



VICTORIAN ERA IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* NOVEL BY CHARLES DICKENS (*An Analysis of Wolfgang Iser's Theory*)

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Abstract

*This research explores the Victorian era in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, using Iser's theory *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978). The theoretical framework of this study is the repertoire of the text. The research method is descriptive qualitative analysis. The main source of this study is the novel *Great Expectations*, published in 2002, which consists of 20 chapters and 484 pages. The research instrument is note-taking. Data collection techniques include reading, classification, and concluding. The data analysis method used is the reading method, the act of reading that conducted by the reader to produce the meaning. This study finds several significant achievements as a repertoire of the novel in the Victorian era, such as Revolution industry, wealth, social class, love, and gentlemanly ideals. These elements represent the repertoire of the text, captured in *Great Expectations* through the act of reading to evoke an aesthetic response.*

Keywords: *Repertoire, Great Expectations, Victorian era, reading process*

Abstrak

*Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi era Victoria dalam novel *Great Expectations* karya Charles Dickens, dengan menggunakan teori Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978). Kerangka teoretis penelitian ini adalah repertoire dari teks tersebut. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah analisis deskriptif kualitatif. Sumber utama penelitian ini adalah novel *Great Expectations* yang diterbitkan pada tahun 2002, terdiri dari 20 bab dan 484 halaman. Instrumen penelitian yang digunakan adalah pencatatan. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi membaca, klasifikasi, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Metode analisis data yang digunakan adalah metode membaca, yaitu tindakan membaca yang dilakukan oleh pembaca untuk menghasilkan makna. Penelitian ini menemukan beberapa pencapaian penting yang menjadi repertoire yang membangun karya sastra dari era Victoria seperti Revolusi Industri, kekayaan, kelas sosial, cinta, dan idealisme seorang pria terhormat. Elemen-elemen ini merepresentasikan repertoire dari teks, yang ditangkap dalam *Great Expectations* melalui tindakan membaca untuk membangkitkan respons estetis.*

Kata Kunci: *Repertoire, Great Expectation, Era Victoria, Proses pembacaan*

INTRODUCTION

The term "Victorian" refers to the reign of Queen Victoria in England, from 1837 to 1901, followed by her eldest son, Edward VII (Balkin, 2022). The Victorian period was characterized by social transformation, with people striving to build better financial futures. The reality of life during this time was depicted in literary works, with many writers responding to the challenges of the era. Charles Dickens, one of the most prominent novelists of the Victorian period, critiqued the social landscape of London. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* is a timeless exploration of personal growth, social class, and human morality. Published in serialized form from 1860 to 1861, the novel follows the life of Pip, an orphan

raised in rural England, as he navigates the challenges of ambition, identity, and relationships. Through Pip's journey, Dickens explores into the profound effects of wealth, social mobility, and love on the human experience, offering a poignant critique of Victorian society.

Charles Dickens was not just one of the first great English novelists. By using his writings as a means to defend the vulnerable people of the Victorian Era and criticize the societal structure of the time, he was also a huge contributor to several important social reforms. The social conscious he developed in his adult years led to some of the most influential pieces of literature the Victorian Era had seen, such as *Great Expectations*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and many more. Although he was not the first to use his skills in writing to address the issues in English society, he was by far the most successful. Dickens was able to bring to light a serious issue that England itself could not see, and with the spread and increased fame of his works people everywhere were beginning to see that something had to be done (Diniejko).

The Industrial Revolution played a major role in the political and economic changes of this period. Due to these shifts, poor men, women, and children entered the Labor force, enduring poor working conditions to meet basic needs (Balkin, 2022). According to Chase (1957), novels render reality in great detail, offering not only entertainment but also didactic values. Through literary works, readers can gain insight into both the story and the historical context. Readers actively engage with the text to uncover its meaning, which connects to Iser's concept of the aesthetic response: the novel's significance grows when readers respond to it through the act of reading.

