

Materialism versus Human Values in the Victorian Novels: The Case of *Great Expectations* and *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract: Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* share similar concerns at the thematic level. Both novels are critiques of the Victorian society since they show the differences between the upper and lower classes of the 19th century in England. Poor people are depicted as good characters while the rich are demonstrated as evil characters who find pleasure in manipulating and tormenting others. Poor Characters strive to be rich to achieve high social status, happiness and love. Once they become rich, they got plagued by the evil of materialism and thus become a replica of the upper- class characters who happened to inflict pain on them. In their turn, they become fake, snobbish, corrupt and revengeful. Through this recurrent vicious circle, in *Great Expectations* and *Wuthering Heights*, Dickens and Brontë emphasize the idea that no amount of money is enough to buy true happiness and true love. On the contrary, money is continuously trapping its owners throughout the novels.

Keywords: Class differences, love, materialism, snobbery, Victorian society

Introduction

Great Expectations and *Wuthering Heights* show how materialism and class differences lead innocent characters to be arrogant, corrupt and manipulative. Characters are transformed into greedy machine-like entities blinded by their strong desire for ownership and revenge. Their money makes of them evil characters who exploit the poor people to reach their own cherished goals. This will be clearly discussed in the following sections.

Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Great Expectations shows rich characters that are snobbish and ashamed of their relatives. Materialism transforms these characters into evil people who are devoid of emotions. Materialism instantiates people and destroys all ties of love between families and lovers. For instance, Mr. Havisham is an arrogant character "He was very rich and very proud so was his daughter" (Dickens, 2001, p. 165). Mr. Havisham's snobbery is the cause of a series of destructions that happens to his family and also to other people. Being from an aristocratic class, Mr. Havisham feels ashamed of his second wife, who has been his previous servant, he also degraded his son Arthur. This affects the son badly and leads to a great hatred not only between the son and his father, Mr. Havisham, but also between the son and his half- sister, Miss Havisham. "He cherished a deep and mortal grudge against her as having influenced the father's anger" (Dickens, 2001, p.167).

Arthur's hatred for his half-sister shows to what extent family ties and love are obscured by class differences and financial considerations. Arthur's hatred goes further when he ruins and humiliates her. He conspires with a criminal called Compeyson against her; the latter pretends he is infatuated with her. "He practiced on her affection in that systematic way, that he got great sums of money from her [...] it was a conspiracy between them; and that they shared the profits" (Dickens, 2001, p.178).. Arthur wants to revenge on his half- sister because she belongs to an aristocratic class and she is too snobbish like her father. By ruining the life of Miss. Havisham, Arthur expresses his objection to the social system that makes of him a degraded person.

When Miss Havisham gets infatuated with Compeyson, she becomes "too haughty and too much in love to be advised" (Dickens, 2001, p.167). She rejects the advices of her poor cousin, Mathew Pocket, thinking that he is an opportunist or he is jealous of her fortune. Mathew "warned her that she was doing too much for this man (Compeyson), and was placing herself unreservedly in his power. She took the first opportunity of angrily ordering him out of the house in his presence" (Dickens, 2001, p.167). Since then, he never sees her again.

Miss Havisham does not accept Mathew's advice not only because she is passionately and blindly in love with Compeyson, but also because she is an arrogant girl who despises her cousin (Mathew) since he belongs to a lower class. She sees that he does not deserve much attention; the reason why she kicked him out of her house.

Later on, Miss Havisham is jilted by Compeyson. Because of her devastation from the cancelled wedding, her life since that day has been spent in Satis House, resentful and unhappy. She decides to lead a life of seclusion. She is transformed from a loving character into an evil one who enjoys inflecting pain on male gender. She becomes a "poisonous" character who is capable of destroying love between people, especially, between Pip (the protagonist and narrator

of the novel) and Estella, the girl whom she adopted. Miss Havisham teaches Estella how to be snobbish and arrogant; she even pushes her to despise Pip. She does her best to prevent love and friendship between them; she makes Estella believe that he comes back to her house for her money but not because he loves her. This is depicted in Miss Havisham's saying: "well [...] I hope you want nothing you'll get nothing" (Dickens, 2001, p.108). Since she becomes an evil character, she gets ignorant of love; she keeps on despising Pip saying that Estella is "abroad [...] educating for a lady far out of reach, prettier than ever, admired by all who see her" (Dickens, 2001, p.109). Miss Havisham insists on showing Pip the difference between him, as a poor boy, and Estella as a rich and educated lady, and showing him that their love is impossible.

After being degraded by Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip is transformed into a corrupt and snobbish person too. Pip's good virtues are corrupted by the temptation of money and wealth, as epitomized by Estella and Miss Havisham who is the embodiment of the aristocratic class. Knowing the difference between him and Estella, Pip, in fact, becomes unsatisfied with the forge, his home, and his family. This is indicated in his saying: "it is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home [...] home had never been a very pleasant place to me, because of my sister's temper [...] Now it was all coarse and common, and I would not have had Miss Havisham and Estella see it on my account" (Dickens, 2001, p.100). Pip feels ashamed even of Joe, his brother-in-law, who brought him up and has been a close friend to him. This is clearly stated in his statement "I am afraid I was ashamed of the dear fellow I know I was ashamed of him when I saw Estella stood at the back of Miss Havisham, and her eyes laughed mischievously" (Dickens, 2001, p.95).

