

Study on Character Behavior in *Great Expectations* from Spiritual Ecological Perspective

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Abstract: This thesis aims to explore disparate effects of different spiritual ecological conditions on the natural world, social groups and human individuals from the perspective of spiritual ecology, so as to improve and promote the spiritual ecological study of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Based on the theories of spiritual ecology, this thesis primarily discusses two aspects: external ecological environment and individual's internal ecological environment. More specifically, external ecological environment is expanded into two levels: natural ecology and social group ecology. Through analysis, it is seen that a person's spiritual ecological condition determines his or her behavior, and the behavior has an impact on the social group one lives in. Ultimately, the social group's ecology is largely counterproductive to the natural ecology. Therefore, individual spiritual ecology plays a decisive role in the development of individuals, society and natural world.

Keywords: Charles Dickens; *Great Expectations*; spiritual ecology; characters' behavior

1. Introduction

Charles John Huffam Dickens is regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. This essay revolves around one of his greatest masterpieces, *Great Expectations*, of his late period. At that time, after experiencing almost all kinds of things, Dickens had a much clearer consciousness of the darkness of society. Coupled with his misfortunes in marriage and love life, the depressed side of his thought became lamentably prominent. This was the time that *Great Expectations* was created. As a bildungsroman, it depicts a story about how the orphan Pip turned out imbalanced in spiritual ecology and finally turned back to normal. This story can be roughly divided into three parts: Pip's simple childhood life in the countryside, Pip's experience of thrusting into London's high-society circles, and Pip discovering the truth and protecting the exiled convict Magwitch who absconded and returned home. After experiencing a roller coaster in life, Pip's "great expectations" were finally shattered, yet blessedly, he recovered his original innocence and simplicity, and deeply realized the preciousness of friendship and family affection eventually.

2. Literature review

Great Expectations is a relatively mature work in the late stages of Dickens' creative career. In the famous Norton Critical Edition reader survey, *Great Expectations* ranks second on the list of the most favorite Dickens novels by readers in Britain and the United States. Therefore, the study of this novel has always received close attention from scholars at home and abroad, who have interpreted it in multiple dimensions from different perspectives. Some scholars interpreted the novel from the perspective of object, space and identity. Chen and Wei explores the poetic functions of the objects of Satis House in the identity transformation of the individual characters as well as the novel's thematic construction^[1]. Some scholars proceeded from the Notion of Wealth in it. Chen and Li held the view that Dickens builds up the power of critique through the formation and structure of *Great Expectations*, making a moral interpretation of the popular notion of wealth in Victorian society^[2].

However, there is relatively a lack of research on this novel from the perspective of the theory of spiritual ecology. Through searching, the result shows that only several journals have studied *Great Expectations* with the theory of spiritual ecology. For instance, Fang published articles in succession, expounding the ecological world in Dickens' novels from the perspective of spiritual ecology earlier^[3-5].

Nevertheless, some papers on relevant topics are available. Many foreign scholars studied Dickens'

novels on the basis of Victorian background, Dickens' life experience and creative style in different periods. Grahame Smith explored Dickens' life experience and his career of writing novels^[6]. Farhana Haque concluded that *Great Expectations* has depicted the class system and real image of Victorian era^[7]. In addition, some other studies focused on exploring the relationship of characters. In 2019, Saed Jamil Shahwan elaborated the powerful influence of benevolence in society and between people under the background of the novel, making the research on the relationship between characters further^[8].

In summary, on one hand, research on *Great Expectations* from the perspective of spiritual ecology is relatively scarce, thus offering limited reference value. On the other hand, although an increasing number of scholars have begun to recognize the importance of spiritual ecology studies, the majority of these investigations tended to approach the subject in a simplistic manner, merely addressing the three dimensions of natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology in isolation. They failed to integrate a detailed analysis of the spiritual ecology of the characters within the novel, resulting in studies that lack depth and comprehensiveness. Therefore, this research aims to deepen and refine the study of spiritual ecology in the novel by exploring both the external ecological environment and the internal ecological environment of individuals. Specifically, the external ecological environment can be expanded into two levels: natural ecology and social group ecology, while the internal ecological environment focuses on the several main characters in the novel.

3. Theoretical basis

"Spiritual ecology" has a history of more than thirty years since it was proposed. Since this theory was put forward, the view represented by Lu Shuyuan is thought to be most systematic and illuminating. In 1994, he put forward the idea of establishing spiritual ecology, claiming that human beings are not only a biological existence, a social existence, but also a spiritual existence, respectively corresponding to natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology^[9]. Therefore, he constructed his understanding of spiritual ecology from the three levels of natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology. The three are closely related, but they are under no circumstances identical, and neither of them can be a substitute for each other.

