

IRONY AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL CRITICISM IN CHARLES DICKENS' GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Uktamova Gulhayo Utkirovna
1st-year Master's Student at
Asia International University
uktamovagulhayo@gmail.com

Abstract

This thesis examines the multifaceted role of irony as a strategic instrument of social criticism in Charles Dickens's masterpiece, *Great Expectations*. By analyzing the trajectory of the protagonist, Pip, the study explores how Dickens employs situational, verbal, and structural irony to dismantle Victorian illusions regarding social class, wealth, and the moral standing of a "gentleman." The research highlights the ironic contrast between the source of Pip's fortune—the convict Magwitch—and the aristocratic decay of Satis House, suggesting that true nobility resides in moral integrity rather than inherited or acquired status. Furthermore, the paper critiques the systemic biases within the Victorian legal system and the dehumanizing effects of unbridled social ambition. Ultimately, the thesis argues that Dickens's use of irony serves as a profound moral compass, forcing a reappraisal of human values in a materialistic society.

Key words: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Irony, Social Criticism, Victorian Class Structure, Gentlemanly Ideal, Moral Ambition, Pip's Journey, Satire, Nineteenth-century Literature.

Introduction

Charles Dickens, arguably the most prominent social chronicler of the Victorian era, utilized his literary prowess to challenge the structural inequities of 19th-century Britain. Among his late-period works, *Great Expectations* stands as a definitive critique of the socio-economic and moral landscape of the time. The narrative follows Pip, an impoverished orphan, as he navigates the complexities of class transformation. However, the novel's true power lies in its masterful application of irony.

Irony in this context is not merely a stylistic choice; it is a tactical instrument of social criticism. By creating a world where reality consistently contradicts appearances, Dickens exposes the hypocrisy of the Victorian class system, the failure of the legal apparatus, and the corrosive nature of unbridled ambition. This thesis posits that

Dickens uses irony to dismantle the “*Great Expectations*” of a society that values capital over character, and status over soul.

The semantic and structural irony of the “*Gentleman*”

The Victorian social hierarchy was built upon the rigid, almost religious, ideal of the “gentleman”. A gentleman was expected to possess not only wealth but a specific pedigree and a refined set of manners. Dickens systematically deconstructs this ideal through layers of situational irony.

The Magwitch Revelation

Pip’s entire world-view is predicated on the assumption that his wealth comes from Miss Havisham, a woman of aristocratic (though decaying) standing. He believes that his transformation is a process of “cleaning” his past. The irony reaches a shocking crescendo in Chapter 39 when he discovers that his true benefactor is Abel Magwitch, a transported convict.

This revelation serves as Dickens’ most biting critique of the British economy. The “refined” life Pip leads—his fine clothes, his club memberships, and his idle days—is funded by the hard labor and criminal history of a man society considers “*human waste*”. Dickens is suggesting that the wealth of the British upper class is often built on the suffering and labor of the marginalized, an irony that Pip initially finds impossible to swallow. His horror at Magwitch’s return is not a horror of the man himself, but a horror of the realization that his “*gentlemanly*” status is rooted in “lowly” soil.

The juxtaposition: Joe Gargery and Bentley Drummle

To solidify this critique, Dickens juxtaposes Joe Gargery and Bentley Drummle. Joe, the blacksmith, is clumsy, uneducated, and socially invisible. Yet, he is the only character who exhibits consistent selflessness and unconditional love. Bentley Drummle, conversely, is born into the elite, yet he is “idle, proud, niggardly, reserved, and suspicious.” The irony is that Pip is ashamed of Joe—the true moral gentleman—while he strives to be like Drummle’s social circle. Through this, Dickens criticizes a society that has lost the ability to distinguish between surface-level etiquette and genuine human virtue. The “gentleman” is revealed to be a social construct that often masks moral rot.

Institutional irony: The legal system and Newgate prison

Dickens had a lifelong fascination and repulsion regarding the British legal system. In *Great Expectations*, irony is used to show that the law is not a tool for justice, but a tool for maintaining class boundaries.

The parallel of Magwitch and Compeyson

The legal history of Magwitch and Compeyson is a masterpiece of social irony. Both were partners in crime, but when they were caught, Compeyson—a man of education and “*gentlemanly*” appearance—received a light sentence, while Magwitch was treated as a dangerous beast. Dickens uses this to illustrate that the law is performative. If a criminal can speak the language of the elite, the law is lenient. If a criminal is poor and unrefined, the law is ruthless. This irony highlights the systemic bias where the “system” protects its own social class, regardless of the gravity of the crime.

