

Capitalistic Gender Norms and Class Arrogance in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*: A Marxist Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to examine the complex influence of capitalism on gender norms and the continuation of class arrogance in society, employing a Marxist analytical framework. This study aims to reveal the intricate mechanisms by which capitalism strengthens traditional gender norms and worsens class disparities by analyzing the interaction between economic systems, gender dynamics, and social hierarchies. Utilizing Marxist ideas of class conflict and exploitation, this paper examines how capitalist systems sustain gender disparity by assigning women to unpaid domestic work positions inside the household. Moreover, it will examine how the bourgeoisie's dominion over the means of production solidifies their authority and sustains class haughtiness, intensifying the marginalization of persons from lower social classes. Besides, this paper analyzes the ways in which characters in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* belonging to various social classes handle and internalize gender stereotypes and class boundaries through a careful examination. This analysis will specifically examine the experiences of female characters in the novel, including Mrs. Joe, Biddy, and Miss Havisham, in order to clarify how their identities and opportunities are influenced by capitalist ideology. The ultimate goal is to provide insight into the lasting impacts of capitalism and how they affect gender equality and class unity in today's society.

Keywords: Marxism, Capitalism, Gender Roles, Class Arrogance, Social Hierarchy,

Introduction

Charles Dickens extensively addressed the prevailing concerns of his era and expressed deep concern over the oppressive actions of the privileged social stratum towards the laboring class. Among all his novels, *Great Expectations* stands out as one of the most significant and remarkable literary masterpieces. In this work, Dickens illustrates the governing authority of the dominant classes and the disadvantages of economic disparity. While developing the theme of the novel, Dickens' examines the unequal distribution of wealth that leads to class disparities in *Great Expectations*. This study will demonstrate the negative effects of a capitalist society on Pip's

upbringing in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, using the perspective of Marxist theory. The concept of social mobility, which was a prominent feature of Victorian culture, is clearly evident in *Great Expectations*. The novel's diverse and intricate exploration of genre contributes to the development of a sophisticated depiction of the Victorian class structure and human psychology. Furthermore, it exemplifies the deleterious impact of wealth in contemporary capitalist society. The tale exposes the malevolence of injustice and the avarice of the upper class. Money shapes the mindset of individuals involved. Charles Dickens prefers to determine his character and standing within society by taking control of his own fate. The novel explores the challenges associated with implementing a rigid hierarchical classification system, highlighting the disparities that arise. It also presents a new model of social organization that is based on merit and the capacity to attain rank via actions rather than one's birth.

One of the leading characters of the novel, Pip who endeavors to attain the status of a gentleman transforms himself into a remorseful individual who, although outwardly adhering to the conventions of the upper class, internally grapples with personal conflicts. Pip's loss of uniqueness is driven by the dominant influence of Estella's social class, ultimately leading him towards self-destruction. This study examines the novel *Great Expectations* from a Marxist standpoint, focusing on the unequal allocation of wealth and its resulting class conflict. The study is highly significant as it provides insights on the inequitable allocation of wealth among various social strata, which in turn leads to significant consequences within a community. Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* emphasizes the working class, as exemplified by Pip, who is deceived by the capitalist owners of the machinery. Moreover, this study offers vital insights into the power dynamics and processes related to the unequal allocation of resources that lead to social class disparities. The portrayal of topics such as child labor, custody laws, greed, exploitation of children by their families, and child abuse raises significant concerns for readers as well. This research extensively examines the dynamics of class conflict and political power struggles shown in *Great Expectations*.

