

## Original Paper

# A Study on *Great Expectations* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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### Abstract

*Charles Dickens was the greatest English critical realist of the nineteenth century with vivid descriptions of the capitalist society he lived in and profound humanitarian feelings towards the impoverished group. Great Expectations is Dickens' masterpiece in his later years, which tells the story of Pip, an ordinary boy who dreamed of becoming a "gentleman" and finally lost and regained his dream. Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao put forward the method of ethical literary criticism, aiming at analyzing the ethical connotation of literary works from a historical dialectical perspective. In view of the rich ethical factors involved in Dickens' works, this paper attempts to explore the ethical themes contained in Great Expectations from three aspects: ethical environment, ethical identity and ethical choice, so as to reveal Dickens' ethical demands and its important contributions to the construction of humanistic spirit. In terms of ethical literary criticism, Great Expectations depicts the ethical picture of Victorian era and guides readers into a world with unbalanced ethical order, in which ethical choice is the core factor leading to its ethical endings. This paper analyzes the ethical connotation hidden in the works and tries to provide new enlightenment for ethical literary criticism.*

### Keywords

*ethical literary criticism, ethical choice, ethical identity, ethical environment*

## 1. Introduction

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, into a small family of a sailor on the outskirts of Portsmouth. Due to the family's poverty, Dickens was forced to attend school on vacation in his early teens. From the age of 15, he worked as a lawyer's apprentice, clerk and court reporter. In 1837, he completed his first full-length novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, a realistic novel. Later his creative talents reached maturity, publishing *Oliver Twist* (1838), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *Dombey and Son*

(1848), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1861), etc. As the greatest English writer of the 19th century, Dickens is a skillful reflector of real life. In his works, he deftly paints an all-encompassing social picture with superb artistic techniques and pays special attention to the lives of the people at the bottom of English society, thus making important contributions as a pioneer and developer of British critical realist literature.

As one of Dickens' masterpieces, *Great Expectations* presents a more realistic and cautious exploration to the choice of life paths for the young, while the optimism of the author's early years has significantly diminished. The protagonist, Pip, an orphan, cannot resist the temptations of his surroundings to lose his original simple nature and goes through severe trials before repenting and starting to live again. With more vivid characters and well-organized plot structure, shortly after the publication of *Great Expectations*, it attracted the attention of many researchers and is regarded as one of Dickens' most influential novels.

Chinese readers were introduced to Dickens' work in the early 20th century through Lin Shu's translation. A few commentaries on Dickens's works appeared, scattered through biographies on Dickens and a few introductory articles, such as Ivashov's commentary on Dickens. However, these commentaries were not sufficiently focused and were limited to translations and presentations of foreign language material, and independent research had not yet begun. From the 1950s, under the influence of the Soviet Union, scholarly research on Dickens' work gradually intensified and flourished in China, culminating in 1962, the 150th anniversary of Dickens' birth. At that time, *Great Expectations* also came into the scholarly spotlight, but *A Tale of Two Cities* had been the focus of Chinese scholars' attention. The existing research mainly focuses on the style of the works and the main characters. For example, Zhang Ai, a domestic scholar, discussed the romantic tendency of *Great Expectations*, and thought that Dickens' rich imagination, exaggerated writing techniques, surreal images and romantic ending undoubtedly added romanticism to the novel on the basis of critical realism. Li Jingyuan, on the other hand, pays attention to Dickens' feminist aesthetic spirit in *Great Expectations*, and points out that the main female characters portrayed in the works just reflect the potential feminist aesthetic tendency in this literary master's heart. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore the ethical theme and contained in *Great Expectations* and reveal Dickens' ethical demand in view of the theory of ethical literary criticism.

