



Applying Marxism on Dickens' *Great Expectations*

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Abstract: Despite having lived rather different lives, Karl Marx and Charles Dickens have worked on similar issues like class diversification, poor conditions of the working class, and consequences of the Industrial Revolution etc. They both

advocated for better lives of the Proletariat. Where Dickens expressed his view through fictions, Marx came up with concepts like Marxism through works like the famous *Communist Manifesto*. In fact, Robert J Shiller, in his research on Narrative Economics, talks about the importance of fiction in propagating an idea, a philosophy and an ideology. Similarly, Charles Dickens was able to propagate Marxism with a vigour that Marx's *Communist Manifesto* could not. Even so, Marx himself spoke of how authors like Dickens helped him in spreading his new ideas.

Though numerous reviews and analysis have been done on the works of both these exceedingly exceptional figures, this particular research paper explores the similarities between two of their major works, the *Communist Manifesto* and *Great Expectations*. *Great Expectations*, through its protagonist Pip, explores ideas found in the *Communist Manifesto*, whether it be the image of the working class as the social scum, the jealousy of the Proletariat, the standoffish attitude of the Bourgeoisie, or even the materialistic family relations of the Bourgeoisie. In conclusion, while the *Communist Manifesto* strongly communicated its ideas across nations, books like the *Great Expectations* conveyed those ideas in the form of a story.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, Economics, Communism, Great Expectations, Writers, Impact, New Ideas.

Introduction

Karl Marx was a German philosopher and an economist who is regarded as the 'Father of Communism'. Along with his friend, the philosopher and economist Friedrich Engels, he wrote the famed pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto*. Published in 1848, the pamphlet was a clarion call for the unification of the working classes. His landmark analysis of

political economy and the labour theory of value is enshrined in *Das Kapital*, the first volume of which was published in 1867 and the subsequent two volumes were published posthumously.

Parallely, Charles Dickens was an English author, known for his novels such as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860–61), *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), *David Copperfield* (1849–50), and stories such as *A Christmas Carol* (1843). He is widely considered among the most authoritative voices of the Victorian era and was a pioneer of the Social Novel. His characters are some of the most popular characters in history of literature, and their universal appeal and mutability is reflected not only in their continued admiration but also consistent adaptation.

Dickens' works are still vastly read, studied, interpreted, and sought by readers across the globe.

This paper will look at two of the most notable figures from the field of literature and economics, Karl Marx, and Charles Dickens respectively, and explore their convergence.

The intersection between their writing, political thought, and intellectual humanism, centred around the age of industrial modernity has been vastly studied. This is a fertile ground to situate in and examine their works through close reading of their texts and an assessment of their intellectual investments. In doing so, the confluence between their thoughts as well as the differences, particularly on economic aspects can be fleshed out. The economist Robert J. Shiller has proposed the theory of 'Narrative Economics', wherein he discusses the ways in which "the human brain is always more inclined to a piece of narrative, whether factual or not", to give reasons for their actions (Shiller, 2017). This framework will further help in pursuing this research paper.

In 1854, Marx wrote about Dickens and the circle of his contemporary novelists that "the present splendid

brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together” (PK, 2019). Following this, I will also be outlining a relationship between the worlds of fiction and non-fiction and draw out their symbiotic relationship.

Literature Review

I would first like to analyse secondary sources that draw a comparison between Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, and a number of Charles Dickens’ works—for instance, *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, among others—to understand the aims of both the authors, and to study similarities between them, which are noted by other researchers.

Despite having lived completely different lives across the expanse of western Europe, “separated by language, nationality, and methodology”, both Charles Dickens and Karl Marx have been compared and contrasted thoroughly in the past and the present because of the similar ideas in their works (Stearns and Burns, 2011). This is because both of them have “profoundly influenced the social world of the emerging Industrial Revolution using complementary perspectives.” (PK, 2019).

