

# Analyzing the Influences on Women's Upbringing and Their Educational Significance Using the Case of Estella, the Heroine of *Great Expectations*

Xiaoyi Yang\*

Dongguk University, Seoul 04620, South Korea

\*Corresponding author: Xiaoyi Yang, YangSo-il@outlook.com

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the influences on women's upbringing and their educational significance by using the character Estella from *Great Expectations* as a case study. Through analyzing the impact of social environment, family education, and self-awakening, this article aims to promote gender equality and the construction of a feminist cognitive community. It delves into the class divisions of 19th-century England, the manipulative family education imposed on Estella by Miss Havisham, and Estella's journey towards self-consciousness after her foster mother's death. The study highlights the challenges faced by women in societal constraints, family expectations, and the importance of self-discovery in overcoming these limitations.

**Keywords:** Women's upbringing; Social environment; Family education; Self-awakening

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## 1. Introduction

The journey of a man is arduous, laden with numerous difficulties and challenges that must be overcome to become a decent and good person with a positive outlook on life, ethics, and financial well-being. When faced with these difficulties and challenges, a male, regardless of their region, state, or country, has a relatively easy path to growth. Perhaps this statement is still not recognized by most men in today's society because they, too, feel that they have gone through many trials and tribulations, overcome many difficulties, and accomplished a lot of challenges<sup>[1]</sup>. However, this article explores the problems faced by women who go unnoticed, and the impact and transformations a girl undergoes to develop into a good woman with a distinct life journey and different education. Taking Estella from *Great Expectations* as an example, this article analyzes the influences on women's upbringing and their educational significance from the three aspects of social environment and family education as well as women's self-awakening, aiming to promote gender equality and the construction of feminist cognitive community, and to help readers to combine knowledge and action in the process of feminist research<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. Influence of the social environment in the process of women's upbringing**

The story in the novel took place in England in the late-mid 19th century. At that time, there was a clear class division in British society because of the industrial development and economic leap. Unlike the skilled laborers of the hero, Pip, who represented the lower class, the heroine, Estella, belonged to the upper middle class with higher incomes, better schools for their children, and more opportunities <sup>[3]</sup>. Class differences are everywhere; apart from the generally known behaviors such as eating and dressing, there are differences in the language used. For example, when the upper class says vegetables, they usually use “vegetables,” while the middle class uses “greens.” When they say glasses, they typically say “spectacles,” as opposed to “glasses,” a word used by the middle class. This language difference is depicted in the book. The hero, Pip, was invited to Miss Havisham's house, during which there was a description of a card game between Pip and Estella. They called the cards differently, and Estella felt that Pip was a vulgar inferior. Women who have been in this social environment for a long time are unconsciously domesticated by this class consciousness, which itself represents the wealth and cultural life that is sought after by people <sup>[4]</sup>.

At the same time, in British society, most people who worked outside, especially those who worked as lawyers and other decent and high-income jobs, were men. Women, however, were restricted by traditional thinking and the social environment, and it was considered enough for them to dress up beautifully at home, learn to play the piano and dance gracefully, and gain the favor of men. Without education or the opportunity to experience a different kind of life, it is difficult for women who have lived in this kind of single social environment for a long time to break out of their limitations and develop new ideas <sup>[5]</sup>.

Every person in society can be likened to a cog in a machine, and the mutual undertaking and cooperation among each constituent support the operation of the world. As a part of this system, no one can escape their fate. There are indeed a few survivors and a certain amount of deviation, but this cannot be taken as an example of a universal situation; Estella's class allows her to be well-educated and to experience things that people of a lower rank would never be able to experience, which is a rare condition for a woman to survive in that kind of social environment at that time. Under these circumstances, the heroine did better than many women of her time, and in mid-19th century England, there was no shortage of women who did not realize they needed to learn and socialize, who spent their days at home doing chores and focusing on dirty laundry and cutting boards <sup>[6]</sup>. She was out of touch with society because of her social class and the social environment of the time, but also because of this, she had that top-down disdain for the lower class, such as Pip and the like. People in the vortex often do not realize that they are the center of the vortex. She had no way of understanding the plight of people of a lower class but laughed at those who were lesser than she was, not realizing that she, too, stood on the shoulders of others to get to where she was today. Even more ironically, after reading the novel, we recognize that Estella is the daughter of a fugitive from justice. In her worldview, such a person would not be able to enter her life or be compared to the noble. She is, however, one of the very people she despises. This also shows that social factors will not only affect a person's growth but will also cloud the person's eyes, making the person unable to see the world outside of their class, unable to diversify their thinking and viewing of things, thus making it more difficult for them to come to terms with their cognitive limitations.

## **3. Influence of family education in women's upbringing**

The social environment set the tone of home education to a certain extent. If the English society of the mid-19th century was a framework, then the teaching of the girls in each family under this structure was the concrete content to fill this empty framework. Miss Havisham undoubtedly used Estella as a personal tool of vengeance

to make a sharp instrument to break men's hearts. Still, in the process of making her adopted daughter into the perfect female image that every man would like, she used the information she received about social class as a tool to break men's hearts. Moreover, she also used the information she received about social class as a tool to make a perfect female image that every man would like <sup>[7]</sup>. Men's favorite perfect woman is still using those inherent thoughts she has received about social class and men as her dominant thought. She still thinks that marriage is the best way for a woman to get a man's approval and that the best way to prove her worth is to see if there is a man who loves her and wants to marry her. She even ends up arranging for Estella to marry another man to hurt Pip. In this case, she does not see a woman as an individual but more like a gift or a toy, a concrete object, rather than a more abstract person.

