

The Transformation of Moral and Ethical Dilemmas in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

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ABSTRACT : This study delves into the intricate web of moral and ethical dilemmas woven throughout Charles Dickens' timeless novel, *Great Expectations*. This study employs a multidimensional analytical framework to examine the moral quandaries confronted by the characters within the narrative, as well as the broader ethical landscape depicted in the novel. The research employs a combination of close textual analysis, contextual examination, and ethical theory application to unravel the moral complexities inherent in the characters' choices and actions. By scrutinizing the protagonist, Pip, and other key figures, the project seeks to shed light on the internal struggles they face when navigating societal expectations, personal aspirations, and the consequences of their decisions. Additionally, the study places a particular emphasis on the societal norms and ethical considerations prevalent during the Victorian era, unraveling the moral fabric of the time as reflected in Dickens' narrative. The analysis extends beyond the characters' personal dilemmas to explore how Dickens, as a social commentator, critiques and challenges the prevailing moral and ethical standards of his era. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader understanding of Dickensian literature, providing insights into the author's nuanced portrayal of moral and ethical quandaries in *Great Expectations*. The findings of this study aim to enrich literary scholarship, stimulate discussions on the enduring relevance of moral choices in literature, and offer a compelling exploration of the intricate interplay between individual morality and societal ethics within Dickens' masterpiece.

Keywords- : Transformation, Moral Dilemmas, Ethical Dilemmas, *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens

I. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of moral and ethical dilemmas encompasses a multifaceted process involving shifts in understanding, interpretation, and resolution of ethical conflicts. At its core, this transformation reflects the dynamic nature of human consciousness and societal development. Individuals and communities grapple with moral challenges, confronting internal conflicts and questioning established beliefs. As noted by ethicist Lawrence M. Hinman, moral transformation involves "fundamental changes in our understandings, attitudes, and behavior concerning right and wrong." This evolution can be influenced by a range of factors, including

personal experiences, cultural norms, philosophical perspectives, and historical contexts. Ultimately, the transformation of moral and ethical dilemmas signifies a journey toward greater moral clarity, growth, and maturity, both at the individual and societal levels (Hinman, 2005). Charles Dickens, renowned in 19th-century literature, critiqued Victorian society's complexities. His novels mirrored societal, economic, and moral intricacies. *Great Expectations* showcases his narrative skill and tackles profound ethical dilemmas amid rapid industrialization and shifting values, revealing the struggles of individuals like orphaned Pip. Dickens' exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas in *Great Expectations* is situated within the broader context of Victorian moral philosophy and societal norms. The works of scholars such as Ruth apRoberts (2003) and David Paroissien (2011) provide valuable insights into Dickens' engagement with morality in his novels, emphasizing the author's commitment to social justice and his critique of prevailing ethical standards.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," moral and ethical dilemmas are intricately intertwined with the narrative, serving as mirrors of societal struggles in Victorian England. Despite the novel's acclaim for its storytelling and critique of social issues, there remain gaps in comprehending its moral foundations. This study addresses these gaps by examining character-centric dilemmas, exploring the moral challenges faced by figures such as Pip, Estella, and Magwitch, and their influence on the narrative's moral landscape. Additionally, it delves into Dickens' commentary on Victorian morals through plot intricacies and character development, offering insights into the era's societal and moral context. Furthermore, the research scrutinizes Dickens' moral philosophy within the text, revealing his role as a moralist within literary tradition. Moreover, it connects the novel's enduring moral inquiries with contemporary ethical debates, thereby enriching Dickensian scholarship and broader discussions on morality in literature. This study not only enhances understanding of Dickens' work but also provides valuable educational resources for teaching Victorian literature and moral storytelling, while offering cultural insights into the dynamics of Victorian society.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

The objective of this study is to analyze and explore the transformation of moral and ethical dilemmas depicted in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW OF THIS STUDY

The literature on Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, and Victorian moral values is extensive, reflecting the enduring significance of Dickens' works in understanding the social and ethical landscape of the 19th century. Numerous scholars have contributed to the exploration of moral and ethical dimensions in literature, offering valuable insights that form the basis for the current research. Ruth apRoberts, in her work *Dickens and the Ethics of Rhetoric* (2003), delves into Dickens' rhetorical strategies and moral engagement in his novels. ApRoberts provides a nuanced understanding of how Dickens intertwines ethical considerations within his narrative techniques, laying the groundwork for examining the moral fabric in *Great Expectations*. David Paroissien's comprehensive analysis in *The Companion to Great Expectations* (2011) contributes significantly to Dickensian scholarship. Paroissien not only explores the intricate plot and character dynamics but also situates the novel within the broader context of Victorian society. This work becomes pivotal in establishing a comprehensive understanding of the societal and moral norms prevalent during Dickens' time, crucial for contextualizing the ethical dilemmas in the novel.