Pip loses his innocence and becomes unfaithful to his social class once he earned a premium for his apprenticeship. This shows to what extent materialism is, throughout the novel, the cause of destruction of relationships and love between people. Pip's snobbery goes further when he becomes a rich gentleman. He thinks that real "gentlemaness" is associated with money and good manners. He starts thinking in terms of money; he believes that if money can prevent Joe from visiting him, he will send it to him. Pip says: "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly have paid money. [...] I had little objection to his being seen by Herbert or his father, for both of whom I had a respect" (Dickens, 2001, p.201). Pip becomes concerned about his reputation; he does not want to be seen with Joe since, for him, Joe is not refined. Pip does not realize that the real gentleman is Joe since he is good at heart, and he cherishes the relationship with Pip, that's why he insists on visiting him in London.

Pip's snobbery got intensified during his travel to Satis House to attend Miss Havisham's birthday. Pip feels disgusted to share the coach with two convicts during his travel, he said: "There were two convicts going down with me [...] their coarse mangy ungainly outer surface, as if they were lower animals, [...] a most disagreeable and degraded spectacle [...]. It is impossible to express with what acuteness I felt the convict's breathing, not only on the back of my head, but all along my spine" (Dickens, 2001, p.210). Pip feels superiority in front of those two criminals. He considers them "lower animals" and "degraded spectacle". He feels disturbed and disgusted by their bad breath. Pip's criticism of the two criminals is ironical since he ignores that he is also associated with the world of criminals throughout the novel. Actually, his benefactor is the convict Magwitch and his beloved, Estella, is the daughter of two criminals: Molly and Magwitch.

After Miss Havisham's party finishes, Pip decides to return back to London without paying a visit to his own family in the forge. Instead, he "sent a penitential codfish and barrel of oysters to Joe (as reparation for not having gone)" (Dickens, 2001, p.227). Pip substitutes his love to Joe by material things. He thinks that sending Joe a present will compensate for not seeing him in person. This emphasizes the fact that Pip becomes a fake copy of the aristocratic people; his concern about money and reputation leads his relationship with his family to be deteriorated.

Being rich and snobbish, Pip becomes lonely the same way as Miss Havisham who is a very wealthy woman, but she spends her days bitter and craving revenge on the male population. "Although he has ready money in his pocket, his snobbishness forced him to keep his relationship with Joe a secret" (Dickens, 2001, p.228). Pip thinks that the "'civilized" world is far from the emotional life he shared with Joe, and his internal conflict is between these two possibilities. Pip has not yet realized that people all around him, including Joe, Miss Havisham, and Jaggers are living examples of how money, or lack of it, cannot determine anyone's happiness. Pip needs to save himself from the trap that lures by falsely advertising that money is the source of happiness, and realize that happiness depends most on how a person perceives and treats his or herself". (Overbey, 2013, p.34)

Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

As it is the case in *Great Expectations*, materialism in *Wuthering Heights* also leads characters to be snobbish and corrupt. Materialism is depicted, throughout the novel, as a downfall because the characters consider money and social status more important than love, respect, spiritual, intellectual, or cultural values. From the first time Heathcliff (the orphan who is adopted by Mr. Earnshaw's family) is brought to *Wuthering Heights* (the house of the Mr. Earnshaw), he is despised by Mr. Earnshaw's family. Nelly (the narrator) says: "Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors" (Brontë, 1999, p.45). In another example, Nelly mentions that the daughter of Mr. Earnshaw "Chatherine has "showed her humor by grinning and spitting at the stupid little thing" (Brontë, 1999, p.46).

Being a poor and an orphan kid, Heathcliff is treated like an unwanted pet. He was called an "it" and a "thing"; besides, he has received spits and prevented from entering the room of Chatherine and her brother Hindley. He is kept in a place where the family keeps pets. Heathcliff is degraded again when Hindley, the son of Mr. Earnshaw, becomes the master of *Wuthering Heights*: "Hindley becomes tyrannical [...] He drove him [Heathcliff] from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of the doors instead" (Brontë, 1999, p.52). The tension between materialism and love is evident in this passage; Hindley's power and tyranny is manifested once he gained the property. As in *Great Expectations*, materialism in *Wuthering Heights* is a symbol of evil that pushes rich characters to inflict pain on poor ones.

Heathcliff is not only despised by Hindley, but he is also degraded by the Lintons (a wealthy family). When the Lintons detect Chatherine and Heathcliff spying at them, they catch them. Once they have learned that Catherine is a daughter of a landowner, the Lintons treat her fairly. On the contrary, knowing that Heathcliff is a poor, orphan kid, they wish that the country "should hang him at once" (Brontë, 1999, p.55). Isabella, the daughter of old Linton, says that

Heathcliff is a “frightful thing![...] put him in the cellar ” (Brontë, 1999, p.56). Catherine is kept by the Lintons, to “tame her savageness” and transform her into a “lady”, while Heathcliff is expelled out.