For both of them, the main focus lay on the lives of the working class. This had largely to do with the Industrial Revolution. Due to the Industrial Revolution, a rapid social change was triggered. As economic activity shifted from the countryside to the city, and as the industrial economy necessitated a labouring population, a class of people was shaped. The working class, as it came to be known, could only earn with their labour. Issues like lower wages, working conditions and working hours were raised constantly during

the time (Hill and Eman M.) and became a flashpoint of political organization.

They were a part of the proletariat, a terminology introduced by Marx himself. By proletariat, Marx meant “the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live” (Marx and Engels, 1888). Marx had clearly stated in *The Communist Manifesto* his belief that the bourgeoisie—signifying the middle and upper classes—would often consider the working class as nothing except as mere tools of production, and in doing so, often neglected their needs and rights. Marx believed that the inequalities between the classes, and the ill-treatment of those on the bottom of the social pyramid would finally lead to a revolution, where the bourgeoisie will not only be overthrown by the proletariat, but also abolish capitalism (Hill and Eman M.).

On similar lines, Charles Dickens, after his dreadful experiences as a child labourer, developed a strong belief in the political destiny of the rising working class and wrote many novels. As many would say, “Dickens was from first to last a novelist with a purpose” (PK, 2019). Through his unique characters, who were often witty and wry, he made marked use of humour and satiric devices, and presented the social issues he was deeply concerned about. Interestingly, Dickens’ works used to appear serialized in popular papers and periodicals, which reached the common public and thus instigated curiosity and gathered a mass readership. It pre-empted the social turn in literature when “the proletariat, finally, were the new heroes of popular literature.” much before it could be realized by the bourgeoisie (PK, 2019). According to Jasna PK, “Dickens’s novels are embedded with Marxian themes, such as, the notion of class consciousness, exploitation, and social injustice under capitalism (2019).”

However, it must be known that apart from Marxist social thought, Dickens’ works also included other economic

concepts. An article in *The Economist*, titled “The Economic Sensibilities of ‘A Christmas Carol’”, brings to our attention that “Charles Dickens prescribed not Marxist revolution or Victorian beneficence but free trade and commerce. (2018)” The article claims that the plot of the story “is a more financial one than a moral one. (The Economist,2018).”

Additionally, Marx’s ideas were often seen as hard to comprehend for the common population, which were rather obverse to his prime goal, considering his target audience were the working classes. With “mass distribution of Dickens's stories, however, the proletariat could begin to digest the real fate of Marxism” (Stearns and Burns, 2011). This presents us with an interesting point to untangle—which is whether certain ideas transverse better than others simply by virtue of their style, that is, having stories revolving around them.

From secondary sources, let us take a look at one of the central books in this research, *Great Expectations*. The book is, according to John Bowen, a story that shows the “dark and more haunted” version of a class transition. The book shows us that the world is a place “in which fortunes can be made and just as suddenly lost” (Bowen, 2014). Aforementioned, Dickens was well aware of how the class division worked and affected people, and hence, based most of his books on the same, including *Great Expectations*. There is also a narrative complication and more nuance in eking out class difference, which is shown less through the financial circumstances but more through the change in character of the protagonist, Pip (Bowen, 2014).

Great Expectations and the Communist Manifesto

Here, I would like to outline my close reading of the *The Communist Manifesto* alongside *Great Expectations* to present and substantiate my perspectives as to how both texts

convey the similar, if not same, messages on shared concerns in terms of economic ideas and concepts, such as capitalism, communism, and the labour theory of value.

My choice of *Great Expectations* out of Dickens' many popular works, stems from my understanding of the book as one where the very beginning introduces the reading to the working class and the challenges it faces through the figure of Pip, an orphaned child. It is clear from the start how difficult it was to be a member of lower classes, or poor, during the Victorian Era, and we, as readers are summarily steeped into the depredations of their lives. The gaping gulf between the lifestyles also gives us an insight into both the classes, the lower and the upper, and this contrast is explored quite deeply in the book.