Literature Review

Charles Dickens is widely considered to be one of the most esteemed novelists of the Victorian era. Several characters from his novels have achieved worldwide renown. Therefore, he can be rightfully acknowledged as the progenitor of one of the most exceptional characters in the realm of literature. Deirdre Gilfedder (2011) explains that his works depict the harrowing early years of numerous Victorian orphans. Charles Dickens is widely regarded as the most eminent 'social novelist' in 19th century English literature. He fearlessly questioned the established institutions of Victorian Britain through his books, serialized novels, and journalism. In *Great Expectations* Dickens explored the impoverished regions of London, where the inhabitants endured neglect, depression, and various forms of pain. The recurring themes in his writings include depictions of melancholic children and emotionally detached adults. He aimed to emphasize and draw attention to many concerns through his written works. Farhana Haque (2018) asserts *Great Expectations* serves as a reflection of the Victorian age. It is a manifestation of the prevailing

cultural, social, and political conditions of its day. The novel explores key aspects of the Victorian age, such as social class disparities, a flawed legal system, rapid industrialization, and the role of women in society. Early in the story, the narrative introduces a lower-class family (p.17). *Great Expectations* is a compendium of several characters from both the upper and lower social strata. The novel depicts the repressive nature of Victorian society, particularly towards individuals from the lower class. Charles Dickens, in his writings, aims to communicate a message that can help alleviate the suffering of individuals (Dallas,1869).

Dickens witnessed the repercussions of capitalism in English society while engaging in his regular strolls. He observed affluent individuals indulging in opulence as impoverished individuals served the wealthy to make ends meet. He witnessed the wealthy exploiting the impoverished. He observed the unsanitary and unhealthy living conditions in which the impoverished individuals resided, making them vulnerable to diseases such as smallpox, fever, and diarrhea (Hardy, 2010). Capitalism emerged throughout the Victorian era, bringing with it its associated consequences. *Great Expectations*, written by Charles Dickens, explores the exploitation of the lower and impoverished social classes by the upper bourgeoisie. Indigent individuals were not only overwhelmed with labor but also subjected to victimization. The occurrence of these events can be attributed to the materialistic tendencies of affluent individuals and the aspirations of impoverished individuals to enhance their standard of living. The disparity between the impoverished and the affluent has spawned malevolent individuals and resulted in the erosion of innocence for numerous individuals. *Great Expectations* portrays a society in which the pursuit of personal freedom and fulfillment is hindered by societal expectations commonly associated with progress, civilization, and modernity (Shihada, 2017). In *Great Expectations*, people experience social mobility in both directions, transitioning from poverty to wealth and from wealth to poverty, due to the prevailing financial volatility of the era. Pip's newfound wealth is a result of his previous life of poverty and oppression, which is facilitated by an unidentified patron. This transformation occurs within the context of capitalism. Pip experiences a sudden and significant increase in wealth. Dickens discusses the conduct of both social strata. He discusses minutiae such as attire, accents, and identities. He consistently advocates for those whose voices are silenced by the wealthy and privileged. He advocates for the inclusion of excluded individuals in society, supporting their efforts to integrate and belong. Dickens has created people who face challenges in their efforts to enhance their quality of life. Nevertheless, their aspiration for wealth engenders avarice, self-centeredness, and cruelty (Bowen, 2015). Capitalism can have severe consequences for impoverished individuals such as Pip, who experienced degradation because to his low socioeconomic status, as inflicted by Miss Havisham and Estella. Capitalism exacerbates societal inequality (Makati, 2008). Besides, Dickens as a novelist focuses on the collective, bureaucratic, and moral aspects of Victorian England. Pykett (2002) endeavors to portray Dickens as a writer whose literary works reflect the essence of his day, emphasizing his profound concern for class and social dynamics. She argues that Dickens attempts to convey the message that contemporary society, characterized by individualism, industrialization, and capitalism, is in

need of reform. In addition, he asserts that Dickens examined matters pertaining to the societal determinants of crime, as well as the broader procedures of societal decisions.

