

Relationship Ideals in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

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ABSTRACT

Our main argument for examining romantic relationships in Charles Dickens' Great Expectations rests on the fact that although thematically it can be said that the novel focuses on class structure, the thrust of the plot centres on a number of relationships. The Victorian era was an age of change. With the expansion of the empire and the progress brought about by the industrial revolution, new ways of thinking started to influence the society and its culture. This included ideals on relationships and marriages. To establish our problem statement, we refer to the work Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction by Talia Schaffer. According to Schaffer, a Victorian woman may marry for romance or she may marry for practical reasons. Based on long-established Victorian norms, we hypothesise that romantic marriages will result in unmet expectations. To support this hypothesis we adapted Vannier and O'Sullivan's investment model framework to analyse the relationships in Great Expectations. We also widened the scope to include analysis of male characters involved in the relationships. As there was no clear pattern with regards to romantic relationships, we posit that even in the Victorian age, relationship expectations, ideals and success are determined by individual personalities and perceptions and not by social norms or expectations.

Keywords: Dickens' Great Expectations; investment model framework; relationships; social class; Victorian age

INTRODUCTION

"Have a heart that never hardens and a temper that never tires,
and a touch that never hurts." Charles Dickens *Hard Times*

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was one of Victorian England's most prolific authors. He wrote a total of 15 novels, all of which tell the story of universal human concerns - destiny, upward social mobility, aspirations, prospects and prejudices. However *Great Expectations* (first published in 1861) is the only novel by Dickens that declares its theme in the title. According to Schilling (2001, p. 69) in *Great Expectations*, "Dickens renders a moral judgment by adding the consonant "s" to form the plural of his great title. *Great Expectations* contains then the classical vanity of human wishes, the tragedy of the wish fulfilled, as if there were something necessarily corrupt in what we all want, so that whatever it is we most desire will destroy us as human beings". Several characters in *Great Expectations*, like so many from his other novels as well, are reluctant to accept the class they were born into. Determined to have something different and remarkable, characters like Phillip Pirrip and Estella, fall into acts of self-deception. Written during the Victorian era, *Great Expectations*, one of the most influential works in Dickens' oeuvre, depicts not only Victorian concerns but more importantly, it criticises the dominant ideology of the time which included strict codes of conduct related to social class and gender (Lemmer, 2007). After more than 150 years since it was first published, this novel is still of great value as seen in the continued academic discussions that have gone beyond social class and gender, and become more interdisciplinary in nature.

It can be said that this novel is the bildungsroman of Philip Pirrip (or simply known as Pip), the main protagonist. At the beginning of the story we are introduced to young Pip who lived with his sister and blacksmith brother-in-law, Joe Gargery, near the harsh marshes of Kent, where he first chanced upon the convict, Magwitch. The encounter forever changed his life. Then as he gets acquainted with Miss Havisham, he was smitten with Estella, her ward. Coming into great fortune by an anonymous benefactor promises a better future for Pip. As the story progresses, we observe that Pip's character changes as a result of his desperate need to be a gentleman so that he can be with Estella.

Therefore, our main argument for examining romantic relationships in *Great Expectations* rests on the fact that although thematically it can be said that the novel focuses on class structure, the thrust of the plot centres on a number of relationships that include Pip and Estella, Miss Havisham and Compeyson, Herbert and Clara as well as Joe and Bidley - the primary one being that of Pip and Estella. We also continue the current trend of studies on *Great Expectations* that mainly focus on interdisciplinary approaches by adapting Vannier and O'Sullivan's investment model framework (2017) for romantic expectations. We believe the notion of romance can also address another issue, one which is related to Pip's great expectation of becoming a gentleman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A decade ago, Davis wrote about why Victorian literature is still relevant to us. The Victorians, he said, "were good at finding almost *anywhere* in time or space those tense areas that rang bells for themselves, echoing their concerns in excitement or in warning". He further states that,

...without a clear sense of where its changes were leading them, the Victorians relished the chance to do with earlier times what they could hardly do in their own. In the clarity of retrospection, they loved to see in periods of great change both a dramatic analogy for their own predicament and a possible causal origin for it. (Davis 2008, p. 138)

Perhaps this sensibility, reflected in the literature of the time, explains why Victorian authors like Dickens continue to be of interest in the age of rapid change like today. The following are some recent studies on or that referred to *Great Expectations* which show the dynamism of the novel.

