



**VICTORIAN WOMEN AND SOCIAL STATUS IN
GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Charles Dickens stands as the master in handling world famous characters through his novels. The Victorian ideal of womanhood is the angel in the house – a moral, yielding, domestic paragon. In Victorian middle class ideology, women should be confined to the home to better protect them from the immoral influences of the world, in order that they should exert their good influence on their husband and children and through them the society at large. In Great Expectations Dickens presents a very different outlook of Victorian women who go beyond class lines, he provides powerful portraits of calculating and manipulative women, with no hint of the softness and capacity for sympathy that characterizes the ideal Victorian women. The present paper explores Victorian women and social status through the profound study of the chief women characters of Dickens' Great Expectations. Dickens presents Mrs. Joe, Pip's sister, often complains about her situation. The second important character is of Estella, who has experienced a strange upbringing. Third chief character is of Miss Havisham whose behaviour is bizarre and obsessive so that she remains constantly in her pain and suffering. Apart from these there are other female characters like Bidly, Clara, Mrs. Pocket and Molly those who have their own stories victimization of the behaviour of men and the expectations of society.

INTRODUCTION

In the silken clothing literature of Victorian era Charles Dickens stands as the master in handling world famous characters through his novels. He is the master of sunniest smiles and most unselfish tears. His women characters are so varied and various that they would make situation moral or immoral and favourable or the worst. He has simply used literature as the means by which to bring himself into relation with his fellow-men, and to inspire them with something of his own sweetness, kindness, charity and goodwill. He could create such a

realistic characters and individual characters and in his power of creative fertility, he is considered next only to Shakespeare.

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In *Great Expectations*, Mrs. Joe, Pip's sister, often complains about her situation. She is presented in the novel with full of anger, resentment and as a comic figure or as a domestic tyrant, but it all be seen as deriving from the loss of her parents and brother. In *Great Expectations* there are several fragments of this fact; that Mrs. Joe is portrayed in the beginning of the novel as mean, pretty, ungrateful, and finally, unfeeling:

What did you say? Cried my sister, beginning to scream. What did you say? What did that fellow Orlick say to me, Pip? What did he call me, with my husband standing by? O! O! O! Each of these exclamations was a shriek; and I must remark of my sister, what is equally true of all the violent woman I have ever seen that passion was no excuse for her because it is undeniable that instead of lapsing into passion, she consciously and deliberately took extraordinary pains to force herself into it, and became blindly furious by regular stages; what was the name he gave me before the base man who swore to defend me? O! Hold me! O! (p.112)

It would better to know the feelings of Mrs. Joe; that are very poignant. Despite the intensity of Mrs. Joe's emotions there is no real human feeling involved.

The second important character is of Estella, who has experienced a strange upbringing. She has idea of her true parentage and has lived in the extraordinary setting of Satis House, cut off from other children and seeing the world only as Miss Havisham represents it to her. Comparer Mrs. Joe's tantrum with Estella's coolness:

'You must know', said Estella, condescending to me as a brilliant and beautiful woman might, 'that I have no heart – if that has anything to do with my memory. (p.235)

Here, Estella feels no anger, no hate and she feels nothing at all. But according to Dickens, neither did Mrs. Joe not really. Her emotion was carefully constructed, as is, Pip posits, that of all 'violent' women. The combination between both the characters is that one from working class and another from upper-class; creates a sense in the novel that not only do women not conform to the sympathetic, domestic ideal; they are often completely opposed to it. Ironically, life among the upper classes does not represent salvation for Estella. Instead, she is victimized twice by the adopted class. Rather than being raised by Magwitch, a man of great inner nobility, she is raised by Mrs. Havisham, who destroys her ability to express emotion and interact normally with the world.

Then the chief character is of Miss Havisham who has endured long, lonely years nursing her resentment and planning her revenge by her manipulation of Estella's feelings. Her behaviour is bizarre and obsessive so that she remains constantly in her pain and suffering. Charles Dickens presents the realistic woman character like Miss. Havisham; psychologically convincing, though an eccentric. Certainly there are women in society who is deserted by their lovers and who adjust them to the frustration which results from such an experience. Miss Havisham could not reconcile herself to the shameful manner in which she was treated by her faithless lover. It is therefore quite natural for her, mentally constituted as she is, to seek to avenge herself upon the entire male sex. There is no improbability in her having adopted a child and having determined to wreak her vengeance upon the male sex through the beauty and cold-heartedness of this child when she has grown into a young girl; Estella. Miss Havisham shaped in Estella as a weapon for destruction – as she herself has been destroyed.

'Let me see you play cards with this boy'.

'With this boy? Why he is a common labouring-boy!....

'Well? You can break his heart'....

'Beggar him', said Miss Havisham." (p.59)

Miss Havisham is an example of single-minded vengeance pursued destructively: both Miss Havisham and the people in her life suffer greatly because of her quest for revenge. She is unable to see that her action is hurtful to Pip and Estella. She is redeemed at the end of the novel when she realized that she has caused Pip's heart to be broken in the same manner as her own; rather than achieving any kind of personal revenge, she has only caused more pain. There is no improbability that she begs Pip for forgiveness, reinforcing the novel's theme that bad behaviour can be redeemed by contrition and sympathy. Dickens has keen knowledge of human psychology, which demands for forgiveness on any evil deed. Apart from these there are other female characters like Biddy, Clara, Mrs. Pocket and Molly those who have their own individual and social stories expectations.

Really, each of the chief women character in *Great Expectations* seeks an identity of the self within a society, which is riddled with injustice, greed and cruelty. Each of the main

characters is in isolation, yet entangled with others in a common guilt. Each is forced to face the mystery of evil, passion, and pain. Reconciliation and forgiveness come from the discovery of the basic element in human relationship and understanding: that true identity escape from isolation is reached in humanity and compassion.

Dickens conceived characters in dramatic terms. That is, he had the gift for creating and fixing through language a sense of humanity in action: men and women not thinking or being but doing and very often saying. Dickens has a very minute knowledge of the Victorian women and society that is why he succeeded in depicting the realistic picture of Victorian women and social status in *Great Expectations*.

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