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**Research Question:** To what extent does the main character 'Pip' in Charles Dickens's novel 'Great Expectations' reflect the impact of Victorian Period on the society?

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## **Abstract**

Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens, is considered to be one of the principal examples of the genre the *bildungsroman*; a novel of education. The *bildungsroman* generally follows the protagonist's life from childhood innocence to experience. This study analyzes the reflection of Victorian Period on the society through the main character 'Pip'.

Brought up by a lower class, Pip is exposed to the difficulties of the poor people at a very young age. Due to his visits to Miss Havisham who represents the upper class of the society, he becomes aware of the conflict between the rich and the poor. As being an idealist character, Pip begins to long with wealthy gentleman on account of seeing the better life. Later on, after Pip learns that somebody makes him a fortune, he goes through a 'social revolution'. Pip turns into a member of upper class, goes off to live in better conditions, educates himself and changes the people around him. However, he finally realizes that the life that he dreams of, is not proper for him and at the end he moves back to his hometown. Since Pip explores both part of the society, he could criticize the society he lives in from his point of view which also gives some clues about the Victorian Society that Charles Dickens is inspired.

(222 words)

## I. Introduction

History has given birth to a very large number of epochs and these have improved the quality of our past through their own various views. These myriad of eras have strong impressions on the society, culture, politics and beliefs of its period. Despite having strong impressions on different areas of the public, its most important influence has probably been on literature. Victorian Era has no exception. The English author Charles Dickens' novel "Great Expectations" is one of the important novels of Charles Dickens since it has lots of symbols and effects that indicate the period it is written. The social commentary, critic of the poverty and the social stratification of Victorian Society can be seen till the end of the novel. Due to the clues about the Victorian Era, the influences of the epoch on the main character 'Pip' in the novel Great Expectations will be analysed in detail. Generally Victorian novels center on the struggles of a protagonist to find him/himself a proper place in the society.

The main character Pip who is an idealist character in the novel, desires to obtain improvement as soon as he sees better conditions. For instance when Pip first visits the Satis House, Miss Havisham's house, he starts to long for wealthy gentleman since he is looked after by a poor family, at first time he sees a wealthy life he is quickly impressed by every detail of being rich, "*it bewildered me, and under its influence I continued at heart to hate my trade and ashamed of home*" (Dickens 36). On account of the facts that Pip has gone through a 'change' as he is turning into an adult from a child. Throughout the novel self improvement of Pip can be noticed. He receives high education including table manners, speaking and clothing. He meets with different characters during his stay in London, as a consequence, according to his experiences he can critique or decide whether the man that he dreams of is good or bad to him.

The mistaken belief of Pip about the way that being a gentleman prevails in England during Victorian Period. In order to understand clearly the social reform of that times , a meticulous attention will be paid to the details of the novel.

The scope of this study therefore, will be the analysis of the impact of the Victorian Society on the main character , Pip. Indeed, Dickens's focused observations about the Victorian atmosphere and the wise use of language will lead the way to the comprehension of Pip's improvement or his "social revolution". While at first, according to Pip's thoughts, being a gentleman is something that can be gained after having learned some rules of high society but then through the end of the novel he realizes that it is kind of a feeling which comes from insight of itself. Being gentlemen equals with neither the amount of money he has nor the number of rules from the upper class he knows, fortunately Pip becomes aware of the real meaning of being gentleman and moves back to his hometown.

## II. Social Class

Social Class portrayed by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations* plays a major role in the society. Bringing the behaviours of the criminals, Magwitch, to the peasants of the country, Joe and Biddy, to the middle class, Pumblechook, to the upper class (Miss Havisham) into the focus, Pip explores the class system of Victorian Era which has a central importance. Miss Havisham who is from the upper class of the society “*an immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion*”(Dickens 47). Victorian Era was a time when great social transformations were sweeping the country. In this context, the definition of “gentleman” was the extent to which he had received school education and also the conditions of working class were becoming worse including child labour. Therefore, Joe Gargery, a blacksmith, is illiterate or Pip who was born in a “marsh country” as a member of lower class, has a poor education at a school in his hometown, Magwitch, a criminal, is poor and belongs to lower class, has no education at all. Instead, Compeyson from the upper class is educated. According to the characters, education is a factor related to the social class systems. During the Victorian Period, the coal reserves and the mineral resources are the premier means of subsistence around the lower class so as being a member of working class Joe and Orlick work in quarries. They work long hours for very little payment, also most of them are unable to remunerate. Hence the lower class can easily be exploited by the high society. For these reasons most people generally long for leaving their country and trying to find a job in bigger cities such as London which is the main survival place for the working class who want an improvement in their life. In those times for the English people London is like an American Dream in which everyone is happy and closer to be rich. As a result of that commonly held belief, Pip rejects to think twice the proposal of starting a new life in London by leaving everything behind.