Theoretical Framework

Marxism is an ideology that encompasses economic, social, and political principles, which analyze social transformation through the lens of economic factors (Mirunalini, 2017). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels believe that to eliminate conflicts, it is necessary to establish a society that lacks sensitivity or consideration. In addition, the primary factor is the conflict between social classes that arises among the working-class individuals as they sell their labor to employers. This conflict is highly broad due to its exposure of the systemic oppression that hinders the progress of civilization. According to Marxists, this mistreatment will incite a rebellion among the workers to dismantle an inequitable society (Marx,1968). Marxism emphasizes the inherent division of society into distinct social classes. Dickens has depicted the societal separation, which has resulted in numerous predicaments. The Manifesto of the Communist Party demonstrates that the existence of class divisions within a society leads to the emergence of economic crisis. The ruling upper class possesses the means of production, while the subjugated class lacks ownership of it. The subordinate class typically experiences exploitation in performing productive labor while serving the interests of the upper class. People in every community and across all ages are confronted with the challenges of poverty and inequality, as exemplified by Karl Marx. The disparity in resource availability and wealth ownership results in social stratification (Engels, 1962). The current study is conducted within the theoretical framework of Marxist theory of exploitation and class struggle. This study analyzes *Great Expectations* through the lens of Marxist theory to uncover the elements of exploitation and class conflict between two social groups that impacted the working class, while adopting textual analysis as the analytical approach. This research aims to focus on the exploitation and demonstrate the effects of class struggle on the marginalized class through various characters in the novel *Great Expectations*.

Discussion and Analysis

Capitalism is characterized by conflicting interests, where the gain of one participant comes at the expense of others. The workers experience a state of helplessness, exploitation, and alienation. Through the process of estrangement, the elite class exploits the lower class and serves their interests. Workers exert significant effort and contribute to the creation and value of goods, although they do not possess any ownership rights. The laborers lack ownership of their own production, which is therefore appropriated by the capitalist without proper recognition or compensation. This action is the fundamental cause for laborers to experience alienation (Champi, 2012). Similarly, Miss Havisham embodies the attitude of the upper-class, who desires to have all other social strata as their inferiors. She commands, "Estella, bring him down." Provide him with sustenance and allow him to freely explore his surroundings as he consumes his meal. "Go, Pip," (p. 85). During the same conversation, Miss Havisham goes so far as to inform Estella about the specific times when Pip is allowed to eat and the specific activities he is permitted to engage in while he is in their residence. This excessive manipulation of someone's physical actions serves as a clear demonstration of the individual's arrogance and sense of superiority derived from their social standing. Miss Havisham reinforces the inflexible social hierarchy by explicitly stating to Pip and Estella that Pip can never have a romantic connection with Estella. Estella is only

permitted to inflict emotional pain on Pip. She instructs her to "shatter their hearts, my source of pride and optimism, shatter their hearts without showing any mercy!" (p.134). Instead of publicly permitting them to establish any kind of relationship with one another, she immediately establishes a clear boundary. This complete rejection aligns with the notion that individuals from various social classes should not engage in romantic relationships. The disparity and lack of acceptance of movement across social classes is a clear demonstration of the inflexibility of the class hierarchy throughout the early 18th century. Pip's behavior was negatively influenced by the inflexible demeanor of both the hosts of Satis House. He is constantly being instructed to perform some tasks and refrain from others; as a result, he is unable to speak in their presence and obediently follows their orders like an automaton. This is also the underlying cause of his behavior towards Joe, although, in the end, he becomes aware of his actions and feels remorse.