## 2. An Overview of Ethical Literary Criticism

Ethical literary criticism is a new literary criticism method put forward by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao in 2004 on the basis of literary criticism theories of the East and the West. The proposal of this theory marks a major reform in the field of literary criticism in China, which fundamentally improves the development of literary criticism in China. In Nie Zhenzhao's view, ethical literary criticism, as an original Chinese theory, is not only characterized by the construction of a theory of

ethical choice and a critical terminology system centered on ethical self-selection, but also solves the problem of disconnection from Darwin's theory of natural selection by establishing a logical link between morality and natural selection. Ethical literary criticism can be applied effectively not only in literary criticism but also in other disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, and cognitive science. It can be seen that ethical choices and their results are an important basis for moral evaluation of characters and the driving force to provoke readers to think and gain moral inspiration. However, ethical choice is not the only factor for moral evaluation, and the ethical environment, the ethical scene at that time and the ethical identity of the characters should also be considered in analyzing the ethical choice of the character, which also contributes to the achievement of objective moral evaluation.

### 3. Ethical Environment

Dickens lived in the mid-19th century, during the reign of Queen Victoria. In his realistic texts describing the Victorian society, Dickens denounced the hypocrisy, greed, malice and cruelty of the upper classes and bourgeoisie and showed deep compassion to the miserable situation of the lower classes, especially women, children and the elderly; and he described with seriousness and conscience the struggle of the working masses who were beginning to awaken. At the same time, with idealism and romantic grandeur, he celebrated the truth, goodness and beauty of human nature and envisioned a more rational society and a better life. In the Victorian era, with the completion of the industrial revolution, industry and commerce made considerable achievements, which caused great social polarization: on the one hand, the big capitalists from the ruling class led a luxurious life; on the other hand, the poor laborers who worked 18 hours a day by selling their labor force still had no food. A huge gap between the rich and the poor aroused and turned to be the chief culprit of the whole society's worship of money. For the victims, distorted values had corrupted people.

In *Great Expectations*, influenced by the whole society trend of worshiping money, Mr. Jaggers, a highly skilled lawyer, gave up defending justice and truth and only served those wealthy customers, whether they were innocent or not. In order to get more money and build up his reputation, Mr. Jaggers even falsified evidence and witnesses to make his defense successful, even though it did harm to justice and legal fairness. Thus in the society worshiping money and status, compared with an uneducated and ragged person, an educated and elegantly dressed gentleman was more likely to get off the crime. The money and status worship also corrupted the relationship between family members. Pip's uncle Mr. Pumblechook showed no concern for the elderly and brought humiliation to little Pip. Pip's sister treated him badly for his bleak future. However, when Pip got a secret property, the snobbish attitude of his uncle and his sister towards him changed dramatically. They spoke highly of him and paid respect to him. The values of love and marriage were also undermined by the greedy pursuit of wealth and titles. Estella chose the vulgar and violent Bentley instead of the devoted and kind Pip just because

Bentley was the son of a wealthy noble. All their money-oriented life principles told Pip that only by owning a large amount of property and high social status can people gain honor and respect, which, to a great extent, led Pip to pursue fame and money excessively and gradually got away from his kind nature. Whether the money-hungry lawyer Mr. Jaggers, the snobbish uncle Mr. Pumblechook who was obsessed with social status, or the unhappy couples appeared in *Great Expectations*, they were all influenced by the capitalist society. In an ethical society with a disturbed view of human nature and morality, the worship of money and status further imbalances and deteriorates the ethics of the society, distorting social values and leading to the ethical tragedy of the major characters.

#### 4. Ethical Identity

According to the perspective of literary ethical criticism, distinguishing the ethical identity of literary images is an important prerequisite for understanding a specific image, because in literary texts, the emergence of all ethical issues is often related to ethical identity. In *Great Expectations*, various contradictions were caused by the misalignment of ethical identity of Pip and other characters, which led to the increasingly difficult ethical choices.