Jaggers and the shadow of the gallows

Mr. Jaggers, Pip’s guardian and a high-profile lawyer, lives a life of constant washing. He compulsively washes his hands with scented soap after dealing with his clients. This is a brilliant use of verbal and physical irony. Jaggers represents the “*clean*” face of the law, but his hands are constantly “*dirty*” from the reality of Newgate Prison. He is the bridge between the criminal underworld and the polite society of London, showing that the two worlds are not separate, but deeply intertwined.

The irony of Satis house: stagnation vs. satisfaction

Satis House, the home of Miss Havisham, is perhaps the most famous setting in the novel. The irony begins with its name: “*Satis*” is Latin for “*enough*.” The local legend says that whoever lived there could want for nothing more.

Decay as social symbol

In reality, Satis House is a monument to death and stagnation. It is a house where time has stopped, where the wedding cake is infested with spiders, and where sunlight is forbidden. Dickens uses this setting to criticize the “old money” aristocracy. Like Miss Havisham, the aristocratic class is portrayed as living in the past, feeding on old grudges, and becoming spiritually bankrupt.

Estella: The manufactured irony

Miss Havisham’s project, Estella, is a weapon of revenge. The irony is that in raising Estella to break men’s hearts, Miss Havisham robs her of her own heart. Estella is beautiful, refined, and aristocratic, but she is “cold” and unable to love. Dickens uses Estella to show how the upper classes treat children as commodities or tools for social warfare rather than human beings. The ultimate irony is that Estella, the prize Pip desires above all else, is actually the daughter of a convict and a murderess—further blurring the lines between the “high” and “low” worlds.

The Irony of the “*Great Expectations*”

The title itself is the central irony of the novel. When Pip receives his “expectations,” he believes they will lead to happiness, fulfillment, and love. Instead, they lead to:

- Moral Blindness: He treats Joe and Bidley with arrogant condescension.
- Financial Ruin: Despite having wealth, he falls into debt by trying to live beyond his means to maintain “gentlemanly” appearances.
- Emotional Emptiness: He realizes that Estella is unattainable and that his social rise has made him miserable.

The structural irony of the novel is that Pip only achieves true “greatness” when he has lost his money. By the end of the book, when he is working as a clerk in Cairo, he is a better man than he ever was as a wealthy idler in London. Dickens uses this to criticize the Victorian obsession with social mobility, suggesting that the climb up the ladder often requires leaving one’s humanity at the bottom.

Social criticism through satire and verbal irony

Dickens also employs minor characters to voice his social criticism through verbal irony and satire.

1. Uncle Pumblechook: He represents the sycophantic middle class. When Pip is poor, Pumblechook treats him like dirt. When Pip gets money, Pumblechook claims to be his “earliest friend”. Dickens uses Pumblechook to mock the hypocrisy of people who worship wealth.
2. The Wemmick Paradox: Wemmick has a “Post Office” mouth and a mechanical personality at the office (Walworth), but is a kind, creative man at home. This irony criticizes the industrial age’s tendency to turn humans into unfeeling machines during work hours.

Conclusion

In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens uses irony to tear away the veil of Victorian respectability. Through the ironic source of Pip’s wealth, the ironic nature of the “gentleman,” and the ironic failure of the legal system, Dickens argues that society is built on a series of illusions.

The novel serves as a profound warning: when a society prioritizes wealth over welfare and status over sincerity, it creates a world of “Great Expectations” that can never be fulfilled. Pip’s journey from the forge to London and back again is a testament to the fact that true nobility is not found in a bank account or a silk hat, but in the loyalty of a friend like Joe and the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own life. Irony, in Dickens’ hands, is the ultimate mirror, forcing Victorian society to see its own distorted reflection.

References

1. Brooks, Peter. (1984). *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2. Dickens, Charles. (2003). *Great Expectations*. Edited by Charlotte Mitchell, Introduction by David Trotter. London: Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1861).
3. Eagleton, Terry. (2005). *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Professional.
4. Gilmour, Robin. (1981). *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*. London and Boston: Allen & Unwin Publishers.
5. Ledger, Sally. (2007). *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Meckier, Jerome. (1987). *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Reevaluation*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
7. Said, Edward W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books / Random House Inc.
8. Walsh, Chris. (2009). *The Literary Greatness of Charles Dickens: Style, Character, and Moral Vision*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.