In Victorian Period a lot of people immigrate to obtain better life or the life of their dreams like as Pip made for his great expectations. Some of them could reach their aim and they find better jobs in better conditions while the others are not so lucky, they couldn't find what they are expected so the ones that are failed in attempts to live in better conditions , move back to their villages.

### III. Gentleman

The traditional concept of a gentleman generally an educated man is contrasted with a gentleman as a man of moral integrity. The transformation of the meaning of “a gentleman” is caused by Victorian Period when great social values are changed. Herbert Pocket portrays Compeyson, a literate gentleman, by saying his father: *"no man who was not a true gentleman at heart ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner. He says, no varnish can hide the grain of the wood, and that the more varnish you put on, the more the grain will express itself"* (Dickens 179). This quotation means that Herbert and Matthew Pocket are considered as gentlemen because of their behaviours and moral integrity. On the contrary, although Provis and Miss Havisham have treated him poorly, he never refuses to help them, when Provis is ill, Pip says “I will never stir from your side”(Dickens 124) to Provis or saves Miss Havisham who gets caught on fire: *“I had a double-caped coat on...and I got them over her”* and *“she was insensible and I was afraid to have her moved or even touched”*(Dickens 122) these examples shows his innate feelings, Pip is an example for the traditional gentlemen. On the other hand, although Pip is actually a gentleman, he can not feel like them because he equalizes being gentleman with money not with the gentility. Pip thinks that education is the premier necessity in order to be a gentleman, according to the conversation between Joe and Pip, Joe says *“you are uncommon in some things”*(Dickens 64) to Pip referring to the education Pip has received.

London where Pip, moves into due to his ambition of being a gentleman, leads him a directionless life, he leaves his hometown without having intellectual and cultural values or a meaningful purpose. Therefore, for Pip being gentleman consists of learning the table manners, speaking with an high society accent, wearing proper clothes or going into debt. During the times Pip passes in London, he also joins the Finches of the Grove, a group of “gentleman” whose only purpose is to “*spend their money foolishly*” (Dickens 249) Despite having cruel and violent behaviours, stupidity and ignorance, Bentley Drummle, a gentleman, being a member of the Finches, also has a good reputation in the society because of his wealthy family. As the competition and the desire of being a gentleman rises day by day, the emigration to the bigger cities increases and changing the lifestyle results in reforming of new characters. Leaving the peaceful air of the countries and starting living in stressful bigger cities unsurprisingly effects everyone in the community. The society in countries are more sincere, the innate reactions are common and the relationships are stronger, on the other hand people who live in cities are double faced and can cheat easily.

That is to say that Living in the cities equal with being away from the naturality. Before moving to London, Joe is Pip’s bestfriend, unlikely before, after Pip changes his lifestyle and becomes a literate gentleman, he starts questioning about his understanding of “bestfriend” since he calls “friend” to a member of lower class, Joe who also can not act properly around Pip’s new class. When Pip learns that Joe is going to visit him, the first thing that comes to his mind is that Joe is going to be shamed of Pip so he does not become happy to hear that news. Although Pip has never called Joe or asked if he needs anything after he leaves his hometown, Joe wants to see his “bestfriend”. In order to become upper class and a wealthy gentleman, Pip could easily forget his past or shape himself according to his conditions. On the other hand, Mr. Pumblechook is a double faced man, after Pip becomes a gentlemen, he starts to give “*the best part of a pork none of the other parts*”(Dickens 128) and also



he always starts the sentences by saying “Pip my dear friend”.Pip could see the difference between the human relationship during his stay in London. The relationships are no longer strong when he compares with the relations in the villages.