In his article "Vagrant, Convict, Cannibal Chief: Abel Magwitch and the Culture of Cannibalism in *Great Expectations*" Robinson (2017), addressed the marginalisation of Magwitch – both in the novel and in academe. He argued that despite the significance of this character, in terms of appearance and role in the plot, Magwitch had often been treated as a flat character. Robinson posited that Magwitch's vagrancy, violence and savagery provided a substantial contrast to civilised society and its sadistic practices.

Approaching *Great Expectations* from a more interdisciplinary approach, Laird (2017) examined Victorian debates on madness. By combining literary analysis of two Victorian novels, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, with Victorian medical and scientific texts including articles such as "Dangerous to Themselves and Others: The Victorian Debate over the Prevention of Wrongful Confinement", "Pedigrees of Madness: The Study of Heredity in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Psychiatry" and "'Prisoners of Their Own Feebleness': Women, Nerves, and Western Medicine—A Historical Overview" Laird examined how the literary texts projected the confusion of the time about the origins of mental illness and its treatment. The findings showed that the mental well-being of characters like Miss Havisham and Estella

were highly influenced by the social and circumstantial setting. In addition, the female characters also struggled to escape naturally inherited cycles of behaviour forced upon them by the realities of their surroundings. Finally, the findings of this research show that gender factor is also significant in the understanding of mental illness as the Victorians assumed women to be more vulnerable to external influence than men, therefore more susceptible to conditions of distressed mental capacity.

Great Expectations was also alluded to in a medical study. In an editorial to the medical journal *Joint*, Milano (2017) reviewed an article on patient expectations regarding shoulder surgery as a proposed treatment and its effect. Using a dedicated interview tool, the patients' expectations were measured. The analysis showed that counselling provided by surgeons prior to surgery had no significant effect on patients' expectations. Milano then went on to consider the notion of expectation which he said is the "perception of an event or condition that has not yet come about and can therefore only be imagined; as such, these change over time as a result of events, new information, and encounters that may precede or follow [it]" (p. 131). Great expectations, Milano added, as can be seen in Dickens' novel "are nothing other than the desire to be 'different'". As with Pip, expectations can be dashed if they are based on other people's met along the way. He had to be disappointed and he had to discard the false expectations in order to reconcile with himself. Similarly, Milano concluded that effects of surgery on patients were based on their own perception of their condition, how they interpret the information given by the surgeon and their own coping strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As stated earlier, the Victorian age was an age of change. With the expansion of the British empire and the progress brought about by the industrial revolution, new ways of thinking started to influence the society and its culture. This included ideals on relationships and marriages. To establish our problem statement, we refer to the work of Talia Schaffer (2016). According to Schaffer in her book *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, a Victorian woman may marry for romance or she may marry for practical reasons. Specifically looking at the relationship ideals, there were the traditional familiar marriages and new modern ideals of a romantic marriage. While familiar marriage focused on "self" serving the need of "others", it is a reflection of the social structure. Romantic marriage on the other hand focused on the "self as independent agent" and concentrated on the needs of the couple. Both types of marriages differed in relation to "what love meant, what a partner was for, what married life was supposed to do" (Schaffer 2016, p. 8). Familiar marriages represented the traditional while romantic marriages were the result of modern influence that was changing the existing dominant ideology. The opposing ideals are important representations of the changing ideas of the meaning of marriage.

In fiction, these two marital ideals, the familiar and the romantic, competed for over a century. It involved a long process of social and cultural negotiation. As Raymond Williams argued, "a dominant culture has to incorporate the residue of the past if it is to function; residual element can speak to those areas that the dominant culture undervalues" cited in Schaffer, p. 8). Schaffer then argued that "familiar marriage allows us to see what the newly dominant ideas of romantic marriages left out, and which of these elements still felt crucial to Victorians" (Schaffer, 2016, p. 8). Her thesis therefore is that, rather than passion, women still considered esteem as a better basis for marriage. According to Schaffer, this was true well into the late 1800's. Based on long-established Victorian norms, we hypothesise that romantic marriages will result in unmet expectations. To support this hypothesis we adapted an investment model framework to analyse the relationships in *Great Expectations*.

