

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## **Pip and the Paradox of Success: A Study of Social Aspiration in Great Expectations**

Sk. Shoaib Ahmed <sup>a</sup> Nafisa Tabassum <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, International Standard University

<sup>b</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, International Standard University

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper tries to look into the ambivalence of success in the Victorian era through diverse circumstances during the mid-19th century, due to its expansion in the field of the Industrial Revolution. It deals with the dilemma of contemporary society and how the urge for success became a trauma, notably for the protagonist Pip. He undergoes great changes, directing and learning to deal with a fixed landscape. This article also pays attention to minor incidents that relate to the confusion of fantasy. It evaluates the vulnerability that revolutionary circumstances create for people, as they keep running after this designated image of success, just to be left mentally drained and dreadful. As Pip exclaims in his painful realization: "All done out of love, poor love!" (Volume 3, Chapter 11), a line that captures the emotional disillusionment hidden beneath his aspirations. Nevertheless, it is expected to eradicate the misconceptions of gaining affluence during the Industrial Revolution and how this has become a hidden trauma for contemporary society. It tries to examine the context of the protagonist by shedding light on the complex circumstances he was experiencing throughout the novel. By adopting the insights of different critics, the study seeks to lay out a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics surrounding success in the Victorian era. Ultimately, the main outcome of this research is to dispel misconceptions surrounding the acquisition of wealth and power during the Industrial Revolution and to illuminate how this pursuit carries out a sense of anxiety within contemporary society. With the meticulous analysis of character experiences and societal norms, this paper tries to contribute to a nuanced exploration of success and its consequences during a pivotal historical period.

### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received: March 07, 2025

1st Revision: May 12, 2025

2nd Revision: May 22, 2025

3rd Revision: June 18, 2025

Accepted: January 15, 2025

Online Publication: January, 2026

### **KEYWORDS**

Victorian Era, Pip, Success, Dilemma, Industrial Revolution, Expectation.

### **Introduction**

*Great Expectations* (published in 1861) is a masterful portrayal of the Victorian era, where the ideals of prosperity, progress and personal improvement are deeply rooted with illusions and trauma. The protagonist Pip and others around him are trapped in this rigid pursuit of Victorian fantasy, a concept shaped by the

contemporary society to grapple with illusory success. The Industrial Revolution enhanced economic growth and created new opportunities for individuals to achieve higher social and financial status. As Pip painfully reflects: “As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me.” (Volume 2, Chapter 14) This expresses Pip’s growing awareness of the emotional cost of his sudden rise. When Pip was younger, Joe’s humble and kind nature made Pip want to be a blacksmith like him. However, Pip’s ambiguity starts when he witnesses the luxurious life of the rich people, challenging his previous notions of identity and worth. Upon seeing Stella’s negligence towards him, Pip got a reality check. He confesses: ‘I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too.’ (Volume 1, Chapter 8). According to the judgment of that timeline, Joe was nothing but a hardworking peasant and people like Miss Havisham were the symbol of success. A well-known quote of that time was “The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly and ordered their state”. That’s how Pip started battling with ambitions to reach a certain level that the world cherishes. The very title of the book indicates the confidence of a conscious genius. Charles Dickens masterfully illustrates the spectrum of pre-set goals crafted by the characters that ultimately led to the diversity of success and how it becomes the ultimate curse for the emerging generations. This era placed a vivid emphasis on self-improvement, hard work, moral dignity, and the pursuit of knowledge. Pip’s gradual development and emphasis on education reflected a broader social belief that personal betterment is not only attainable but also essential for the progress of life. The protagonist has cherished those untouchable dreams and sadly, he lost everything within a whisker of time. The metamorphosis emphasizes the novel’s profound exploration of the consequences of ambition. Then again, as every action has some opposite reactions, this novel shows the power of self-confidence and dedication as the motto of a good outcome, as Pip at last got his love in the form of Estella. In this, Dickens conveys the idea that even with the existence of adversity, one can find solace and happiness through dedication and commitment. The dilemma of success made Victorian society

relentless and traumatized. Among the most tragic figures shaped by Victorian ideals is Miss Havisham, whose entire existence is frozen in time due to betrayal. Though often viewed as the antagonist, she represents the damage inflicted by emotional trauma and societal obsession with appearances. Her manipulation of Estella and Pip stems not from cruelty alone, but from her own ruin—betrayed by Compeyson, a man driven by greed and class ambition.