Charles Dickens, in *Great Expectations*, sets the story near the end of the Industrial Revolution, a time of significant growth in fabric production and trade. This study focuses on how the achievements of individuals during this period are reflected in Dickens's novel, including events that critique the role of the government. This analysis uses Iser's concept of the repertoire, which is part of Jauss's aesthetic response theory, to explore how a literary work can be received by a reader. Iser (1987: 69) argues that:

"The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, to social and historical norms, or the whole culture from which the text has emerged—in brief, to what the Prague structuralists have called the 'extra-textual reality' (1987: 69)."

According to Iser, a novel cannot be separated from its repertoire, which includes the social, historical, and cultural background that shapes the story. The repertoire provides a framework for understanding a literary work as a reflection of societal existence over time. A novel's purpose is to communicate significant events or important histories of human society.

Reception theory was a reaction to what appeared to be a stalemate in literary studies. Of paramount concern for this theory was the impact a piece of literature has on its readers and the responses it elicits. Instead of asking what the text means, I asked what it does to its potential readers.... The message (of the text) that was no longer to be ascertained triggered interest in what has since been called text processing—what happens to the text in reading. (Iser, 2000, p. 311).

For Iser, a given text does not depend utterly upon any particular reader for its

meaning but —implies an ideal reader. Literary meaning inheres in a collaboration between author and reader. Iser draws upon the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin in regarding the author’s words as providing instructions to the reader, who acts to fill in the gaps and blanks inevitably encountered in any serious literary text (Shi, 2013: 3). It expresses that literary work cannot bring the meaning without reader participation in reading process. The gap or blank appropriate in that novel provide the reader to fill it with their own knowledge and comprehension experiences about the story of that novel. It can be related between repertoire of the text and the reader.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive-analytical method. Descriptive analysis is commonly employed in literary studies to gather data and provide a thorough explanation. In this study, the data centres around the character of Pip in *Great Expectations*, who aspire to become wealthy. Pip gains wealth through a mysterious benefactor but struggles to manage it, eventually losing it.

To analyse the data, the researcher draws on Jauss's theory of aesthetic reception, which considers how readers interpret and respond to a literary work. The primary data source is *Great Expectations* (published in 2002), consisting of 20 chapters. The research employs qualitative data analysis, using note-taking and reading processes as key instruments. Through reading and note-taking, the researcher classifies relevant data and interprets its connection to the study's focus on the Victorian era’s impact on the narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

One of the central features of Charles Dickens’s novel is the transformation of the protagonist, Pip, from a poor boy to a wealthy man. Dickens uses Pip's story to depict the nature of London society during the Victorian era. *Great Expectations* highlights how the weak support the strong, the poor uphold the rich, and the children sustain the parents. These themes are recurrent in Dickens’s work, where societal problems such as poverty, crime, and class struggles are evident.

Repertoire of *Great Expectations*

Historical Events	Social Background	Cultural Background
Industrial revolution	Social class	Education problems
Legal system	Individual identity	Child Labor
Victorian Period	Morality	Gentility
	Love and wealth	Economic

Manifestation of the Repertoire in the novel and the issue that illustrates in that story.

This discussion will describe some of the examples of the actualization of the repertoire of the text in the novel.

Embodiment of Moral Value

The statement about moral which is discuss in the story of Pip and those display in some quotations. One notable quote from Dickens’ work that reflects the novel’s exploration of morality and personal growth is:

“In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice.”

This quote highlights the profound impact of moral injustices on young minds and sets the stage for Pip's early experiences of shame, guilt, and class consciousness. Pip's journey throughout the novel reflects his moral struggle to reconcile his ambitions and societal expectations with his loyalty, gratitude, and empathy toward others, particularly Joe and Magwitch. Another reflective quote on moral redemption and forgiveness is: *"Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There's no better rule."* This speaks to Pip's ultimate realization that character and morality are not determined by appearances or status but by actions and intentions.

Representation about wealth

A significant quote from *Great Expectations* that reflects on the theme of wealth and its impact on human character and relationships is:

"You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read, since I first came here, the rough common boy whose poor heart you wounded even then. You have been in every prospect I have ever seen since—on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light, in the darkness, in the wind, in the woods, in the sea, in the streets."