The framework that we have adapted and applied is based on Sarah A. Vannier and Lucia F. O’Sullivan’s (2017) model of unmet romantic expectations. In our analysis of the romantic relationship between the characters in *Great Expectations* we observe if their ideal expectations were met or not. This will then lead the reading into the character’s relationship dynamic. The relationship dynamic is associated with the character’s satisfaction, quality of alternatives and investment. According to Vannier and O’Sullivan, the components of the relationship dynamics determined the commitment variant for the relationship. “Satisfaction” refers to the positive affect experienced in a relationship; “quality of alternatives” denotes the appeal of possible substitutes to the relationship and is considered a negative component; “investment” is defined as the intrinsic and extrinsic resources that are lost if the relationship fails. Intrinsic resources include time and emotional effort, and mutual friends and joint possessions are examples of extrinsic resources.

The relationships we analysed are Pip and Estella, Miss Havisham and Compeyson, Herbert and Clara as well as Joe and Bidley. In our analysis we examined both the female and male characters involved in the relationships and linking their motivations to the relationship investment model that is pictured in the figure below:

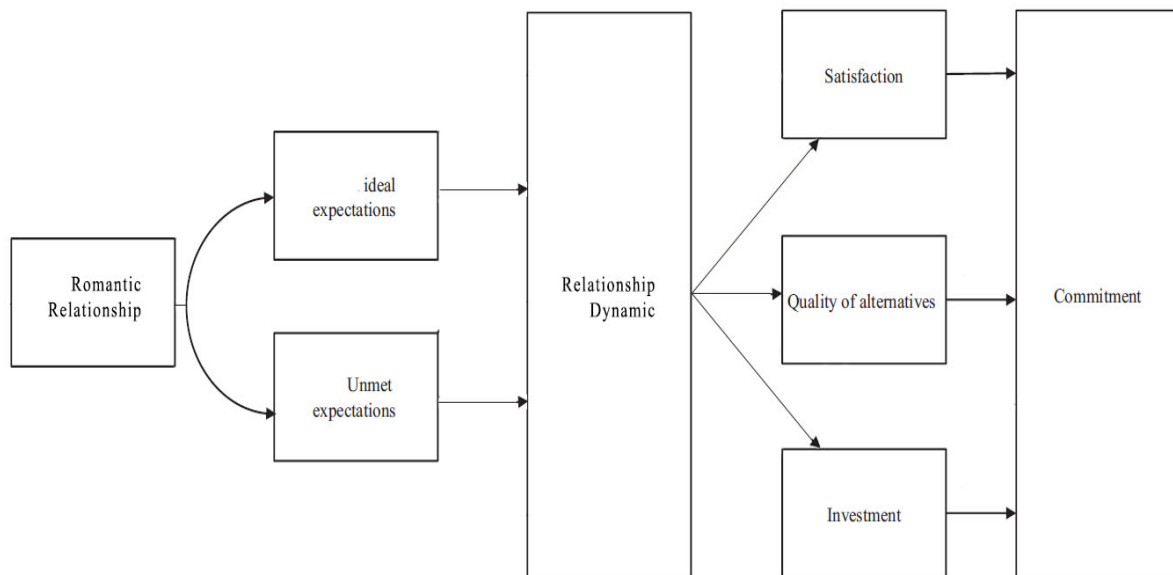


FIGURE 1. Relationship Investment Model

ANALYSIS

Pip’s love for Estella was established early in the novel despite her cold disposition and arrogance. Pip was also under the impression that Miss Havisham meant for him to be with Estella, which supported his romantic ideals,

she had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths a blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin – in short, do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. (Dickens, p. 206)

Pip also invested a lot in terms of emotional effort in justifying his love for Estella, which in the social context of Victorian sensibilities is inappropriate:

“Biddy,” said I, after binding her to secrecy, “I want to be a gentleman... I have particular reasons for wanting to be a gentleman...”
...“You know best, Pip; but don't you think you are happier as you are?”
“Biddy... I am not at all happy as I am. I am disgusted with my calling and with my life. I have never taken to either, since I was bound...I never shall or can be comfortable—or anything but miserable—there, Biddy!—unless I can lead a very different sort of life from the life I lead now... what would it signify to me, being coarse and common, if nobody had told me so!”
...“The beautiful young lady at Miss Havisham's, and she's more beautiful than anybody ever was, and I admire her dreadfully, and I want to be a gentleman on her account.”
“Do you want to be a gentleman, to spite her or to gain her over?” Biddy quietly asked...
“I don't know,” I moodily answered. (Dickens, pp. 112-113)

Pip's determination in becoming a gentleman fulfils the model of relationship that is driven by romance and focused on individual satisfaction at the expense of societal expectations.