When Catherine returns to the Heights (her home), she is already transformed from a “heatless little savage” (Brontë, 1999, p.57) to a “very dignified person” (p.57). In fact, Catherine is changed into a snobbish person who starts despising Heathcliff the same way the Lintons and her brother Hindley do before; this is clearly depicted when she “burst into a laugh, exclaiming, why, how very black and cross [Heathcliff] look[s]! And how funny and grim”(Brontë, 1999, p.58). Catherine becomes accustomed to a style of living where class status and privilege place her above those who work and produce for her. Since Heathcliff is filthy and neglected, he remains a member of the inferior social class.

Catherine’s snobbery becomes quite apparent when she chooses to Marry Edgar Linton rather than Heathcliff, though she loves him. She says: “it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff” (Brontë, 1999, p. 80). She also claims that Edgar “will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood and I shall be proud of having such a husband” (p.80). Money and social attitudes have destroyed the love between Catherine and Heathcliff; Catherine becomes aware of her class superiority, the reason why she prefers Edgar. This leads Heathcliff to leave the Heights and starts working towards gaining social status, money and power.

When Heathcliff becomes a rich “gentleman”, he loses the simplicity of his spirit, love and innocence the same way as Pip in *Great Expectations*. The modern world transforms him into an evil character; it makes him disdain the simplicity of his own home and torments the households. The first thing Heathcliff does once he arrives to the Heights is to take revenge on all the people who degrades him. Like Arthur in *Great Expectations*, Heathcliff’s revenge on Both the Earnshaws and the Lintons is, in fact, revenge from the upper class system. Once Heathcliff becomes the landowner of the Heights, he becomes corrupt, arrogant and proud of his property. After the death of Hindley, Heathcliff starts tormenting his son Hareton who “lives in his house as a servant, deprived of the advantage of wages: quite unable to right himself” (Brontë, 1999, p. 164). He wants Hareton to suffer the same way he has suffered when he was a kid.

Being poor and brutish, Hareton is also disdained by Cathy, the daughter of Catherine and Edgar. She mistakes him for a servant and gave him orders. When she has been told that he is her cousin, she shouted “with a scornful laugh. He my cousin! Oh Ellen! Don’t let them say such things! [...]Papa is gone to fetch my cousin from London: My cousin is a gentleman’s son” (Brontë, 1999, p. 170).

Cathy feels superior than Hareton; according to her, he does not deserve love or good treatment because he lacks money and social class, this is evident when “she cried in a tone of disgust. I can’t endure you! [...] I despise you” (Brontë, 1999, p. 248). On the contrary, Cathy sympathizes with her other cousin, Linton, and treats him fairly. The latter belongs to a wealthy family; he also has social attitudes that separate him from the inferior class embodied in Hareton. When Linton asks her “you don’t despise me, do you?” (Brontë, 1999, p. 203). she replies “Despise you? No! [...] I love you better than anybody living” (p.203). Being “a gentleman’s

son” and having social attitudes and privilege, Linton is as proud as Cathy. He treats her respectfully but he despises his cousin Hareton. When he has informed Cathy that he cannot read the writing on the wall of Wuthering Heights, Linton sarcastically says: “he does not know his letters [...] could you believe in the existence of such a colossal dunce” (Brontë, 1999, p. 189).

Like *Great Expectations*, *Wuthering Heights* shows how materialism and class differences lead innocent characters to be arrogant, corrupt and manipulative. They use other characters as puppets to reach their goals. Miss. Havisham in *Great Expectations* is jilted by Compeyson; as result, she starts taking revenge on Pip using Estella to achieve that goal. Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is jilted by Chatherine; as a result, he uses Isabella Linton to reach the property of the Lintons family and take revenge. Once they lose their innocence, characters fall in their own trap since they become governed by their own greed for money, property, power, social status.

Conclusion

Both *Great Expectations* and *Wuthering Heights* were published during the historical period of a great economical change, industrial unrest and political instability. That period witnessed the growth of full-scale capitalism accompanied by cycles of boom and crises. “The emergence of trade unionism around the struggles against the poor law and for empowered factory conditions, enabled class battles between organized labour and their employers to be conducted on a new, much larger scale” (Cookson and Loughry, 1998, p.82). Manipulation of poor characters in both novels refers to the manipulation of the bourgeois employers, assisted by the government, against the working class. Heathcliff and Pip (as poor characters) are representative of the nineteenth’s- century “propertyless” proletariat. They are not only used as engines by their superiors (masters), but also victimized by them. Characters’ exploitation in both novels stems from materialistic purposes. This, however, results in a series of destructions such as the transformation of innocent characters into evil ones as the case of Pip in *Great Expectations* and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. These characters resolve to free themselves from the humiliation of oppression by attaining for themselves the status of oppressors. They, thus, become a replica of the socioeconomic situation and the bourgeois who manipulate and dehumanize the poor. Ironically, as oppressors, these characters become trapped by their own money as they become controlled by the world of materialism and social status. Materialism reduces them into machines living for the sake of snobbism and revenge.

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