The analysis shows that every time the urge to be successful haunts the character's day-to-day life. The stark economic disparities and rough working environment highlighted the darker side of industrialization. The assertion is done with a meticulous examination of the chapters, revealing the connection between the path to success and the hurdles of trauma. A notable example of this theme is easily traceable in Pip, whose aspiration to become a role model, accumulate wealth, and embody the epitome of a flawless Victorian persona ultimately proves to be a tragic endeavor. The novel captures the essence of a society where the pursuit of success is an ever-present phenomenon, extracting a heavy toll on those who dare to chase this elusive dream. The main protagonist is the mentionable character as he lost everything while chasing the stigma of success. The exploration underscores the enduring relevance of the novel's themes, which serve as a testament to its literary merit and thought-provoking narrative. This novel remains a timeless exploration of the human condition, inviting readers to contemplate the diverse nature of ambition, the imbalances created through the by-product of success, and the enduring power of perseverance in the face of adversity. Symbolically, these scenes can be termed as the Renaissance of the American dream in Europe.

### **Literature Review:**

David Hennessey (2004), in his article, examined the intense guilt felt by the protagonist Pip due to the burden of fulfilling the ideals of being a gentleman. It created the development of a moral sensibility in Pip that results from the benevolent treatment of others. The expectations placed on Pip by the society that hoped for his success ultimately became a double-edged sword. In a sense, they

drove him to excel in his newly acquired role model status. Unfortunately, on the other hand, they forced him to grapple with the moral implications of his actions, potentially leading to conflicts between personal ambition and the values instilled by his guilt-driven morality. As Pip ascends the social ladder, the benevolence that he encounters, coupled with fantasy, creates a complex scenario that acts as a source of dilemma for the protagonist.

Karl P. Wentersdorf (1966), in his article, mentioned the term Materialistic Expectations regarding success, which had a demoralizing effect on Pip from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, he narrated that the protagonist was juxtaposed and contrasted due to numerous characters who lit up Pip's personality. Unfortunately, he swam away to the path of nothingness to capitalize on success. The desire to reach the summit often leads to a sense of being lost, which has been vividly portrayed in Pip's characteristics.

Prominent critics Judith and Cohan (1981), in their article, expressed Pip as the most psychologically complex of Charles Dickens' heroes. They added that Pip had so many drawbacks and weaknesses; even after that he eventually became conscious and outgrew and it created a psychological disturbance in him regarding dreams and fantasies that created a dilemma in him for chasing his destinations in *Great Expectations*. My research also focuses on the ambivalence and diversity of success in Pip, which has always been his main enemy. It aims to sort out Pip's psychological battles, revealing how Dickens intertwines a rich narrative of a hero, who is facing both internal and external dilemmas in his quest for self-realization.

In contemporary criticism by Jill Kriegel, Pip's disregard towards other people's feelings was attributed to the busy city life where people seemed to have no time for feelings; rather, they were obsessed with power and wealth. Shaped by early experiences of poverty and constant reminders of his lower status, he becomes determined to secure a better life. However, in his pursuit of stability, he unintentionally distances himself from his actual roots-Joe and Biddy.

David Holbrook, in his article, reflected on the predicament of love, the urge to be a gentleman, and sophistication in every circumstance of life. Furthermore, he

was surprised by Dickens' attitude towards contemporary women in *Great Expectations* as being imprisoned, peevish, and sometimes murderous. However, he has articulated many aspects but the diversity of success was not mentioned in this article; (why it was the driving force for all the desires and how the final destination of success is turning out to be an illusion in disguise). This research focuses on the intricate nature of success that has been overlooked by Holbrook to quite an extent. The analysis lacks a comprehensive understanding of the characters' motivations in the novel.

Regarding the facts of this research, the ambivalence and diversity of success have been missing in a broader sense. This paper is based on discourse analysis of Pip and other major characters concerning the dilemma of success and how this has acted as a villain in the path of their happiness and contentment of that contemporary society portrayed by Charles Dickens. To formulate that, firstly, this study tries to articulate how Victorian society has always had an urge for success and sophistication. However, that turns out to be their hidden trauma and ambivalence in the path of contentment in life. They were escaping every moment just to get a bit more success and being that so-called perfect person. Secondly, this study has gone through different psychological and contemporary articles to examine how the characters in the novel undergo the diversity of success and how it unsettled them in every circumstance.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens portrays a rich setting of the Victorian era with psychological depth and social commentary. This article deals with insightful ways to analyze Psychoanalytic Theory and Marxist Theory.

Psychoanalytic Theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, focuses on the unconscious mind and its influence on human behavior. According to this theory, characters in literature often personify hidden desires, fears, and conflicts that mirror the unconscious struggles in them. In *Great Expectations*, the protagonist's journey from a struggling orphan to a gentleman is captivated with psychological tension and ambiguity. His obsession with maintaining status can be seen as a reflection

of his unconscious desire for acceptance and love, particularly from Estella, whom he idealizes. Pip's internal conflict between his genuine affection for his brother-in-law Joe, and his dissatisfaction over Joe's lower social status underlines the Freudian struggle between the id (instinctual desires) and the superego (moral standards imposed by society).

