes to Pip's longing for a better life and higher social standing. Her disdain for their lower social class and obsession with maintaining appearances coupled with her ambition for Pip to "play for his advancement" fuels Pip's desire to escape his humble origins. These ambitions become a driving force in Pip's life, leading him to value wealth and status over personal relationships and moral values. Pip's dissatisfaction with his life and eagerness to leave the forge is, to a significant extent, a reaction against the stifling atmosphere Mrs. Joe imposes.

Mrs. Joe's treatment of Pip also has an impact on how he interacts with other characters in the future, specifically Joe and Biddy. At the outset, Pip and Joe share a bond characterized by mutual affection and respect. However, as Pip's aspirations expand, he begins to perceive Joe's simplicity and limited education as sources of shame. This change in attitude mirrors the disdain and impatience that Mrs. Joe frequently displayed toward both Pip and Joe. Furthermore, Pip's future interactions with Biddy and other individuals from his early years are influenced by a feeling of superiority and a desire to distance himself from his past. This inclination reflects the values instilled in him through Mrs. Joe's treatment.

Apart from Mrs. Joe, the other females who played a significant hand in making Pip the man that he became were Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter Estella. Pip's gentleman-like

aspirations first begin at Satis House where these two women served as his first introduction to the upper class. It is following his initial visits to Miss Havisham that Pip's desire to rise above his social standing begins to take shape. "*Her contempt was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it.*" He becomes acutely aware of his poverty, coarse manners, and lowly status, especially in comparison to Estella's sophistication and poise. This is evident when Estella mocks him for his thick boots and coarse hands, and Pip feels ashamed of his background for the first time. "*I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before, but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair.*" Estella's impact propels Pip into circumstances that compel him to face his imperfections and biases. His fervent chase of Estella and the refined stature he believes she embodies leads him to view his background with contempt and embarrassment. The drive for Pip to ascend to gentlemanly status is sparked not solely by the pursuit of financial prosperity, but equally by his deep-seated yearning for Estella's esteem and love.

Miss Havisham's manipulation of Pip, using his love for Estella and his social aspirations to entertain her twisted resentments, is a form of emotional abuse. His love for Estella, unreciprocated and often met with coldness and mockery, shapes his understanding of relationships. He conflates love with unattainable ideals and suffering. This experience leaves Pip disillusioned and bitter, impacting his future relationships and worldview. Bidy, a potential love interest, becomes lovelier by the day, however, Pip fails to recognize her value, instead remaining lost in how happy he will have been with Estella. "*The unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I found her irresistible*" Despite his growing passion for Estella, social status makes their relationship forbidden and unattainable, Pip will simply never be good enough for her.

Pip's move to London marks a critical turn in his journey. Upon arriving in London, Pip is thrust into a world that is starkly different from the marshes of his youth. He is initially entranced by the city's apparent sophistication and promise of a higher social status. However, this allure soon dissipates, the grandeur and glamour he envisioned are overshadowed by the insincerity and idleness he witnesses among the upper class. Pip begins to lose touch with his intrinsic values of honesty, hard work, and loyalty, which he learned from his brother-in-law Joe, a symbol of the honest and good-hearted working class. His ideals of what it means to be a gentleman become skewed. He associates gentlemanlike behavior with having social and financial power, rather than having honor and righteousness. This disillusionment leads him to look down upon his modest origins and reject Joe when he visits Pip in London. A moment that exemplifies Pip's abandonment of his moral compass.

The earliest signs of Pip's snubbing of Joe are seen when he is about to leave for London and tells Joe that he wants to walk to the coach by himself. When he realizes that he does this out of embarrassment and shame he has a momentary urge to ask Joe to walk with him the next morning. *"I had an impulse upon me to go down again and entreat Joe to walk with me in the morning."* But his pride prevents him from doing so here and in the future as well. As mentioned before, when Joe visits Pip in London, Pip treats him with utter contempt and disregard. Pip's transformation into a snob is most evident in his interactions with Joe. He is often dismissive and cold towards Joe, showing hatred for the life he once led. This is captured in his thoughts: *"I wanted to make Joe less ignorant and common, that he might be worthier of my society and less open to Estella's reproach."* He feels ashamed of Joe's rustic manners, simple ways, and his discomfort in fancy environments. A feeling that is made evident to the readers when he states, *"If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money."* This

condescending behavior is further depicted when Pip returns to Kent to visit Estella but purposefully does not visit Joe. Additionally, when Pip, following his sister's funeral, promises Joe "*I shall be down soon and often*" in spite of these words Pip and Joe don't meet until the latter makes the effort to come to London.

