Great Expectations: God’s Law Vs. Human Law Essay, Research Paper

Great Expectations: God’s Law vs. Human Law

In his book Great Expectations, the problematic nature of moral judgement

and justice that stems from a conflict between God’s law and human law is one of

several topical themes that Charles Dickens addresses. This paradox regularly

surfaces in his treatment of plot and setting, and is more subtlety illustrated

in his use of character. To facilitate the reader’s awareness of such a

conflict, the narrator often uses language that has Christian connotations when

relating his thoughts and when giving descriptions of the environment,

characters and events that take place. While these things allude to divine and

moral law, the story itself revolves around crime and criminals, thereby

bringing issues of human law into focus.

The climate for this theme is established from the very beginning of the

novel. Pip’s act of Christian charity towards the convict can also be

considered a serious crime. The story opens in a churchyard where the grave,

symbolic of eternal judgement can be contrasted with the nearby gallows,

symbolizing human punishment. Set on the eve in which we commemorate the birth

of Christianity, an institution based on charity and love, Pip feels guilty for

bringing food to a starving fellow human. Pip must steal food from his own

family to help Magwitch, thereby transforming mercy and compassion into crimes.

As Pip is running home, he looks back at the convict and sees him limping

towards the gallows “…as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down,

and going back up again” (27). This imagery conveys a complicated perception of

guilt as something conscious of its own moral accountability, frightening and

self-destructive. When Magwitch is caught, he gives a false confession to

stealing the food from the Gargery’s to protect Pip. Joe replies that he

wouldn’t want him to starve and that he was welcome to it. Pip highlights the

conflict between divine and human law by comparing the Hulk that his convict is

returned to as “a wicked Noah’s ark” (56). Thus in these first few chapters,

the ideals of justice, mercy, law, and punishment are intermingled and confused.

This confusion is furthered by Mrs. Joe, who actually transforms charity

into punishment. Her beatings, bullying and lectures of how she brought Pip up

“by hand” at great personal sacrifice are a constant reminder to Pip of his

fault for ever being born. The narrator recounts his sisters response to Mrs.

Hubble’s observation that young Pip has been a “world of trouble” and we see

that Pip is made to feel guilty even for things completely beyond his control as

a young and innocent child:

“Trouble?” echoed my sister; “trouble?” And then entered on a fearful

catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of

sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high place I had tumbled from, and

all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself,

and all the times she had wished me in my grave, and I had contumaciously

refused to go there. (45) Pip becomes familiar with guilt and injustice at a

very young age, and these issues become central to his motivations throughout

his life as a young man. Ironically it is Orlick, the most contemptible

character in the novel who is Mrs. Joe’s unwitting agent of justice. Orlick,

who embodies selfishness and violence, is never brought to justice for his

murderous behavior.

Magwitch is another example of a failed justice system. Superficially, he

appears to personify evil and moral corruption. Pip finds him horrifying upon

their first encounter and equally revolting when he returns to London as Provis.

Despite all this, we learn that he is a loving, generous, sympathetic man who

risks his life to see Pip and spends his fortune to repay Pip for an act of

kindness. While he is a criminal, and deserving of punishment from the law, he

is simultaneously deserving of mercy and forgiveness from God. Compeyson, is

treated much more favorably by the law than Magwitch: “And when the verdict come,

warn’t it Compeyson as was recommended to mercy on account of good character and

bad company, and giving up all the information he could agen me, and warn’t it

me as got never a word but Guilty?” (324). Compeyson exhibits no redeeming

qualities at all, but it is Magwitch who gets the tougher sentence. Though

Magwitch’s fate seems inconsistent with his kind and unselfish behavior, it is

in perfect alignment with the theme under consideration. The interplay between

divine and human justice is again alluded to at the convict’s final court

appearance when he says to the Judge “My Lord, I have received my sentence of

Death from the Almighty, but I bow to yours” (272).

One can draw from the narrator’s own self-revelations as well. In

preparation for his first visit to Satis House, Pip recalls how he “…was put

into clean linen of the stiffestcharacter, like a young penitent into sackcloth,

and was trussed up in my tightest and fearfullest suit [and] delivered to Mr.

Pumblechook, who formally received me as if he were the Sheriff ” (67). Just

two paragraphs later, Pip observes the many little drawers of Mr. Pumblechook’s

seed shop. As he peeks into the drawers and sees the seeds tied up in brown

paper packets he wonders “…whether the flower-seeds and bulbs ever wanted of a

fine day to break out of those jails, and bloom” (67). Given that “pip” is also

the word for a small seed, one cannot help but draw a parallel here. When he

returns from the Satis House, he tells outrageous lies about his experience

there, and admits this to Joe later. In one short episode, Pip has described

himself as a penitent, a prisoner, and a confessed wrongdoer.

The conflict between Pip’s own instincts regarding morality and

conventional perceptions of justice and punishment is manifested as the guilt he

is burdened with throughout his childhood and young adult life. Pip accumulates

these feelings and attempts to suppress them throughout most of the story. At

one point the narrator takes a moment to reflect on his guilty conscience:

As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to

notice their effect upon myself and those around me. Their influence on my own

character, I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very

well that it was not all good. I lived in a state of chronic uneasiness

respecting my behaviour to Joe. My conscience was not by any means comfortable

about Biddy. (256) He goes into great debt in his attempts to distract himself

from this guilt, and drags his dear friend Herbert along with him (which he also

expresses guilt about). His vain attempt to make reparations with his

conscience by sending “a penitential codfish and a barrel of oysters