On the other hand, Marxist Theory, coined by Karl Marx, examines literature through the lens of class struggle and economic power. It showcases how social class and material conditions shape individuals' lives and relationships. In *Great Expectations*, slight contrasts between the rich and the poor are evident throughout the novel. Pip's rise in social status, through an anonymous benefactor (Magwich), exposes the corrupting influence of wealth and the rigid class structure of Victorian society. The novel critiques the so-called success as a mere illusion that often leads to alienation and moral decay.

By combining and reviewing these two theories, we can see how *Great Expectations* not only explores the inner workings of its characters' minds but also critiques the social and economic systems that shape their lives. Pip's psychological struggles are the by-product of his social aspirations, and the novel's portrayal of class differences reveals the deep connections between individual psychology and its connectivity to broader social phenomena.

### **Objectives of the study:**

This article evaluates the fluctuation of feelings toward success by examining how diverse circumstances, shaped by the Industrial Revolution, influenced the viewpoints and preferences of the Victorian era. The primary objective of this study is to explore the ambivalence of success as portrayed in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. It aims to analyze how Pip's journey toward social mobility and personal achievement is marked by conflicting emotions such as pride, guilt, alienation, and disillusionment. The study also seeks to examine the socio-economic factors of Victorian England that shape the concept of success and to interpret Dickens's critique of materialistic aspirations. Furthermore, it endeavors to investigate the psychological impact of success on individual identity and

morality, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between ambition, societal expectations, and personal fulfillment in nineteenth-century English literature. Qualitative methods have been utilized, including direct observations and literary criticism, to formulate a comprehensive analysis of the complex circumstances the characters had to navigate in their quest for success. We also portray the societal dynamics of the Victorian era, illustrating how individuals chased a designated image of success, contributing to mental exhaustion and hidden traumas.

### **Methodology of the study:**

This study follows a qualitative, analytical approach, focusing on close textual analysis of *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. It examines the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic concerns related to the concept of success. Relevant critical theories, including psychoanalytic and Marxist perspectives, are applied to deepen the analysis of Pip's psychological struggles and the socio-economic influences of Victorian society. Secondary sources such as scholarly articles, critical essays, and historical texts on Victorian England are also reviewed to provide contextual support. The study prioritizes an interpretative method, aiming to uncover the nuanced portrayal of success and its inherent contradictions within the text. By exploring these dimensions, the study offers a comprehensive examination of success's ambivalence, emphasizing its psychological, social and moral consequences.

### **Study Findings:**

The findings of this paper reveal the complex and often destructive nature of success as portrayed in the novel. *Great Expectations*, set during the Industrial Revolution, highlights how societal pressures and the pursuit of affluence lead to inner turmoil, particularly for the protagonist, Pip. Pip's ambition to rise in social status and gain Estella's approval becomes a source of deep emotional trauma, illustrating how the relentless drive for success can snatch personal happiness and identity.

The Industrial Revolution had a big role to play in generating unavoidable pressures, creating new social hierarchies and opportunities often resulting in greater economic disparity. The novel critiques the Victorian obsession with success, depicting it as an illusion that fails to bring genuine fulfillment. Characters who achieve material wealth, such as Miss Havisham and Estella, are not necessarily happier; they often suffer from greater dissatisfaction and regret. This research also emphasizes the symbolic representation of characters who embody the darker side of Victorian ideals. Miss Havisham, for instance, manipulates Estella and Pip, driven by her twisted notion of success rooted in bitterness and revenge. Estella represents the unattainable ideal that fuels Pip's futile pursuit, ultimately leading to his disillusionment.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the themes of *Great Expectations* remain relevant today, reflecting modern societal pressures where the quest for success often leads to mental and emotional exhaustion. The novel serves as a cautionary tale, advocating for a reevaluation of success that prioritizes personal integrity, humility, and genuine happiness over societal approval. In doing so, it invites readers to contemplate the true cost of ambition and the illusory nature of success in both the Victorian era and contemporary society.

### **Discussion:**

In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens presents a complicated portrayal of success, exploring its contradictions and the emotional ambivalence it often brings. Through the protagonist Pip, the author examines that success, while desirable, is not always fulfilling or morally rewarding. The novel interrogates the traditional Victorian notion that wealth and social status are the ultimate measures of success, instead emphasizing personal empathy, integrity, and emotional growth.