The portrayal of gentlemen is used to show the faulty and destructive values of Victorian society. Moreover, to what extent the term “wealth” may destroy people in Pip’s society is demonstrated by Pip’s emotional and moral struggles that he has to face with during the process of becoming gentleman.

#### **IV. Religion and Moralism**

In the Victorian period on account of the competition and the ambition , the uses of fake emotions increased.People start acting easily or telling lies to whom they respect, day by day they become more and more double faced.These fake emotions generate from the conservatism and the moralism.As a result most of the strict rules such as going to church or not working on Sundays are coming from that belief.

Religion stands in the forefront through the novel. Most of the characters such as Pip , Joe Gargery , Biddy , they all go to Church every Sunday or join mass. Pip usually prays before he goes to bed or before starting his meal, with his family they thank God for everything they have. Pip’s society also put their hands on Bible to show that they are going to stand behind their words. *“Compeysan took it easy as a good riddance for both sides.Him and me was soon busy, and first he swore me (being ever artful) on my own book- this here little black book,dear boy, what I swore your comrade on”*(Dickens 320) From the examples it is understood that in the Victorian Era religion is very important and people are deeply religious. On Sundays they go to Church habitually , they have Bible in their houses and it is read by people from every class regularly.

Each character is processed through moralism. As mentioned in a dictionary moralism “is the differentiation between those that are good( or right) and bad (or wrong)”. To start with, Pip’s sister acts rudely to Pip and Joe Gregory , she keeps complaining about being a wife of a blacksmith, “*If I warn’t a blacksmith’s wife or a slave (it’s the same thing)...*”(Dickens 20) or she brings up Pip “by hand” which means that she beats Pip each time she sees his fault. These “ *constitutional powers had dispersed, my sister lay very ill in bed*”(Dickens 111), her wrong behaviours cost her to become ill . Afterwards she couldn’t walk or speak anymore. Secondly, Miss Havisham who is lovelorn , decides to take revenge from men. With this in mind, she brings up Estella without telling or expressing her, the meaning of love, her enemy, thus Miss Havisham is responsible for her coldness and cruelty towards the boys especially Pip. “*Estella was set to wreak Miss Havisham’s revenge on Pip*”(Dickens 130). As a result of affecting Estella’s life in this way, Miss Havisham dies in a most harmful way by burning in the fire which starts in her house.

Therefore, like the proverb “what goes around comes around”, in the novel each wrong attitude is punished. When it is generalized, in Victorian society the idea of moralism is very important for the members. When it mixes with the religion, most people try to live properly.

## V. Education and Money

Education together with money is like an important step in order to gain the other people's respect. The idea of being respectful to someone is related level of education and the amount of money. When Pip is a little boy, no one shows their respect to him because he is only a child of a blacksmith. They even give the worst part of the meals or never pay attention to him. On the contrary, after owning money from a fortune, the acts, the manner of address and the people's looks are all changed towards him. When Pip returns to his hometown, he realizes his advantages about being a gentleman just because he is a wealthy man, he is definitely sure that education helps to improve the status of a person in the society. "*My first decided experience of the stupendous power of money, was, that it had morally laid upon his back, Trabb's boy*" (Dickens 152) which indicates that Pip has gone through an improvement in London, in fact the shop assistants have changed their attitudes or language as they talk with him. In Victorian society the power of money is very essential to be loved and respected. It is possible to say that; people had been no longer considered as flesh but with blood. That is because nobility had peaked as the most valuable virtue and a concept of "noble blood" had come up, according to the aristocracy's arising in community, royalty had become capable of making decision on the faith of uncommon people.

Moreover, money and education not only makes people to be respected by others but also helps people to be Sir, Lady, Lord. The title of nobilities mean that having abundance of money and being well educated have a benefit of being gentlemen. According to Pip and the other characters being gentlemen is very important, it is also a symbol of being rich and educated. "*Abroad...educating for a lady, Estella; far out of reach; prettier than ever; admired by all who see her*" (Dickens 106) says Miss Havisham to Pip in order to explain the importance of good quality education which absolutely essential to be able to become "a

gentleman” or “a lady”. Especially, from Pip’s point of view being a proper gentleman is more or less equal with being an upper class member .