The family is not only the smallest social unit, but also the most important part that forms the basis of society. The family is the cornerstone of Dickens's novels and is associated with the creation of an ideal social order. According to ethical literary criticism, if all family members stick to their so-called ethical identities, such as gentle and virtuous mothers, filial and attentive children, and harbor concern for each other, the family will always be an oasis of peace and happiness. However, if the ethical identity of a family member is weakened, ethical chaos will occur, and it will also affect other family members. Mrs. Joe was more than 20 years older than her younger brother Pip. Since their parents died early, Mrs. Joe had to take care of Pip like a mother since he was born. As a woman having "hard, heavy hands" and a vulgar temper, Mrs. Joe constantly yelled at Pip, and impatiently rejected Pip's requests for help whenever the curious Pip asked a puzzling question. To make matters worse, Mrs. Joe even insulted and beat her younger brother. Her failure to shoulder the ethical identity of a caring mom and a helpful sister results in Pip's inferiority complex and sensitivity, which also results in Pip's weak temperament and lack of confidence.

Similarly, Pip suffered from ethical dilemma caused by the confusion of ethical identity. When he was young, his brother-in-law, the kind-hearted and hard-working Joe was his role model and he expected to grow into a skilled blacksmith like Joe. He was contented with his identity of being a blacksmith apprentice who makes a living with strength and skills. But when he was invited to Miss Havisham's magnificent mansion and became the companion of the beautiful and arrogant Estella, Pip gradually showed an increasing dislike with his own humble background and the identity of a poor boy without a bright future. Even though the proud Estella insulted Pip with words and slapped him in the face with all her strength, Pip still couldn't resist her charm, just crying sadly in his heart and wishing to win

Estella's hands with his patience. When Pip luckily received an endowment from a secret benefactor, he got rid of his original identity without hesitation and hurried to take the new identity of a young gentleman. However, although Pip led a luxurious and decent life like a "gentleman" and deliberately kept a distance from his kind but humble friends like Joe and Biddy, he still failed to win Estella's heart since there were competitors with nobler birth and more wealth. Pip intentionally followed the graceful trend of those "gentlemen", but he was never really accepted by the group Estella belonged to. At last he lost all his money and ran into debt. With the financial help and considerate care from Joe, Pip finally recovered from his physical illness and mental injury. But when he finally returned to Joe and Biddy for help and warmth, he found that Joe and Biddy had got married and he could never regain the identity of being an innocent and dependent young brother and friend. Fortunately Pip came to realize that only by being independent and self-reliant can he repay the kindness of Joe and Biddy and realize his own value. Therefore Pip left his hometown and worked hard overseas. He finally found his true identity by being an independent business partner.

## 5. Ethical Choice

Ethical literary criticism considers human being as a combination of human nature and animal nature. Human nature gives man an ethical consciousness, i.e., the rational consciousness and ability to distinguish between good and evil. Bestiality is man's animal instinct, embodied in man's free will. In literary works, rational consciousness and free will compete with each other, and when the rational will is controlled by the free will, an ethical conflict will be formed, and the characters will face a dilemma of ethical choice, thus falling into an ethical dilemma. Then, when the work shows how the characters use the power of reason to control the free will in the ethical dilemma and gradually turn into a moral person, or describes the serious consequences of the characters' behavior under the domination of free will, the readers are educated and enlightened, and in this way, the work realizes the educational function of criticizing evil and promoting good.

As a boy of innocent nature, Pip's heart is full of kindness, which is reflected in his help for the poor escaped prisoner, sympathy for Miss Havisham, concern for his brother-in-law Joe, and generosity to his friends. Pip used to live with his sister and the kind brother-in-law Joe. Although they lived a humble life in terms of materials, Joe cared about, protected and educated Pip, which brought Pip warmth and consolation in his desolate childhood. Thus when Pip stayed with Joe, he was grateful to Joe and his expectations for his life is to become a blacksmith like Joe and return his care and love. Therefore, during the childhood, with the kind nature and the model example from Joe, Pip was influenced by rational consciousness and chose his life path practically, holding reasonable expectations toward his future.