I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I found her irresistible. Once for all; I knew to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be. Once for all; I loved her none the less because I knew it, and it had no more influence in restraining me, than if I had devoutly believed her to be human perfection. (Dickens, p. 207)

Pip's romantic ideals and expectations clearly superseded serving the need of others. Despite the convention that people only marry within their social class does not deter Pip's hope. As he came into great fortune by a generous benefactor (which turned out to be Magwitch, the convict), Pip was delighted at the thought that he might be able to pursue his relationship with Estella after all. Thinking his benefactor to be Miss Havisham and that Miss Havisham really meant for Pip to be with Estella was a poor emotional investment on Pip's part as his love was unrequited. Following this, there were many other efforts invested throughout the story that showed Pip's determination to persuade Estella. However nothing seems to win her over. Estella was aloof as ever and Pip's romantic relationship expectation was unmet. Thus by the end of the novel Pip's relationship dynamic was compromised because of the unmet expectations.

I am already quite an old bachelor... I have forgotten nothing in my life that ever had a foremost place there, and little that ever had any place there. But that poor dream, as I once used to call it, has all gone by, Biddy, all gone by!. (Dickens, p. 430)

In the case of Pip, he had come to the realisation that his satisfaction did not have to depend on being with Estella. He was content with being settled as an old bachelor. As a result of his great expectations, he had invested everything to be with Estella, and missed the opportunity for happiness when he realized too late that Biddy was a quality alternative for him despite her social class. It is also worth noting that although Pip's yearning for Estella was based on romantic ideals, it is also influenced by his need for upwards social mobility and that could be achieved by a marriage to Estella.

Estella, on the other hand, had a different and clearer expectation concerning her relationship ideals. This had to do with her upbringing by Miss Havisham who was wary of love. Estella grew up without the understanding of what love constitutes. As a result, her expectation of an ideal relationship does not fit the romantic marriage model.

“You must know,” said Estella, condescending to me as a brilliant and beautiful woman might, “that I have no heart—if that has anything to do with my memory.”
I got through some jargon to the effect that I took the liberty of doubting that. That I knew better. That there could be no such beauty without it.

“Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt,” said Estella, “and, of course, if it ceased to beat I should cease to be. But you know what I mean. I have no softness there, no—sympathy—sentiment—nonsense.” (Dickens, p. 212)

It is convenient to simply see Estella as cold and heartless. However, we need to take into account the environment provided for her by Miss Havisham that was designed to shape Estella to be a heart-breaker. Estella is the proponent for the marriage plot in this story as she is the one who had a say as to whom she wants to be married to. Her options were either the romantic relationship as proposed by Pip or a familiar marriage with a wealthy gentleman, Bentley Drummle. Estella’s choice between these two suitors was an example of the “way of figuring how one should be in the world” (Schaffer, 2016, p. 8). This is also the trope that Schaffer called the two suitor plot, or what we identify in modern day as the love triangle. The two suitor plot is one “with each suitor embodying a different marital ideal” (Schaffer, 2016, p. 7). In Estella’s case, a romantic relationship is out of the question.

There! It is done. I shall do well enough, and so will my husband. As to leading me into what you call this fatal step, Miss Havisham would have had me wait, and not marry yet; but I am tired of the life I have led, which has very few charms for me, and I am willing enough to change it. Say no more. We shall never understand each other.

(Dickens, p. 324)

It is important to note here that the decision to be married was done autonomously by Estella herself. It was her decision to pursue a familiar marriage. Schaffer noted that during the Victorian era, “marriage was a woman’s only career... female characters were able to make strategic decisions about their lives through the agency of marriage” (Schaffer, 2016, p. 13). As the decision was in Estella’s hands, she chose the familiar marriage route of marrying Bentley Drummle. The marriage to Drummle signifies conformity to the social conventions of the Victorian era. This decision to follow the traditional familiar marriage is not unlike the Satis House that Estella grew up in that symbolized a resistance to change and growth. Estella’s marriage to Drummle followed the “socially approved” option “constrained by dynastic and property consideration” (Schaffer, 2016, p. 15).