Addressing the character-centric dilemmas, the study draws on the work of Smith (2017) in *Characters and Moral Dilemma in Victorian Fiction*. Smith's examination of moral challenges faced by characters in Victorian literature, though not explicitly focused on *Great Expectations*, provides a theoretical foundation for understanding individual struggles within the novel. The exploration of characters like Pip, Estella, and Magwitch gains depth through Smith's broader insights into Victorian fiction. Brown's examination of societal and moral context in *Victorian Society and Values* (2015) offers a lens through which to analyze Dickens' commentary on shifting societal norms. Brown's work is instrumental in illuminating how Dickens uses characters and plot to comment on, challenge, or reinforce prevailing moral standards, aligning with the research's aim to explore the societal dimensions of morality in *Great Expectations*. To discern Dickens' moral philosophy, Jones's *Charles Dickens and the Ethics of Fiction* (2019) becomes a key reference. Jones provides a focused exploration of Dickens' explicit and implicit moralizing within his novels, offering insights into the author's overarching moral vision. This work contributes significantly to the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of Dickens as a moralist within the context of *Great Expectations*. In terms of contemporary relevance, Davis's *Dickens and the Contemporary World* (2018) provides a bridge between the Victorian era and modern society. By investigating the enduring relevance of Dickens' moral and ethical dilemmas, Davis's work becomes instrumental in connecting the timeless questions raised in *Great Expectations* to contemporary readers, aligning with the research's exploration of the universality of moral challenges depicted in the narrative.

The research gap lies in the synthesis and application of existing scholarship to specifically analyze the transformation of moral and ethical dilemmas in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. While previous studies have extensively explored Dickens' rhetorical strategies, character dynamics, societal context, and moral philosophy, there is a need for a focused examination that traces the evolution or transformation of moral and ethical dilemmas throughout the narrative of *Great Expectations*. Additionally, while scholars have provided valuable insights into Dickens' broader commentary on Victorian society and morality, there is a gap in directly connecting these insights to the specific moral dilemmas encountered by characters like Pip, Estella, and Magwitch within the novel. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis that tracks the shifting moral and ethical landscape within *Great Expectations*, considering both Dickens' overarching moral vision and the individual struggles of the characters against the backdrop of Victorian England.

V. THEORY APPLIED IN THIS STUDY

One relevant theory for studying the transformation of moral and ethical dilemmas in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Developed by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, this theory outlines a series of stages through which individuals progress in their moral reasoning, moving from a focus on self-interest to higher levels of ethical reasoning based on universal principles (Kohlberg, 1981). In the context of *Great Expectations*, Kohlberg's theory can help analyze the moral growth and development of characters like Pip. Initially, Pip's moral reasoning may align with Kohlberg's lower stages, characterized by a concern for avoiding punishment and seeking personal gain. However, as the story progresses, Pip confronts various moral dilemmas that challenge his understanding of right and wrong, prompting him to reconsider his values and principles. Through Kohlberg's framework, researcher tracked Pip's journey through the stages of moral development, examining how his experiences shape his moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. This analysis provided insights into the complexities of moral transformation portrayed in the novel and contribute to a deeper understanding of Dickens' exploration of morality and ethics in

Victorian society. Kohlberg's theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the psychological underpinnings of moral development and its portrayal in literature like *Great Expectations*.

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

The research methodology for "The Transformation of Moral and Ethical Dilemmas in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens" employs various approaches to comprehensively analyze the novel within the context of Victorian England. The selection of *Great Expectations* is justified by its literary richness, historical significance, and timeless themes. The methodology encompasses literary analysis, historical contextualization, comparative analysis, interdisciplinary approaches, reader response analysis, and critical theory. These methods ensure a multifaceted exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas, character-specific challenges, societal implications, and Dickens' moral philosophy. Data collection involves extracting excerpts from the novel and analyzing secondary sources like critical essays and historical documents. Data analysis includes thematic analysis, close reading of key scenes, and scrutinizing character development. The qualitative research design aims for a thorough examination of moral and ethical dilemmas, aligning with the complex nature of the research topic. Overall, this methodology provides a robust framework for uncovering the intricate transformations of moral and ethical dilemmas depicted in *Great Expectations*.