Pip is confronted with his first ethical dilemma when he was invited to be a companion of Estella from the wealthy family. The admiration for beauty is the basic instinct of human beings as emotional animals, thus the beautiful and noble Estella awakened the animal factor in Pip, which drives Pip to love Estella passionately. But the human factors quickly regained their dominant position by constantly reminding Pip of the disparity between them in terms of wealth and status. Nevertheless, the animal factors changed the thoughts and behaviors of Pip since he fell in love with Estella. Gradually, obsessed with vanity, Pip was only interested in pursuing wealth, social status and Estella's heart, forgetting the warmth Joe gave him. In Pip's eyes, Joe even became an obstacle to his success and his dissatisfaction with Joe began with Estella's contempt for Pip. "If Estella had met Joe, she would have thought that a mere blacksmith was insignificant, and would have laughed at the fact that his shoes were so bulky and his hands so thick". And when Pip received the money from a benefactor, he chose to leave his families behind and became a member of the upper class. The wrong ethical choice led to the further corruption of Pip. Gradually, Pip was as snobbish as Mr. Pumblechook, and with his elevated social status and inflated self-image, his brother-in-law Joe, who had brought him such a wonderful childhood, was considered a disgrace to him, and his morals and conscience were abandoned.

Fortunately, as Pip gradually approached his goal, he began to realize the emptiness and hypocrisy of the life of the rich. He found that those so-called nobles and wealthy people were not as decent as he had imagined, and their hearts were filled with greed, fraud, and hypocrisy. At the same time, he also realized that he gradually lost his true self and precious humanity in this process. After experiencing a series of setbacks and injuries, Pip finally woke up and gave up his original pursuit, returning to the life path of leading a simple and authentic life. When he found that his faithful friends Joe and Biddy had got married, he didn't choose to feel sorry for himself or stay with the kind couple and enjoy their care. Instead, he felt happy for the final happy ending for his faithful friends, and decided to go overseas to start his own business so as to repay the kindness from Joe and Biddy. In the end, Pip found true happiness and satisfaction in working with his friend and earning a living with his own efforts and capabilities. Although he had not made his mind to get married and have children, the self-reliant Pip had grown into a mature adult with reason who would make the proper ethical choice in front of tests and trials.

Throughout the story, Pip's views about "great expectations" were changing, which resulted in his different ethical choices. When he aimed to follow Joe's example and become a trustworthy blacksmith in the childhood, he felt close to his families and friends and was generally satisfied with his life. When he was lost in the beauty of Estella and attracted by the vanities of the wealthy, his plan for future turned into being a "gentleman" who led a decent life with a beautiful wife. Therefore he chose to accept the secret donation and spend money in decorating himself instead of repaying his families, which brought him disillusionment. In the end, he woke up from the unrealistic dreams and decided to go back to the true friends. He made the choice to work hard overseas to repay money and sincere care

from Joe and Biddy. It was only when Pip awakened from his sleep of “great expectations” that his spirit was liberated and sublimated. Although he didn’t stay with his dear friends physically, he got much closer to them mentally by being an truly independent and grateful gentleman.

## 6. Conclusion

Ethical literary criticism proposes a new methodology that plays an indispensable and important role in the interpretation of literary works, which enables us to understand the moral patterns of society and life of the characters from an ethical perspective. Through presenting the complex ethical environment, the confusing ethical identities and the difficult ethical choices, the literary work *Great Expectations* fully displays the personal and ethical development of Pip, whose experience can inspire young people in improving themselves and planning for the future. Surrounded by the corrupting ethical environment which worships money and social status, the kind and innocent Pip was once confused and dissatisfied with his ethical identity, which caused his ethical dilemma and resulted in his wrong ethical choice. Fortunately, with the innate kindness, the patient help from friends and sufficient self reflection, Pip finally got rid of his dilemma and found his ethical identity by choosing to be an independent young man who worked hard at his own business and sincerely cared about friends. In conclusion, a critical analysis of literary ethics in *Great Expectations* offers the reader a new perspective to understand the novel and Dickens’ moral concern for man and society. The reciprocal development of man and society, the harmonious relationship between the individual and others, and the perfection of man himself, contribute significantly to the construction of humanism not only in his own time, but also in the hundreds of years after the publication of the novel and in the current age.

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