Estella’s choice was a direct critique of romantic relationships that supposedly fulfilled one’s needs. To Estella, romantic relationships would only cause heartbreaks, so she decided to pursue a familiar marriage despite being persuaded countless times by Pip. Pip’s proposition for a marriage based on romantic relationship was rejected by Estella thus she ended up marrying Drummle just as she had decided to do. Estella’s relationship dynamic however did not end in happiness:

I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband, who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness. And I had heard of the death of her husband, from an accident consequent on his ill-treatment of a horse. (Dickens, p. 430)

There was no satisfaction or positive experience in Estella’s marriage to Drummle. Despite the fact that it was her choice to go with a familiar marriage, Estella did not invest whole-heartedly into the relationship thus resulting in their separation. We could consider Pip as her alternative relationship, however Dickens has determined that their parting was inevitable. Estella even confessed that they “will continue friends apart,” (Dickens, 1861, p. 683). It seemed that their love just was not meant to be (although in an alternative version Dickens’ suggested a happy ending for Pip and Estella).

Estella’s predisposed distrust towards love can be traced back to Miss Havisham whose encounter with love had been traumatic. Miss Havisham was in love and engaged to

be married to a young man by the name of Compeyson. By Victorian standards, she was in her prime and poised for marriage:

“The marriage day was fixed, the wedding dresses were bought, the wedding tour was planned out, the wedding guests were invited. The day came, but not the bridegroom. He wrote her a letter—
“Which she received,” I struck in, “when she was dressing for her marriage? At twenty minutes to nine?”
“At the hour and minute,” said Herbert, nodding, “at which she afterwards stopped all the clocks. What was in it, further than that it most heartlessly broke the marriage off,”
(Dickens, 162)

Miss Havisham’s idea of romantic ideals constituted a romantic relationship accompanied by passionate love between her and her fiancée. However, as he left her at the altar, her expectations were shattered. Readers later discovered that seducing Miss Havisham was only part of a business agreement and it can be said that Compeyson was only after the convenience of her wealth. This resulted in her having a twisted idea about love, which later influenced the way she raised Estella. Miss Havisham’s notion of love is demonstrated in the extract below:

“I’ll tell you,” said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, “what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter—as I did!”
(Dickens, p. 214)

Miss Havisham was let down by her passionate love for Compeyson. At this stage it can be stated that Miss Havisham had invested in both emotional and material for this relationship but was rejected. As a result of the disappointment she became a grim and reclusive character. She was hurt and angered and vengeful for many years after. The tragedy is that she was not just angry with Compeyson, she was also determined to “wreak revenge on all the male sex” (Dickens, 157). Miss Havisham’s relationship with Compeyson can then be considered obsolete. Consequently, it is necessary to discuss Miss Havisham’s relationship with her adoptive daughter, Estella. The relationship dynamic between Miss Havisham and Estella can be taken into account as it is the projection of Miss Havisham’s alternative relationship.

“I had been shut up in these rooms a long time (I don’t know how long; you know what time the clocks keep here)... I wanted a little girl to rear and love, and save from my fate...”
(Dickens, p. 357)

A result of not being in a relationship is often time associated with being lonely and this was true for Miss Havisham. She soon decided to adopt a little girl with the intention of protecting her from becoming another victim of passionate love. She perceived that the adoption would satisfy her unmet romantic expectations. Thus she invested enormous effort into educating and shaping Estella to break the hearts of men before they break hers. Nevertheless, Estella and Miss Havisham’s relationship was not built out of mutual commitment that in the end their relationship could not be sustained.

Herbert and Clara’s union depicts a relationship that was successful. The fact that should be taken into account is both Herbert’s romantic relationship expectation as well as his family’s expectation with regards to his marriage. At one point, Herbert was also sent to Miss Havisham’s to be introduced to Estella supposedly with the prospect of marriage.

“Yes, she had sent for me on a trial visit, and if I had come out of it successfully, I suppose I should have been provided for; perhaps I should have been what-you-may-called it to Estella.”