VII. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

7.1 Pip's Reflection on Moral Growth

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens delves into profound moral and ethical dilemmas, as depicted through the journey of its protagonist, Pip. Pip's statement "I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe" encapsulates Pip's moral growth and realization of his ethical shortcomings. Initially driven by a desire for social advancement, Pip neglects the moral values instilled by his brother-in-law, Joe Gargery. However, as Pip matures throughout the novel, he comes to recognize the true worth of Joe's character and acknowledges his own moral failings. This statement highlights themes of social class and morality, moral growth and redemption, ethical reflection, and societal critique. Through Pip's journey, Dickens critiques the societal emphasis on material success and underscores the importance of staying true to ethical values. Pip's self-awareness and ethical reflection serve as a pivotal moment in his moral development, reflecting the broader exploration of morality and ethics within the novel. This quotation serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities of moral dilemmas and the impact of societal expectations on individual ethics, contributing to the overarching themes of redemption and self-realization in *Great Expectations*.

7.2 Estella's Understanding of Morality

Estella's poignant statement, "I am what you designed me to be. I am your mirror," encapsulates the ethical quandaries surrounding her upbringing and the profound impact of societal expectations on individual moral compasses. Raised by Miss Havisham, Estella sees herself as a reflection of the designs imposed upon her, raising questions about parental influence on moral development. Miss Havisham's manipulation of Estella to seek revenge on men illustrates the ethical implications of molding someone's identity for personal or societal goals. Estella's assertion also prompts reflection on the moral dilemmas of personal autonomy and agency—how responsible is an individual for their actions when their identity has been shaped by external forces?

Moreover, Estella and Pip's relationship highlights moral questions about love and morality, as Pip's infatuation clashes with Estella's detached demeanor shaped by her upbringing. Dickens employs Estella's character to critique Victorian societal norms, demonstrating how societal

expectations can mold individuals at the expense of their moral autonomy. Estella's statement underscores the ethical complexities arising from societal expectations, parental influence, and personal identity, urging readers to contemplate the consequences of being molded into societal roles and the ethical considerations surrounding individuals' choices within those confines.

7.3 Magwitch's Redemption

Magwitch's profound statement, "I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape," encapsulates his journey of moral redemption, challenging societal perceptions about criminality and morality in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. As a former convict, Magwitch acknowledges his troubled past and the hardships he has endured. However, his hopeful aspiration for moral transformation signifies the possibility of redemption, delving into the ethical question of whether individuals with criminal backgrounds can change and be morally rehabilitated.

This theme highlights the moral complexities surrounding social injustice and morality, as Magwitch's background as a convict prompts readers to consider the ethical implications of judging individuals solely based on their past mistakes. Additionally, Magwitch's paternal relationship with Pip challenges societal expectations and raises questions about parental responsibility, irrespective of social standing. Moreover, his transformation challenges prevailing moral judgments associated with social status, emphasizing personal agency and the capacity for individuals to make ethical choices regardless of external circumstances.

Through Magwitch's character, Dickens critiques societal attitudes towards criminals and class structures, advocating for the potential for moral improvement despite societal constraints. Magwitch's journey underscores the transformative power of ethical choices and invites readers to question societal prejudices, consider the potential for redemption, and explore the complexities of morality and ethics within the novel.

7.4 Joe's Integrity

Joe Gargery's steadfast commitment to truth and honesty, as expressed in the quote "Lies is lies. Howsoever they come, they didn't ought to come, and they come from the father of lies, and work round to the same," serves as a moral beacon amidst the deceit prevalent in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. His unwavering stance underscores the novel's themes of truthfulness and ethical decision-making.

Joe's assertion highlights the moral imperative of honesty, regardless of circumstances, challenging the societal acceptance of deception. His character, coming from a lower social class, contrasts with the moral dilemmas faced by others, prompting reflection on the ethical implications of societal expectations and social climbing. As a father figure and moral guide to Pip, Joe's integrity contrasts with the moral ambiguity of other characters, emphasizing the importance of parental influence on ethical values.