Pip's journey from a humble blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman in London is marked by his longing to rise above his social class. This aspiration, fueled by his infatuation with Estella and the patronage he mistakenly attributes to Miss Havisham, leads him to associate success solely with power and wealth. However,

as Pip attains this long-desired status, he starts to feel a growing sense of emptiness. His alienation from Joe and Biddy, the very people who represent unconditional love and loyalty, highlights the personal cost of his social changes. Dickens masterfully constructs Pip's success as both a blessing and a burden. While gaining financial support and education, he simultaneously loses touch with his roots and sense of self. The revelation that his benefactor is not the aristocratic Miss Havisham but the convict Magwitch shatters his illusions of gentility. This moment is pivotal, exposing the moral ambiguity of success when it is based on false assumptions and selfish motives.

In *Great Expectations*, the author masterfully explores various aspects of Victorian society while capturing the ambiguity of societal norms and values of his time. Class structure plays a vital role as it is a prominent theme that impacts heavily on individuals. The focal point, Pip, experiences a transformative journey from a struggling boy to a gentleman. Through Pip's involvements, Dickens portrays the rigidity of social classes, exceeding the demand for success and shedding light on the superficial nature of societal judgments. Another mentionable character (Joe), Pip's humble brother-in-law, represents the simplicity and integrity of the so-called struggling class, emphasizing Dickens' criticism of the false vanity embedded in Victorian society.

In addition, Charles Dickens utilizes characters like Miss Havisham and Estella to showcase the obsession with wealth and status. Miss Havisham, stuck in memories, nurturing a grudge on humanity and consumed by the aftershocks of a broken marriage, becomes a symbolic figure representing the consequences of a society devoted to materialism. Estella's actions embody the dehumanizing effects of a society that values appearances over genuine human connections. Dickens emphasizes the role of women in Victorian society through characters like Mrs. Joe and Biddy. Mrs. Joe's domineering nature of avoiding anything with anger reflects the limitations placed on women, while Biddy, though humble, represents vivid potential choked by societal expectations. The ambiguity of success was so vicious that Dickens challenged the patriarchal norms of his time by presenting diverse female characters with unique strengths and weaknesses who kept on

getting neglected due to the contemporary stiff social class. This novel serves as a powerful commentary on Victorian society. Dickens' exploration of class disparities, materialism, moral decay, and gender roles provides readers with a multifaceted critique of the societal norms and fantasy of success prevailing in his era. The novel was immediately successful upon its publication and George Bernard Shaw notably hailed it as Dickens's "most compactly perfect book".

### **Conclusion:**

Considering the personal and ideological struggles each character has endured, it becomes clear that the primary antagonist in *Great Expectations* is the stereotypical societal ideology of success, a perspective that victimizes every character in the novel. The protagonist, Pip got entangled from a very early age among all these societal expectations, which blocked his other instincts to justify his later actions with more clarity even to himself. He, therefore, becomes the round character in the novel who undergoes major character development throughout the novel. His aim was very clear from the beginning (to be worthy of Stella). As maturity struck, he realized he would have to abide by the vision of a successful gentleman to achieve that. In his pursuit, because of his encounters and favors of people like Magwitch, Joe, and Herbert Pocket, he restored his faith in goodness. Pip's ambiguous idea of success consistently overshadowed what truly mattered, which is why he develops into such a rich and thought-provoking character. Upon stumbling upon fortune and the way people's treatment changed around him, any young boy of that age was bound to become fascinated by that. Later in the novel, he stumbled upon the reality that the money that brought him visionary success was not from a chivalrous source; he found himself doubting his reality, and later in the novel, he evolved as a better man. During the course of the novel, Pip comes to realize that his great expectations –social standing and wealth–are less important than loyalty and compassion.

**Work Cited:**

- Dickens, C. (1861, September). Great expectations. *The Atlantic Monthly*.
- Gold, J. (1969). Charles Dickens' and today's reader. *The English Journal*, 58(2), 205–211.
- Hennessee, D. (2004). Gentlemanly guilt and masochistic fantasy in *Great Expectations*. Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania.
- Katz, B. P. (2018, November 6). Pip and me: A journey into the world of *Great Expectations*. *The New York Times*.
- Nath, A. (n.d.). *Great Expectations: Why Dickens' colourful characters easily lend themselves to adaptations*. *The Hindu*.
- Penna, C. (2007, December 4). The realistic novel. *British Literature 1660 to the Present*. University of Delaware Online.
- Wentersdorf, K. (1966). *Mirror images in Great Expectations*. University of California Press.
- Weissman, J., & Cohan, S. (1981). Pip's arrested development. *American Imago*, 38(2), 163–183.