Put forward by Lu Shuyuan, the theory of spiritual ecology is to study the relationship between the subject of spiritual existence and its living environment. In his opinion, spiritual ecology has two main tasks: one is to focus on the healthy growth of the spiritual subject, which mainly refers to human beings and the inner value system of human beings; another is to focus on how the whole earth ecosystem tends to balance under the coordinated influence of spiritual variables^[9]. This thesis will combine these three levels to analyze the behavior of the characters in *Great Expectations*.

4. Spiritual-ecological study on external environment

Regarding the psychological factors behind individual's various behaviors, there are two major aspects: external spiritual environment and individual's internal spiritual environment. This part is to further elaborate the impact of external ecological environment on individual behaviors from two specific dimensions: natural ecology and social group ecology.

4.1 *Spiritual ecology of the natural world*

Human and nature are two inseparable parts. From the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century, Britain experienced an unprecedented Industrial Revolution, and the process of industrialization developed rapidly. In the course of Industrial Revolution, urbanization was fostered, and the material life of British witnessed amazing development and prosperity, whereas simultaneously, this unplanned and uncontrolled industrial development also put natural resources and the environment at great risk. Thus industrialization and capitalism had begun to bring wretchedness into this country. Just as what is portrayed in *Great Expectations*, crowded cities were often shrouded in thick smoke and smog, and the clear rivers that once meandered along the villages no longer existed as well.

While behind people's unrestrained requests from nature, it is their spiritual factors that play a leading and dominant role. Hence, it is crucial in maintaining a well-conditioned natural ecology to control human spiritual ecology properly.

4.2 *Spiritual ecology of the social groups*

In terms of the social group composed of people and others, spiritual ecology suggests that the social ecology of groups is affected by the situation of individual spiritual world. *Great Expectations* vividly shows the group ecology among people under the influence of individual spiritual ecology.

Taking the protagonist, Pip, for instance, he originally lived in a small village in England with his sister and brother-in-law, a hard-working and honest blacksmith. His sister was bad-tempered and intolerant, but luckily, Joe was a placid person who could regulate his spiritual ecology well and helped maintain the relatively balanced group ecology among the whole family members. Under such influence, Pip could always retain a simple and good nature. However, after encountering Estella, some spiritual variables, especially love and desire in his spiritual construction changed drastically, so his spiritual ecology began to become distorted. But blessedly, in the end, his brother's selfless love and care for him redeemed him, making his spirit returned to peace.

Thus, the relatively balanced spiritual ecology will play a huge role in guiding people's behavior and thereby promote the formation of desirable group ecology, while the distorted or even collapsed spiritual ecology will cause the imbalance of group ecology.

5. Spiritual-ecological study on individual's internal environment

In the individual's spiritual ecosystem, the spiritual variables such as desire, value, outlook on life, emotions and belief are the main factors which have an influence on the state of spiritual ecology.

5.1 *Pip's transformation*

When Pip was a child, he was always well protected by Joe who offered the little Pip psychological comforts and had a positive influence on Pip. Hence, Pip was learning and internalizing Joe's distinguished spiritual qualities in his growth. For this reason, his individual spiritual ecology was benign at that moment. Just as Pip himself thought, at the very first his dream was to become a good blacksmith like Joe.

(1) Once it had seemed to me that when I should at last roll up my shirt-sleeves and go into the forge, Joe's 'prentice, I should be distinguished and happy^[10].

It was under such a benign individual spiritual ecology that when the young Pip met the hungry escaped convict Magwitch, he could kindly provide the man with food and kept the secret.

But when Pip met and fell in love with the beautiful and arrogant Estella, his thoughts altered completely. Pip was so deeply infatuated with Estella that he distorted his original outlooks on life and values. He began to dislike his poor relatives and family, and desired to pursue wealthy and luxurious life as a gentleman.

(2) I took the opportunity of being alone in the court-yard, to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. ...They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages^[10].

As he struggled with his changing state of mind, a mysterious benefactor appeared and entrusted a lawyer to help him squeeze into London's high society circles. Therefore, Pip started to pursue his "great expectations". After becoming a rich man, he led a leisure and comfortable life and became very extravagant. The so-called "great expectations" made Pip, an essentially dutiful, kind and simple boy, become hypocritical and ungrateful. But his wealth, which was illusory and unstable, was not in exchange for his own efforts, so it will eventually evaporate into nothing. After Magwitch was captured and had the property confiscated, Pip's dream was completely disillusioned.