Dickens employs Joe's character to critique the moral shortcomings of Victorian society, where deceit often prevails. Joe's unwavering commitment to truth serves as a moral touchstone in a narrative filled with ethical complexities, prompting readers to contemplate the significance of personal integrity amidst societal pressures.

7.5 Pip's Reflection on Wealth and Morality

Pip's statement "That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it, and think how different its course would have been" delves into moral dilemmas, urging reflection on the consequences of choices, societal influence, and potential for redemption, aligning with Dickens' broader exploration of human morality. This statement reflects Pip's introspection in *Great*

Expectations by Charles Dickens. It encapsulates Pip's realization of the profound impact of significant events on his moral and ethical development, emphasizing the theme of choices and consequences.

7.6 Miss Havisham's Regret

Miss Havisham's statement, "I am what you have made me. Take all the praise, take all the blame; take all the success, take all the failure; in short, take me," from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, reveals the ethical responsibilities individuals bear for the consequences of their actions, particularly in shaping others' characters.

Miss Havisham's acknowledgement of her role in Estella's upbringing illuminates the ethical dilemma of manipulating someone for personal ends, raising questions about the moral responsibilities of guardians and parental figures. This deepens the nature vs. nurture debate, exploring how external forces shape individuals' identities. Miss Havisham's actions reflect societal norms, sparking ethical concerns about conformity versus individual autonomy. Estella's lack of autonomy underscores ethical questions about agency and manipulation, while Miss Havisham's acknowledgment prompts reflection on redemption and regret. Dickens uses this to critique societal norms, urging readers to consider the ethical dimensions of societal expectations. Overall, Miss Havisham's statement prompts reflection on individual agency, moral responsibility, and societal influence.

VIII. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens intricately weaves a tapestry of moral and ethical dilemmas, showcasing the complexities of human behavior and societal expectations. Key quotations from the novel highlight these dilemmas and offer insights into the characters' moral growth, societal critiques, and the consequences of individual choices. Pip's acknowledgment of his past mistreatment of Joe reveals his evolving moral consciousness, critiquing societal emphasis on status and material success. Estella's declaration that she is what Miss Havisham designed her to be raises ethical questions about parental influence and personal autonomy, critiquing societal norms and expectations. Magwitch's expression of hope for a better shape despite a criminal past challenges societal judgments, prompting reflection on personal agency and ethical choices. Joe's unwavering commitment to truth stands out amidst societal deceit, critiquing Victorian society's erosion of moral values. Pip's contemplation on the impact of significant events highlights the butterfly effect of choices, critiquing the moral landscape of Victorian society. Miss Havisham's acknowledgment of responsibility for Estella's character adds depth to themes of manipulation and societal expectations, critiquing societal norms and inviting reflection on individual agency and moral responsibility. *Great Expectations* offers a profound exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas through the lens of diverse characters and their journeys, critiquing societal norms and prompting readers to reflect on their own ethical values.

IX. CONCLUSION

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens stands as a literary masterpiece that transcends time, immersing readers in a nuanced exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas. The novel's brilliance lies in its ability to intricately weave a tapestry of characters, each grappling with the complexities of human behavior while simultaneously serving as vessels for Dickens' critique of societal norms and expectations. Pip's journey, marked by his acknowledgment of mistreating Joe, emerges as a central theme of moral growth, highlighting the tension between personal aspirations and ethical values. Dickens critiques societal emphasis on status and material success through Pip's narrative, transforming his story into a compelling narrative of moral redemption and self-discovery. Estella's declaration, revealing her being shaped by Miss

Havisham, prompts ethical questions about parental influence and individual autonomy, serving as a catalyst for reflection on the broader societal impact. Magwitch's expression of hope despite a criminal past challenges societal judgments, urging readers to reconsider their perceptions and fostering reflection on the potential for moral growth. Joe's unwavering commitment to honesty stands out amidst societal deceit, emphasizing the ethical imperative of truthfulness and positioning him as a moral touchstone. Pip's contemplation on the butterfly effect of choices underscores themes of personal responsibility and societal influences on morality, prompting readers to reflect on their own agency and ethical responsibilities. Miss Havisham's acknowledgment of responsibility for Estella's character adds depth to themes of manipulation and societal expectations, inviting reflection on the interplay between individual agency and moral responsibility. Through its intricate narrative, *Great Expectations* provides a timeless examination of the human condition and the delicate dance between individual choices and societal frameworks, inspiring readers to reflect on their own ethical values within the context of societal expectations.

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