“What's that?” I asked, with sudden gravity.
He was arranging his fruit in plates while we talked, which divided his attention, and was the cause of his having made this lapse of a word. “Affianced,” he explained, still busy with the fruit. “Betrothed. Engaged. What's-his-named. Any word of that sort.”
“How did you bear your disappointment?” I asked.
“Pooh!” said he, “I didn't care much for it. She's a Tartar.” (Dickens, p. 157)

It was anticipated that Herbert should fall for Estella and be betrothed to her because they were from the same social class. That would have been appropriate following the social convention of the Victorian era. As shown above, however, Herbert was not fond of Estella at all. Herbert's romantic ideal expectations was to be with Clara. Yet her mother had a different idea on the matter. As a product of Victorian society his mother was more predisposed to the notion of familiar marriages. Herbert recounted that Clara “is rather below my mother's nonsensical family notions” (Dickens, 224). Herbert's intrinsic investment towards the relationship with Clara that included patience and perseverance, were the key to his relationship success. Their mutual romantic ideal created a strong relationship dynamic between these two characters despite the difference in social class.

I shall come back for the dear little thing, and the dear little thing and I will walk quietly into the nearest church. Remember! The blessed darling comes of no family, my dear Handel, and never looked into the red book, and hasn't a notion about her grandpapa. What a fortune for the son of my mother! (Dickens, p. 402)

For Herbert, there was no need for an alternative relationship as his romantic relationship ideals had been fulfilled. Indeed Herbert and Clara's relationship dynamic was built on trust and strong commitment towards each other. This is a great example of a romantic marriage that goes against the social conventions of the time.

Another example of a romantic relationship is that between Joe Gargery and Biddy. Joe, Pip's kind-hearted brother-in-law married Biddy, Pip's friend and teacher, after Pip's sister died. Their union was a loving one with mutual expectation in the aspect of romantic relationship despite their age gap. Initially their relationship appeared to be based on a pragmatic union, one where Joe would work in his forge as a blacksmith and Biddy would handle the household and domestic chores. However, very quickly their relationship became one that was based on romantic ideals.

...Joe and Biddy stood before me, arm in arm...
“It's my wedding day,” cried Biddy, in a burst of happiness, “and I am married to Joe!” (Dickens, pp. 426-427)

This was observed and acknowledged by Pip:

“Dear Biddy,” said I, “you have the best husband in the whole world, and if you could have seen him by my bed you would have—But no, you couldn't love him better than you do.”
“No, I couldn't indeed,” said Biddy.
“And, dear Joe, you have the best wife in the whole world, and she will make you as happy as even you deserve to be, you dear, good, noble Joe!” (Dickens, p. 427)

Pip even noted the high satisfaction they experienced in their relationship. They were jubilant with the relationship. In fact, it had been observed that within the Victorian setting, “working people were often freer to marry for love than their wealthier brethren” (Schaffer, 2016:5). However, it is important to note that their happiness with being in a romantic relationship is a powerful evidence for the prospect of this model of relationship.

CONCLUSION

The relationship plot in *Great Expectations* portrays the expectation of relationship ideals. While chasing these ideals, issues such as practicality, compatibility and romantic ideals that may support or contradict the Victorian culture arise. Characters like Pip, Estella and the rest discussed above, display how they navigate this dilemma. The characters that pursued romantic ideals had different outcomes from each other – Pip ended up heartbroken unlike Herbert though both had opted for romantic relationships as opposed to familiar marriages. *Great Expectations* is a prime example that showcased the ways Victorians adapted to the new dominant idea of romantic marriages while trying to preserve the traditional familiar marriage, a conflict between the old and the new common to the dynamic Victorian era. As we cannot establish a clear pattern with regards to romantic relationships, we posit that, like the patients that Milano referred to in his article, the relationship expectations, ideals and success in *Great Expectations* are determined by individual personalities and perceptions as portrayed in the relationships between Pip and Estella or Herbert and Clara and not just by social norms or expectations. What this may suggest with regards to Dickens and the Victorian society is that the ideology of social class is complex and that it influences relationship ideals. These ideals affect the society's expectations and sometimes even its decency as in the case of Compeyson and judgment as can be seen in Pip. Dickens showed some of these characters were willing to sacrifice morality in order to fulfill social conventions.

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