This statement, made by Pip to Estella, encapsulates how wealth and social aspirations have shaped Pip's identity and influenced his relationships. Pip's yearning for Estella symbolizes his desire to rise above his humble origins, spurred by his assumption that wealth and status would earn her love and societal respect. However, as the story progresses, Pip learns that wealth does not bring genuine happiness or moral superiority. His disillusionment with his "gentlemanly" life and ultimate return to humility and integrity reflect Dickens's critique of the societal obsession with material wealth and social class.

Another apt quote is:

"We need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts."

This sentiment reflects Pip's realization that true wealth lies not in material possessions but in emotional honesty, empathy, and the relationships we build with others.

Representation about revolution industry

In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens does not directly address the Industrial Revolution but critiques its societal consequences through the depiction of characters and settings. The novel reflects the transformation of Victorian England during the Industrial Revolution, particularly its effects on class structure, wealth distribution, and human relationships.

Implicit Critique of the Industrial Revolution

Urbanization and Alienation:

Pip's journey to London highlights the stark contrast between rural life in the marshes and the bustling, impersonal urban environment. London, as depicted in the novel, is chaotic, polluted, and morally ambiguous, reflecting the alienation and disconnection often associated with industrial urban centre.

Class Mobility and the Illusion of Progress:

The Industrial Revolution created opportunities for social mobility, but Dickens critiques the moral cost of pursuing wealth and status. Pip's "great expectations" symbolize the era's obsession with material success, yet his wealth comes at the expense of his relationships and personal integrity. Characters like Joe

and Bidy represent the enduring value of traditional, pre-industrial virtues such as hard work, honesty, and kindness, contrasting with the corruption and superficiality of urban wealth.

Economic Inequality:

Magwitch's backstory as a convict and his struggles to amass wealth for Pip underscore the harsh realities of a society that marginalized the poor despite industrial progress. Dickens draws attention to the systemic injustices perpetuated by economic inequality.

Representation about social class

As Bloom (2005) notes, *Great Expectations* serves both as an elegy for the lost innocence of the lower-class rural population and as a critique of the growing gap between illusion and reality during the era of reform, social mobility, and commerce. Through Pip, Dickens critiques the social conditions in London.

The theme of social class is central to *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, shaping the characters' aspirations, relationships, and moral choices. Dickens critiques the rigid class structure of Victorian England, highlighting its injustices and the moral corruption associated with social mobility and materialism.

Representative Quotes

- On social inequality and exploitation: "*I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe.*" This moment of realization for Pip underscores the moral gap between wealth-driven ambition and genuine human decency, echoing concerns about the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism.
- On urbanization and societal changes: "*We Britons had at that time particularly settled that it was treasonable to doubt our having and our being the best of everything.*" This line reflects the self-satisfaction and moral blindness of Victorian society during the Industrial Revolution, highlighting its failure to address the negative consequences of progress.

Representation about love

Love is a central theme in *Great Expectations*, explored in its various forms: romantic love, familial love, unrequited love, and love tainted by manipulation or self-interest. Dickens portrays love as both a redemptive and destructive force, shaping the lives of characters and driving the narrative forward.

Romantic Love:

Pip's obsessive and idealized love for Estella dominates much of the novel. Despite her coldness and inability to reciprocate, Pip remains devoted to her, revealing his immaturity and misguided priorities. His famous confession to Estella reflects this:

"You are part of my existence, part of myself."

This shows how deeply Pip has entwined his identity with his feelings for Estella, despite the unbalanced and toxic nature of their relationship.

Familial Love:

Joe Gargery's unconditional love for Pip is a powerful counterpoint to Pip's romantic obsession. Joe's quiet, steadfast care symbolizes selfless and nurturing love. For example, despite Pip's neglect and snobbery, Joe continues to support and forgive him: "*Ever the best of friends; ain't us, Pip?*"

This line exemplifies Joe's unwavering kindness, highlighting love as a force that transcends pride and hurt.