The characters Pip meets in London play significant roles in his character development. For instance, Bentley Drummle and Startop, fellow students of Mr. Pocket, exemplify the idle, purposeless life of some members of the gentry. Drummle's arrogance and entitlement, and Startop's idle pursuit of knowledge without application, reflect a society that values status over substance. The lack of genuine friendship and purpose among the people Pip encounters in London starkly contrasts with the authentic relationships he left behind in the marshes.

Pip's experiences at "The Finches of the Grove," a club emblematic of the frivolous and extravagant lifestyle of the wealthy, further his disillusionment. It's a place where excess and argument replace meaningful interaction, exacerbating Pip's sense of alienation. "*The Finches spent their money foolishly (the Hotel we dined at was in Covent-garden), and the dinner was a ridiculous bore.*" The revelation that Estella considers a man like Drummle, whom Pip despises, worthy of her attention is a crushing blow to him. It exemplifies how the values and judgments of London society are at odds with his own.

Pip's retribution arc starts with Magwitch's return, the convict that he had assisted as a child and the revelation that Magwitch, not Miss Havisham was his secret benefactor all this while. This discovery initiates a profound transformation in Pip, both emotionally and morally. Initially, Pip is horrified to learn that his gentlemanly status and wealth come from a convicted felon. He expresses his disappointment and repulsion: "*The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread*

*I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast."* Despite his initial shock, Pip's conscience and inherent goodness lead him to take action to protect Magwitch from being captured and executed. As he spends more time with Magwitch, Pip begins to empathize with him, understanding the hardships and injustices he endured. He comes to admire Magwitch's unwavering commitment to making Pip a gentleman as a way of providing the opportunities he never had: *"In the hunted, wounded, shackled creature who held my hand in his, I gradually saw the man who had come on the same errand to my bedroom, when we were wide awake, and when we could have struck him dead."* Pip's dedication to ensuring Magwitch's safety marks a crucial step in his moral redemption.

Pip's journey of growth comes at a great personal cost. He loses his wealth and status, suffers through illness and indebtedness, and endures the pain of unrequited love. Yet, these losses are paradoxically his gains, as they lead to a newfound maturity and humility. He begins to reflect on his actions and his values and truly becomes aware of how kind and good Joe has been to him. Upon Magwitch's passing, Pip faces financial ruin and is engulfed by debts. In this time of dire need, it is the ever-generous Joe who steps in to help. Despite Pip's previous neglect, Joe generously settles Pip's financial obligations using the modest earnings from his forge and provides care throughout Pip's sickness.

Pip's repeated expressions of regret towards Joe throughout the narrative signify his fundamental decency. His brief surrender to the distorting effects of affluence and societal position leads him astray, fostering a demeanor that is self-centered, haughty, and aloof. Eventually, Pip discards these distorted perceptions and embraces a more grounded existence. Following a prolonged journey through delusion, Pip comes to an epiphany that the disingenuous and manipulative

nature of the elite cannot fulfill his aspirations. He gains an appreciation for the inherent worth of individuals and their actions, rather than their social rank or material wealth.

In his reconciliation with Joe and his altered outlook on life, Pip embodies the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity for transformation. It is in the return to his origins that Pip finds a more profound sense of purpose and fulfillment, a testament to Dickens' enduring belief in the triumph of personal integrity over social pretense. Through Pip's narrative, Dickens affirms that one's social environment is a powerful shaper of identity. The capacity for self-improvement, informed by genuine connections and ethical actions, ultimately transcends the superficial distinctions of class and status. Pip's story is a journey of self-discovery that resonates with the universal quest for authenticity and the enduring pursuit of moral excellence.

### **Works Cited**

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