

**THE ROLE OF IRONY IN REVEALING SOCIAL CLASS IN CHARLES DICKENS'S
GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

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Abstract. *This paper looks at irony in Great Expectations. Charles Dickens uses irony to show the truth about Victorian social class. Pip rises from a poor blacksmith's boy to a rich gentleman. But his rise does not make him a better person. The paper studies key scenes with Pip, Joe Gargery, Estella, Miss Havisham, Magwitch, and Wemmick. These scenes show that money and manners do not equal true worth. The paper also looks at earlier studies on class and satire in Dickens. It ends with the idea that irony is Dickens's main tool for social criticism in the novel.*

Keywords: *irony, social class, Great Expectations, Charles Dickens, Victorian society, satire, gentility.*

Introduction

Victorian England cared deeply about rank and money. Charles Dickens wrote about this world with sharp eyes. In *Great Expectations* (1861), an orphan named Pip gets a chance to become a gentleman. A secret benefactor pays for his new life in London. At first, this looks like a simple success story. A poor boy becomes rich and refined. But Dickens does not let this story stay simple.

He builds irony into almost every part of the plot. This irony shows that wealth and manners do not bring real virtue. This paper argues that irony is the main way Dickens criticizes the class system in the novel. It looks at verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony together.

Literature review

Many scholars have studied class in Dickens's novels. George Orwell wrote a famous essay called "Charles Dickens" in 1940. Orwell says that Dickens attacks bad behavior, not the class system itself. Dickens wants people to be kinder. He does not ask for a new political system. This idea matters for our paper. It shows that irony, not direct argument, is Dickens's main weapon.

Q. D. Leavis and F. R. Leavis wrote *Dickens the Novelist* in 1970. They also see moral seriousness under Dickens's humor. Julian Moynahan wrote an essay in 1960 called "The Hero's Guilt: The Case of *Great Expectations*." He says that Pip feels guilty about his low origins. This guilt is part of the novel's irony. Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society, 1780 to 1950* (1958), places Dickens in a wider group of writers who wrote about class change. Edgar Johnson's biography, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (1952), shows that Dickens himself worried about his class origins. Many readers see this worry in Pip's story too.

Later scholars looked at the novel's structure. Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), shows how the plot's secrets and twists create dramatic irony. J. Hillis Miller's book *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958) makes a similar point. Online study guides also help students see this irony. LitCharts explains the social class theme in the novel. Study.com has a lesson on irony and satire in the text. Both sources show that Pip's rise brings disappointment, not joy. A blog post by Eleanor Webb looks at small scenes of language and class. In one scene, Orlick greets Pip with fake respect. This greeting shows how empty Pip's new status really is.

New academic papers also study this topic.

One paper looks closely at class discrimination in the novel. Another paper uses Julia Kristeva's idea of "Otherness" to explain why readers still like Pip, even when he acts like a snob.

A paper from an Indian journal studies the full range of classes in the novel, from convicts to rich families. It argues that Dickens uses Pip to attack the idea that manners equal virtue. All these studies agree on one point. Irony works at every level of the novel: character, plot, and social message.

Main analysis

The novel's biggest irony is about Pip's secret benefactor. Pip believes that Miss Havisham, a rich old woman, is helping him. He hopes this means he will marry Estella one day. But the truth is very different. The real benefactor is Abel Magwitch, an escaped convict. Young Pip once helped Magwitch out of fear, not kindness. This twist is important. Pip's money and his gentleman's life come from a criminal, not from noble blood. Dickens uses this twist to attack a simple Victorian idea. That idea says that rich people are naturally better than poor people. The novel proves this idea wrong.

Another strong irony is Pip's shame about Joe Gargery. Joe is Pip's brother-in-law and a simple blacksmith. He is honest, kind, and loyal. As Pip becomes a gentleman, he starts to feel embarrassed by Joe's rough manners. This is clear when Joe visits Pip in London. Joe wears stiff, uncomfortable clothes and feels out of place. But the irony works against Pip, not Joe. Joe is the most moral person in the book. Meanwhile, truly "refined" characters like Bentley Drummle and Uncle Pumblechook are cruel or fake. Dickens turns the class order upside down. The blacksmith has more dignity than the gentleman.

Miss Havisham and Estella add another layer of irony. Miss Havisham was left at the altar many years ago. Since then, she has trained Estella to break men's hearts. Estella's cold, perfect manners look like natural elegance. In fact, they come from a painful and cruel upbringing. Pip loves Estella's beauty and grace. But this grace is not a sign of good character. It is a sign of damage. Uncle Pumblechook shows a similar irony. He once bullied young Pip. Once Pip becomes rich, Pumblechook suddenly treats him with great respect. This shows how empty respect based on money can be.

Wemmick, a clerk at Mr. Jaggers's law office, gives us one more clear example. At work, Wemmick is cold and only cares about money and "portable property." At home in Walworth, he is warm and gentle with his old father. This split shows something important about Victorian class life. To succeed in business, people had to hide their true feelings. Real warmth only survived in private life.

Mr. Jaggers, the lawyer who manages Pip's fortune, links the criminal world and polite society together. After meeting his clients, he washes his hands with strong soap. This small habit is ironic. He wants to feel clean and separate from crime. But his whole career, and Pip's whole fortune, depend on that same criminal world. The soap cannot wash away this connection.

The Finches of the Grove club also deserves attention. This is a club for gentlemen, including Pip and his friend Herbert Pocket. The members drink too much and argue over small matters of "honor." Their behavior is often silly. A humble man like Joe would never act this way.

Dickens uses this club to mock the idea that good manners make a true gentleman. Pip's growing debts in this club move him further from real security, not closer to it.

Money itself becomes ironic in the novel.

Pip believes that money will solve all his problems and win Estella's love. But money never brings the happiness he expects. Miss Havisham is very rich, yet she lives a sad, frozen life in her decaying house, Satis House. The name "Satis" comes from a Latin word meaning "enough." Yet nothing about her life feels like enough. Magwitch works hard for years to make Pip rich. In the end, his money cannot save him from the law or from illness. Dickens uses these examples to question the belief that money brings status and happiness together.

Discussion of results

All these examples of irony work together. They break the link between social class and good character. Dickens does not call for a revolution. As Orwell notes, his criticism stays moral, not political. But irony still gives strong social criticism. Readers feel Pip's disappointment with him. They learn, along with Pip, that wealth and manners often hide the truth about a person. The convict is kinder than the gentleman. The blacksmith has more honor than the fine lady's admirer.

The perfect lady's grace hides deep pain. The loyal clerk must split his heart in two just to survive. Through these reversals, Dickens makes readers question class values without stating his opinion directly.

This method also explains why the story feels personal, not preachy. Pip tells his own story as an older, wiser man. He can look back and judge his younger self's mistakes. This distance lets Dickens criticize class values from the inside. The reader watches a boy who once believed in gentility completely, and now sees how wrong that belief was.

Conclusion

Irony in *Great Expectations* is not just a clever style. It is Dickens's main tool for questioning Victorian class values. The secret truth about Magwitch, Joe's quiet dignity, Estella's manufactured perfection, Pumblechook's fake respect, and Wemmick's split life all work together.

They build a strong picture of class as a kind of social lie. In Dickens's moral view, true gentility has nothing to do with money or manners. It comes from loyalty, humility, and kindness.

Irony lets Dickens tell an entertaining story of growth that is, underneath, a strong attack on social pretense.

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