As being a member of lower class, like other children Pip never goes to school, he remains uneducated until he realizes the importance of education to reach his aims, education is like barrier that he has to jump over. Once Joe says “*be it so or son’t, you must be a common scholar*”(Dickens 69) to Pip which shows the realization of importance of the education around the lower class. This is the important part of the Pip’s life because his life has changed after that conversation. It is certainly like an awakening time for Pip. After all, without a shadow of a doubt, he decides to move into London where He is taught everything that each member of upper class should know, during his education every new things he learns, he comes closer to be a member of upper class. At the end of learning how to act properly, good table manners and sort of these things, he becomes a wealthy gentleman who is respected by everyone and belongs to an upper class. In the early Victorian period children never go to school as poor children are not worth educating hence the half of the society is unable to read and write whereas the children of rich families are luckier than the poor ones since they could have a chance to be educated. This shows that education is one of the factor to identify the social class of the person, in other words education is very important around the society.

## VI. Child Labour and The power of love

In the early Victorian Era, for the disease of power the labour of children is used. While the territorial owner is respected by others, the poor, however, are the ones who are oppressed, therefore the young children force to work for long work days with poor nutrition and health to bring money home. The effects of this period reflect on the novel *Great Expectations*, too. The servant in the Satis House comes home at the age of eight *“I suppose I did really come here, as any other chance boy might have come – as a kind of servant, to gravity a want or a whim, and to be paid for it”* (Dickens 328). Most of the owners of the shops in Pip’s home town employ younger boys as they can work long hours without being exhausted. To illustrate a young boy works in the shop of Mr Trabb. Helping him for the sales and cleaning of the shop.

The power of love plays a great role in the Pip’s self improvement path. His first realization of wealth and beauty is Estella whom he meets in the Satis House and falls in love with. However because of her behaviours towards him and her education, she is the one who is unreachable so as to reach her he decides to become a gentleman. One of the reason Pip wants to go to London is to be equal with Estella and draws the attention of her by his income and status. By this way, he thinks that he can be with her and she will want him too. When it is compared with the social classes in the Victorian Era, since the upper classes are conscious and also the authority of the community, for the lower class the high society is the ideal part of the society so they long for belonging to the upper class or some of them act as if they are from upper class of the society as they go outside of their houses. For instance Mrs Joe Gargery usually *“leads the way in a very large beaver bonnet, and carrying a basket like the Great Seal of England in plaited straw, a pair of patterns, a spare shawl, and an umbrella”* (Dickens 90).

## VII. Conclusion

Being an *bildungsroman*, *Great Expectations* portrays a poor boy who is in search of an identity in a Victorian society during the period of social reforming. Throughout the novel, the main character Pip goes through a process of maturation and awareness on the way of his dream, being a gentleman. Despite the education, Pip has never become a real member of high society, once he thinks that he turns into a wealthy gentleman but at the end he moves back to his hometown, which symbolizes that being gentlemen, living in London are all like clothes that he is going to take them off one day. Due to his misunderstanding of being a gentleman or a wealthy man, he goes into debt, joins the Finches which is created by a group of “empty gentlemen”, for Pip learning the appropriate use of utensils, wearing like the richest or using an advanced language are enough to be a person he wants however he can not prepare himself for the cultural, spiritual and intellectual changes. As he stays in London, he experiences lots of things that at the end when he starts to think mentally, he decides to move back to his “marsh country” because he can not feel himself belongs to that foreign country.

Charles Dickens's novels, among other things, are usually the works of social commentary, he criticizes the poverty and the social division of the Victorian society over the protagonist of the novel. Unsurprisingly, in *Great Expectations* Dickens also makes social commentaries by using the main character Pip. He tries to inform us about the period that he lives in, point out the struggles that the community have to face with and he also writes the effects of some “social revolutions”. Therefore as Pip is trying to reach his goal which is to be rich and a proper gentleman, he learns lots of things about real life which are also giving us some clues and ideas about the Victorian Era and Society that Dickens criticize in most of his novels.

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