

11.

The theme of social status is explored in a number of ways through the novels 'Great Expectations' and 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens. 'Great Expectations' follows the story of Pip, a young boy who is encouraged to gain higher social status in order to win his love: Estella. 'A Christmas Carol' details the journey of Ebenezer Scrooge as he is led on a journey by ghosts to teach him to see past social status. Both protagonists grow throughout the novel as they begin to disregard social status due to the teachings of minor characters.

At the beginning of 'Great Expectations', Pip is a innocent and naive boy from an impoverished background. He is content in his social class until he is invited to the house of Miss Havisham, a wealthy lady of high social status, where he begins to feel unworthy: "I wish my boots weren't

so thick nor my hands so coarse" We see that he begins to doubt his upbringing and feel lesser. He falls for Miss Havisham's daughter, Estella, and she causes him to feel not worthy of her affection: "I felt that the kiss was given to the coarse, common boy". We feel sympathy for Pip as he regrets the things he cannot change. He becomes obsessed with social standing which causes his character to become more corrupt. As Dickens highlights the damage that the acknowledgement of social status can do.

In contrast to Pip, Scrooge is incredibly wealthy at the start of 'A Christmas Carol'. However, he is selfish with his money: "I can't afford to make the idle people merry". We see that he regards himself above all others and looks down on those less fortunate. Dickens highlights his lack of generosity when he describes the attitude

towards Scrooge: "no beggars implored him for a trifle". Like Pip, Scrooge is obsessed with social status which causes us to see the cruelty in his character. Dickens illustrates the fallacies of society as he highlights Scrooge's lack of life due to his opinions of others. Both Pip and Scrooge ruin themselves in the pursuit of higher social status and wealth.

The use of minor characters is key to the significance of social class. Throughout both novels the poor are classed as happy whereas the rich suffer greatly at the hands of their money. These impoverished minor characters serve to teach valuable life lessons to the protagonists. For Pip in "Great Expectations", this character is Joe Gargery. He acts as an almost father figure to Pip as he is completely content with his social class. At first, Pip admires Joe greatly,

however, once Pip comes into money due to a mysterious benefactor, he begins to become ashamed of the man he once looked up to:

"If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money":

Here, Pip is characterised as cruel as he disregards Joe merely because of his social class. We see

that the change in social class has morphed

Pip into a man of lesser character. His attitude

match that of Scrooge as he looks down on

those ~~men~~ below him. Joe, however, offers

Pip valuable life advice: "one man's a blacksmith

and one man's a whitesmith and one man's a

goldsmith". This foreshadows when Pip realises

the uselessness of social class at the end of

the novel.

For Scrooge, the important minor characters

are ~~the family of Topsy Tim~~ the family of Topsy Tim.

When Scrooge is shown the family by the ghosts trying to help him, they are seen to be incredibly poor but content with their lives. Tiny Tim, who is incredibly sick, even seems happy despite his ailment. Dickens contrasts the unhappy child of Scrooge we see in the past: "a solitary child, neglected by his friends", with the happy Tiny Tim: "God bless us everyone!" It becomes more clear to Scrooge, and the reader that money does not equal happiness and we see that the introduction of the Cratchett family began to change Scrooge from his original stance on the poor: "are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?" However, we see that Scrooge is still not convinced as he accuses the ghosts: "how you delight to torture me". Like Pip, Scrooge is unable to break down the barriers of what he has believed but the reader is aware of the influence caused by these minor

characters.

In their pursuit of social status, both characters lose potential loves as a result of their changed personalities. Pip loses a love he could have had with Biddy, a kind girl of an un-poverished background. He is blinded by his love for Estella and her money and so he does not see the potential in Biddy:

"She was common and she could not be Estella"

Dickens highlights the theme of love through Pip's blind pursuit of Estella. We see that his regard for social status holds him back from true happiness. Joe ends up marrying Biddy and Pip is upset as he realises he missed his chance at a content life. Instead, he is doomed to live ~~in~~ a complicated love with Estella. This realisation pushes him closer to ~~the~~ the breaking down of his ideas of social

class at the end of the novel.

In an echo of Pip's loss, Scrooge disregards Belle, his fiancé, in the journey to his higher social class. The Ghost of Christmas Past shows us Belle as she calls off the engagement saying he has "changed". She says they made the agreement when they were "both poor and content to be so". We see that Scrooge, like Pip, changed due to his increased social status and, again, Dickens highlights the destruction of class boundaries.

Scrooge becomes distraught when the ghost shows him Belle and her new husband reminiscing about Scrooge and how he is "quite alone in ~~this~~ this world". Again, it is illustrated Scrooge's loneliness due to his attitude towards others. We see that, for both Scrooge and Pip, their lives and happiness are unreachable as an effect of their narrow minded views.

These views are eventually stripped away as the protagonists learn their final lessons and begin to see a world unmarred by social status. Pip's change in heart is caused by Magwitch, the man who is his benefactor. Magwitch was a convict of very low social standing and so, on the discovery of his benefactor's true identity, Pip is distraught. He feels as though he can never escape his poverty as his newfound social class is tainted by its origins. He owes all of his success and money to a low class criminal. His ideals of social class break away as he begins to question his own worthiness for Estella. Magwitch however, treats Pip as a son: "You're a son to me - more nor any son". A relationship develops and Pip realises Magwitch's kindness. We see that Pip begins to doubt the value of social class. Magwitch becomes ill and reveals to Pip that Estella is his daughter. With

This revelation, Pip's delusions of social class are finally broken and he realises that both Joe and Magwitch are more gentlemen than he ever was. He realises the more important things in life. The final lesson of this acceptance comes when Pip tells Magwitch that Estella "is a lady and she is beautiful". Pip spares Magwitch's feelings by not revealing Estella's true cruelty and thus we see that Magwitch has been accepted.

The turning point in Scrooge's character is caused by that of Tiny Tim. He begins to care for Tim: "tell me if Tiny Tim will live". He realises that his actions will cause Tiny Tim to die. With this he realises that he has been selfish due to his views on the social order. The Ghost of Christmas Future shows him ~~what~~ what happens after he dies and on realising what little impact his death has

on the people in his life, "read upon the stone of the neglected grave", his fear of dying unloved and forgotten cause him to change his ways and become a nicer person for the benefit of himself and for Tiny Tim. It is clear that the journey he took with the ghosts had an impact on his life however, the case of Tiny Tim is the reason for his change of heart. Both Scrooge and Pip take journeys to realise the cruelty of their ways. They are shown the extent of their social class delusions as they realise the true meaning of life.

The thematic significance of social status on the novels 'Great Expectations' and 'A Christmas Carol' is incredibly important to the novels as a whole. The character's own obsession with the social order is used to highlight the pitfalls of society as Dickens uses them to

Illustrate the destruction of personality as a result of wealth and power. The use of minor characters creates an important contrast between the unhappiness of Pip and Scrooge and the happiness of their poorer counterparts. Therefore, serving to highlight the extent to which Pip and Scrooge misjudge the way to a good life. In the end, both characters see the error of their ways as they constantly change during the novels. They are able to realise the true meaning of life is happiness, not power or social class.