Having lost his great expectations, Pip was depressed and desperate for a time. In addition to being heavily in debt, he caught a serious illness. But Joe gave him a hand at the crucial moment, offering Pip his warm embrace and thoughtful kindness. Hence, Pip was so moved that he gradually returned to that original innocent Pip. In those days, he reflected on his life and came to realize that it is his imbalance of the spiritual ecology and the deterioration of the social ecology that had led to a lost life. Therefore, after wandering overseas for eleven years, he finally mustered up the courage to return to the homeland where he was born, and regain his once-lost authenticity.

5.2 Miss Havisham's breakdown and contrition

Miss Havisham lived in a splendid mansion called the Satis House. Dark and dreary, this house was surrounded by a great many iron bars. Some windows were walled up, and all the ones underneath were firmly barred. In addition, her house was quite dark and lifeless, seeming as if it was a luxurious prison. Apparently, Miss Havisham has fallen into a sick state, especially spiritually and psychologically.

The reason that made her become such an insane person was that she was tricked and abandoned by her fiance on the wedding day. In order to possess more property, her half-brother conspired with the liar Compeyson to frame his sister. However, being doted and too well protected since childhood, Miss Havisham was so inexperienced and innocent that she can hardly distinguish the good people from bad ones. As a result, she was completely unaware of his trick. What is worse, her love for Compeyson expanded rapidly, resulting in the change in her mental variables. Consequently, when all the lies and scams were revealed to the world on the wedding day, her spiritual ecology completely collapsed.

Having been shut up in her house for a long time, she decided to adopt a child and save the child from misery. However, as Estella grew increasingly beautiful, Havisham started to fantasize about making use of her beauty to get revenge on men. With her praises, jewels and teachings, Estella was raised to be her "weapon" to break men's hearts. She constantly instilled and passed on her belief in hating men to Estella, and educated this little girl to be a love killer without love and emotional attachments. In this way, Havisham's morbid mentality got satisfied.

(3) "With this boy! Why, he is a common labouring-boy!"

I thought I overheard Miss Havisham answer — only it seemed so unlikely, "Well? You can break his heart"^[10].

(4) Miss Havisham would embrace her with lavish fondness, murmuring something in her ears that sounded like, "Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy"^[10].

However, Miss Havisham gradually realized that her revenge had done great harm to many people and thus felt very regretful.

(5) "Until you spoke to her the other day, and until I saw in you a looking-glass that showed me what I once felt myself, I did not know what I had done. What have I done! What have I done"^[10].

Having witnessed that Pip went through the pain she suffered years ago, and that Estella led a life without love, she began to realize that revenge meant nothing but greater pain to herself and those around her and repent of what she had done. Therefore, her spiritual ecology eventually moved towards balance.

5.3 Estella's depravity

From the very beginning, Estella's spiritual ecology was extremely distorted. After Miss Havisham's deliberate training and teaching, she hid her real feelings, unclear about how to respond, how to love others, and how to confront the real emotions deep inside. So she became perverse, arrogant and weird, with strong hierarchical concepts and indifference to others. In her ideology, she was a rich lady with noble status while Pip was just a child of a low-status blacksmith. Therefore, when she determined to select a husband, she would rather choose Drummle, who was arrogant, greedy, and despicable, but never thought of Pip at all.

While at the end of the story, having experienced the hardship of life and the vicissitudes of years, the true characteristics of Estella's character gradually manifested. Although she still retained the dignity and charm, her character had entirely altered.

(6) The freshness of her beauty was indeed gone, but its indescribable majesty and its indescribable charm remained. Those attractions in it I had seen before; what I had never seen before was the saddened softened light of the once proud eyes; what I had never felt before was the friendly touch of the once insensible hand^[10].

Filled with softer and more humane feelings, her heart was no longer ruthless. Different from before, years of suffering made her deeply aware of her mistakes. Therefore, she could express her inner thoughts and feelings much more directly and became a much warmer woman. At last, her spiritual

ecology tended to be balanced.

6. Conclusion

In *Great Expectations*, the status of human spiritual ecology had a profound influence on the development of natural world, social groups and individuals. Through studying the relationship between the behaviors of several major characters and their spiritual ecology, it can be seen that the underlying incentives behind their behaviors are spiritual factors. Hence, people ought to have a good control of various spiritual variables, strive to maintain the spiritual ecological balance, rationally use and protect natural resources, jointly create a favorable social ecology, and behave reasonably and appropriately, so as to realize the benign and harmonious development between nature and people, people and people, and between people and themselves. At the same time, it is sensible for people to explore in depth the backwash effect of literary works on ecological civilization.

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