The underlying message of this narrative challenges the prevailing perception of Dickens as a radical social commentator. In contrast, Joe, a modest rural dweller, is shown as being satisfied with his assigned role within the social hierarchy. Pip discovers that he should strive to imitate the way he fills it with excellence and respect, since he cannot find a greater example to follow (Stange,1954). Upon entering Satis House, he immediately forfeits his freedom and identity. Upon encountering a pallid juvenile at Satis House and being instructed to engage in combat with him, he promptly complies with the directive. Despite his awareness of the repugnance of combat, he complies with orders. The individual states, "I have never experienced such a profound level of astonishment in my entire existence, as I did when I delivered the initial strike and witnessed him lying on the ground, gazing up at me with a nose that was bleeding" (p.128). Pip, as stated by him, exemplifies the characteristics of a typical individual from a lower social class who has lost their self-awareness. His readiness to embrace immoral conduct serves as evidence of how the wealthy exploit those from lower social classes. In essence, Pip's pessimistic demeanor was a direct result of his interactions with individuals belonging to the higher echelons of society. Dickens explicitly conveys the idea that money is equivalent to authority. Nevertheless, individuals who have acquired wealth by inheritance, like as Miss Havisham, appear to be less fulfilling as individuals, including Pip himself. Bentley Drummle is an affluent and youthful gentleman. Dickens' portrayal of him is anything but complimentary, with terms such as 'lethargic', 'clumsy', and 'lounge'. Furthermore, it is evident that Drummle is devoid of intellect and his wealth is primarily derived from inheritance rather than diligent effort. Additionally Marx did not overtly endorse gender equality; his work does contain references to the recognition of gender disparity, which he indirectly attributes to capitalism. Marx argues that the institution of the family is intricately linked to capitalist ideology.

He posits that the family unit serves to unite individuals and assign them societal worth in a manner that ultimately favors the capitalists. In a conventional family setting, the woman has responsibility for all domestic tasks, which might be seen as labor, although she does not receive any compensation for her efforts. The man is employed in an outdoor occupation and receives compensation for his physical work. Upon his arrival at home, he is exempt from any supplementary tasks. However, he is provided with care and nourishment to ensure his physical

well-being and energy levels, enabling him to effectively contribute to the capitalist industry on the following day. Thus, the capitalist system exploits the labor of men without compensating women for their employment, resulting in cost savings for capitalists by avoiding payment to female workers (Marx,1932). Consequently, a woman's worth is diminished to her ability to efficiently run a household and attend to her family. Women have a decrease in influence and control when private property is established as a means of producing goods and services. Male ownership of private property and the resulting ability to produce excess wealth leads to a shift in the structure of families, creating a patriarchal system where women, and sometimes slaves, are treated as possessions of the father and husband (Ferguson, 2004). The novel *Great Expectations* portrays the presence of a capitalist framework throughout every household. An exemplary illustration is Mrs. Joe, who adeptly oversees her household. She maintains a high level of cleanliness in the house and accomplishes all of her obligations. Nevertheless, despite fulfilling her obligations, she remains discontent. She harbors bitterness and resentment due to her unfulfilled higher objectives that are constrained by societal limitations. At different times, she contemplates surpassing her job as a blacksmith's spouse, but despite her drive and vigor, societal expectations limit her to the traditional role of a homemaker due to her gender. An additional instance of assessing a woman's worth is demonstrated through Biddy's counsel to Pip. "Do you desire to become a gentleman, either as an act of defiance towards her or in order to win her affection?"

After a momentary silence, Biddy inquired softly... "If the intention is to intentionally upset her, I believe it would be more effective and self-sufficient to disregard her words entirely." "And if the purpose is to win her over, I would assume—but you have superior knowledge—she was not worth the effort of winning over" (p.217). Biddy, although being a woman herself, has assimilated the belief that women are objects or acquisitions to be obtained by males. A woman's value is contingent upon her contributions to a man. If she is unable to provide him with the necessary support to enhance his productivity within the capitalist society, her value diminishes. Miss Havisham's role in the novel is that of a woman who has been failed by the system, making her the opposite of the accepted norm for women. On her wedding day, she was abandoned at the altar, and this event profoundly shapes the remainder of her life. She engages in peculiar behaviors such as donning her wedding dress and freezing the clocks at the exact moment when the tragedy occurred. According to a Marxist feminist viewpoint, a woman's wedding day holds great significance as it marks the day when she is bestowed with a significant social status. She is bestowed with dignity and significance due to her future role in society as a productive contributor through managing household and delivering children (Engels, 2001). An individual who is unable to provide these valuable contributions to society is subjected to social exclusion, similar to the way Miss Havisham has been treated. Thus, even though she possesses riches and enjoys a privileged social status, her worth as a woman is still dictated by the gender stereotypes imposed by capitalism. As she deviates from these beliefs, her life becomes challenging, leading her to adopt a retaliatory mentality in order to seek retribution. Estella bears the burden of Miss Havisham's resentment as she is groomed by her to seek retribution against males. Estella is