Love as Manipulation:

Miss Havisham’s twisted love for her lost fiancé turns into a desire for vengeance, which she projects onto Estella. She raises Estella to be incapable of love, using her as a weapon to break men’s hearts. Miss Havisham’s eventual regret is poignant: *“What have I done! What have I done!”* This moment reveals the devastating consequences of her inability to move past betrayal.

Redemptive Love:

Magwitch’s love for Pip is an unlikely but profound example of redemption. His desire to give Pip a better life stems from genuine affection and gratitude, contrasting with Pip’s initial shallow ambitions. Magwitch’s sacrificial love allows Pip to reevaluate his priorities and embrace humility.

Unrequited Love:

Pip’s realization that Estella may never love him mirrors the pain of unrequited love, a universal experience that resonates deeply with readers. His eventual acceptance reflects personal growth:

“I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be.”

This illustrates the irrational and often painful nature of love, yet also the resilience it demands.

Education and Opportunity

- Education was a privilege tied to class. Biddy, who teaches Pip, represents practical knowledge and wisdom, contrasting with Pip’s formal but sometimes shallow learning in London.

- Quote:

“In the end, the whole focus of my attention was upon the knife that was stabbing me.”

(Chapter 35).

This metaphor illustrates how Pip’s pursuit of "gentlemanly" education comes at a personal cost, alienating him from his roots.

The list of Characters in this novel, it shows in the table below:

Characters	Role
Pip (Philip Pirrip)	The protagonist; an orphan who rises from a humble background to become a gentleman.
Estella	The woman Pip loves; a symbol of unattainable love, raised by Miss Havisham to break men's hearts.
Miss Havisham	An eccentric old woman; a symbol of vengeance and emotional ruin. She manipulates Estella and Pip.
Magwitch (Abel Magwitch)	A convict who becomes Pip's secret benefactor; symbolizes redemption and sacrifice.
Joe Gargery	Pip’s father figure; a kind-hearted blacksmith who embodies unconditional love despite Pip’s shame.
Mr. Jaggers	A stern lawyer managing Pip’s affairs in London;

	represents the power of law and emotional detachment.
Herbert Pocket	Pip's best friend in London; represents true friendship and support.
Biddy	Pip's childhood friend; symbolizes understanding, kindness, and a simple life.
Pumblechook	Joe's pompous uncle; falsely claims credit for Pip's fortune and represents hypocrisy.
Compeyson	A conman and Magwitch's enemy; responsible for Miss Havisham's downfall and a symbol of betrayal.
Wemmick	Jaggers' assistant; shows duality with a professional demeanour at work but a kind and caring personality in private.
Orlick	Joe's worker who holds a grudge against Pip; represents physical threat and malice.

Dickens critiques the rigid and superficial class divisions of Victorian England, suggesting that true worth lies in character, not wealth or status. Pip's journey demonstrates the emptiness of material aspirations and the value of humility, loyalty, and moral integrity. The novel advocates for a more egalitarian perspective, challenging readers to reconsider the assumptions and prejudices tied to social class.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens critiques the societal upheavals of his time, warning against the dehumanizing effects of industrial progress while advocating for the enduring importance of empathy, integrity, and personal connections. It portrays love as a complex, multifaceted force. True love is depicted as selfless and forgiving, as shown in Joe's and Magwitch's actions. In contrast, love driven by selfishness, pride, or manipulation leads to pain and destruction, as seen with Miss Havisham and Estella. Ultimately, the novel suggests that love is most fulfilling when rooted in sincerity, humility, and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Great Expectations* reveals the profound influence of the Victorian era on the narrative, particularly in its depiction of social class, wealth, and the quest for gentility. Through Pip's journey from poverty to wealth, Dickens critiques the class system, morality, and the government's role during the Industrial Revolution. The concept of the repertoire, as articulated by Iser, helps explain how Dickens's work reflects the social and cultural realities of the time. Ultimately, *Great Expectations* is not just the story of an individual's rise to wealth, but a critique of Victorian society's values and the complex relationships between individuals, class, and morality.

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