In Marx and Engels', *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter One titled 'Bourgeois and Proletarians' Page 51, specifies that:

“The “dangerous class”, the social scum, that passively rotting class thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”

The phrase “the social scum” is quite similar to the first character Pip interacts with shows how poverty has affected people. It is a poor person, quite horrific, who demands Pip to bring food. Pip deals with him with compassion, which stands in contrast to the terse socially mediated hostility that is at the crux of the novel and presents a psychological counterpart to it.

In the introduction of Chapter Seven, Page 41 of *Great Expectations*, Pip explains how his mother is being referred to as the “wife of the above”, showing that his father was someone in the upper class, and hence would have “exaltation to a better world”, whereas Pip knowing anyone “below” wouldn't earn the same respect. Through this Charles Dickens

hints at the social status quite directly and links it with the similar idea of class consciousness as is mentioned in the Communist Manifesto.

Chapter Eighteen is the turning point of the novel. It is the moment when Pip, comes into money not through his own labour, but because a benefactor decides to leave him with this money. This excerpt sketches out Pip's feelings:

“After a pause they both heartily congratulated me: but there was a certain touch of sadness in their congratulations that I rather resented.” Page 131

Despite the uplifting and congratulatory nature of events, Pip immediately starts doubting that Joe and Biddy are after his money and talks about a jealousy, which he felt previously for the bourgeoisie. Pip becomes more arrogant later in the book, once he adjusts to the life of a gentleman and adopting a snobbish and standoffish attitude having become a member of the rarefied society. Again, this is similar to idea presented in *The Communist Manifesto*, Page 45, were Marx and Engels wrote:

“Not only are they slaves (proletarians) of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State, they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overseer, and above all, by the individual bourgeois manufactured himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims to be its end and aim, the pettier, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.”

Another idea present in both the *Communist Manifesto* and *Great Expectations* is the difference between family relations in the upper class and lower class. As mentioned in the *Communist Manifesto*, Page 36, “*The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.*” Quite likely so, this is indeed very true and shown skilfully by Charles Dickens, by contrasting Pip's relationship with his family and with Estella, his fiancé.

Pip is rather saddened by the death of his sister, Mrs. Joe. Pip finds himself shocked at this. He says:

“Whatever my fortunes might have been, I could scarcely have recalled my sister with much tenderness. But I suppose there is a shock of regret which may exist without much tenderness. Under its influence (and perhaps to make up for the want of the softer feeling) I was seized with a violent indignation against the assailant from whom she had suffered so much.”
Page 251

This shows that, to some extent, despite the casual threats by his sister, and the influence of her temperament on him, Pip still felt “sentimentally” attached to her. However, this is missing in his relationship with Estella, which seems to be rather materialistic.

She is the same Estella who had tortured and bullied him as a kid, because he was poor, and from the lower class, but after gaining money from the benefactor, they began courting. However, it is rather heart-breaking to see how Estella treats Pip, her character very much explicitly defined by this line - *“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.”* Page 215

Estella treats Pip like an option instead of a confident choice as her future husband. She even starts to court someone else, and does not seem to care about Pip’s feelings, and in fact becomes quite straightforward about it.

When Pip asks her whether she is courting someone else, she doesn’t hesitate to say that she indeed is courting a man named Drummelle, and “many others (Page 282).” This is a very unreal, instead of sentimental, relationship perhaps because of the materialistic world Estella is a part of.

Conclusion

It can be clearly seen that Charles Dickens and Karl Marx did, in fact, have a number of common ideas in their works. One was a direct way of communicating through the transformations of the period, where people were being divided on the basis of their class station, and ideology at a time when each new day led to a social movement. Another communicated through the narrative power of stories. Stories have better ways of expressing ideas and humanizing the conceptual worlds that aren't always easy to grasp.

Through the works of Dickens, we are able to understand the importance of literature and its impact on portraying concepts related to human behaviour and thought. Quite indirectly, literature has had a profound impact on history, and as Robert J. Schiller mentioned, it influences the ways in which many people conduct their lives. This is why it becomes even more important to read literature and connect it with the past and the present.

Undoubtedly, both remain great figures, whose works have changed the course of history, and mankind. It is their works that gives us a sense of our shared past, and by understanding the past, we have the capability of improving the present.

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