brought up in a manner that shapes her into a frigid and aloof woman, capable of causing emotional pain by shattering someone's heart. However, in order for that scenario to occur, she must also conform to societal expectations of her gender role and enter into matrimony. This demonstrates that women in a capitalist culture are unable to achieve any significant accomplishments without entering into marriage. Bidley, in contrast to Estella, is a sagacious young woman who is well-suited to Pip. However, her upbringing has not equipped her with the necessary refinement to manage an upper-class household and assist Pip in his social ascent through her interactions with high society. Consequently, her worth to a middle-class family is diminished when compared to Estella, and Pip is neither romantically attracted to her nor does he marry her. If Miss Havisham had not been born into a capitalist society and ideology, she could have enjoyed a contented existence filled with the advantages of riches, privilege, and companionship. However, her internalization of a woman's worth being determined by her successful marriage prevents her from experiencing happiness and instead transforms her into a vengeful individual who inflicts violence upon others (Marx, 1911).

This research presents a critical analysis and encourages future scholars to investigate the primary factors contributing to the current problem of economic disparity. Throughout the novel, nearly every member of the upper echelon endeavors to socially and economically subjugate the lower-class individual. *Great Expectations* presents a significantly bleaker and more haunted portrayal of a shift between social classes, characterized by feelings of emptiness and a loss of personal identity. Dickens's literary works depict a highly dynamic world where wealth may be acquired and lost with great swiftness. According to Karl Marx (1978), the social classes were becoming more and more separated, with the bourgeoisie and the proletariat emerging as two opposed groups. In contrast, Dickens is captivated by the distinctions among individuals within a specific social class, rather than their similarities. He meticulously depicts the wide range of methods, including subtle distinctions in attire, pronunciation, and conduct, by which individuals express and embody their social class affiliations and ambitions. He is consistently attracted to characters who occupy peripheral positions within social classes, rather than those who hold central positions. These characters are either barely maintaining their status or respectability or experiencing rapid shifts in their social standing within the unpredictable Victorian economy.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this research study has explored the complex connections between social class, gender, and power relations in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, using a Marxist analytical framework. By thoroughly analyzing the plot and characters of the novel and applying theoretical perspectives from Marxist theory, this study has revealed the complex influence of capitalism on gender roles and class arrogance. The analysis demonstrated how capitalism sustains conventional gender standards by assigning women to unpaid domestic work responsibilities inside the household, while simultaneously strengthening class hierarchies through the bourgeoisie's dominion over the means of production. Characters like Mrs. Joe, Bidley, and Miss

Havisham demonstrate how people from various socioeconomic classes navigate and internalize gender stereotypes in a capitalist society. This highlights the intricate relationship between economic systems and social identities. Furthermore, the study clarified how class arrogance worsens social inequities and sustains gender inequity. The study used Marxist theory to illustrate how the bourgeoisie's feeling of entitlement and superiority strengthens oppressive social systems, exacerbating the marginalization of lower-class individuals and perpetuating traditional gender roles. This research study has tried to enhance our comprehension of the lasting impacts of capitalism and their effects on gender equality and social class dynamics in Victorian society by combining literary analysis with theoretical perspectives. This highlights the significance of acknowledging and examining the overlapping influences of social class, gender, and authority in order to tackle structural disparities and work towards a fairer and more impartial society. This research paper functions as a persuasive appeal, pushing readers to actively analyze and participate in the socio-economic influences that form our existence and work towards a future defined by unity, fairness, and societal fairness. By persistently examining and promoting, we can strive to dismantle the oppressive systems upheld by capitalism and cultivate a society that is more inclusive and fairer for everyone.

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