As a woman who has been victimized by men, Miss Havisham has some degree of independence and awakened female consciousness. Instead of unquestioningly worshipping men and the power they have, she wants to do something as a woman, and the breaking of men's hearts that she wants to achieve is a challenge to male power and patriarchy. However, this feminism that she sprouts here is still feminism based on patriarchy, and although it is women who are doing the things, the criteria for judging the good or bad of the items is still hugely linked to men. It can even be said that it is the men's behaviors that consider women's successes or failures.

The heroine Estella, although she is sent to France to study at a later stage and changes her thinking when she meets other young people, the first level of education she receives, which is home education, is still from the conservative lady who lived under the patriarchal system. The way Miss Havisham dilutes the suffering she has suffered is by imposing it on a new generation of young women. She teaches the heroine how to manipulate men and capture their hearts, which appears to be a busy endeavor for her independence and power but serves men at the root <sup>[8]</sup>.

Having such an adoptive mother causes Estella to mix in some high expectations and dependence on men when building her concepts, which is unhealthy. We also know that Miss Havisham is hostile and distrustful of the male community after being hurt by a man, and she stops believing in love and instead begins to pin her hopes on playing with people's feelings. This wrong view of love is also absorbed and inherited by Estella to some extent. Readers who have read the article carefully will have no trouble remembering that in the book, Estella warned Pip that the only reason she did not go for a fling with him was because she thought the boy was different from the rest <sup>[9]</sup>. In other words, as opposed to positive intimate relationships in which people give emotional value to their favorite partners, the heroine provides deliberate care and love to someone she dislikes, who wants to play around. This behavior must be attributed to her adoptive mother, who felt that manipulating people's feelings was the way to get along with them in the long run.

This is sad because the so-called manipulated men do not feel that they fall in love with beautiful young ladies because they are used; instead, they think that it is because they are perfect that young ladies fall for them. The target of Ms. Havisham's vengeance should have been the men from the beginning and the ones who broke the hearts of women. However, the only thing she destroyed was the love of Pip, who saved her from the fire, and the outlook on life and love of her adopted daughter, who had been with her for years. This is undoubtedly ironic, but it also makes us admire the ingenuity of Charles Dickens' lines as a realistic English critical writer. The only thing that an old lady, who is intent on getting back at men, has done with her life is to deprive her adopted daughter of her ability to love; and he, as a man who wants to get back at male entitlement, fails to break out of the patriarchal mindset. This sad man has lived under the male gaze for so long and has brought the same look to others that he has committed a series of actions that border on insanity. Homeschooling is how a young man acquires much of the information necessary to get along with society, and it is for this reason that

the limitations of the family, or more accurately, the parents' rules, cannot be easily overturned.

#### 4. Impact of self-awakening in the process of women's upbringing

*Great Expectations* is not a short novel, but only a small part of this novel is left for Estella's self-awakening. In the first part of the novel, we can vaguely perceive that this young lady is not willing to cheat and play with other people's feelings as her adoptive mother has taught her to do. However, she also does not feel that it is wrong to do so and does not do anything to resist, and reminding Pip not to be hurt by herself may be out of friendship or mutual care between two young people who have already met each other. She still lives by the same set of behaviors that her foster mother taught her. Until near the end of the novel, when Estella got married, she was still living her life according to Ms. Havisham's way of thinking; she married the man that her foster mother wanted her to marry, and she did not fall in love with anyone, just as she had set out to do <sup>[10]</sup>.

The beginning of Estella's awakening of self-consciousness is the death of her foster mother. It was not until she returned to the manor after the death of this great foster mother that she confided in her young friend. Miss Havisham can be seen here as the mental shackle that has always bound her. This chain that bound her goodness and heartfelt feelings snapped with Miss Havisham's death. Although this is an English novel written around 1860, it is not difficult to find the epitome of the Asian woman, if not the woman of the world. Girls are controlled from an early age to be obedient and filial, and help their parents to fulfill their wishes. Unlike men, men of the same era, background, and economic situation are more encouraged to go out and make a career or earn their own money. It must have been more difficult for a girl to truly awaken her sense of self than it was for a man in the same situation. After the death of her adoptive mother, Estella had to go through a life of misfortune, being treated harshly by her husband and then becoming a widow. It is these misfortunes that motivate her to be rebellious and self-conscious. Here, we can see these deaths as the heroine's repeated metamorphosis. Layer by layer, the bonds of kinship, love, and marriage that these people have suppressed her character and emotions and that they represent are peeled away. After it is all over, we see the real Estella <sup>[11]</sup>.

It was no doubt a sad ending, but it is also a cause for celebration because no matter what the cost, Estella finds her true self in the end. She can stand in the sunshine and make peace with who she once was without inhibition, and she can associate with people she wants to associate with. It is said that the original version of the ending was abandoned by the author but rediscovered by students studying the development of the novel and that in that version, one of Bidley and Joe's children was named after Pip, and Estella mistook the boy for Pip's child. If that is how it ends, then that ending should be discarded. Estella, who has matured and developed a sense of self, is still worrying about such trivialities as men and children even after her self-awakening. Although she has thrown off the shackles of the others, she is still trapped in that time, in the judgment of the male gaze <sup>[12]</sup>. This is a problem that male writers tend to encounter when portraying women; being male, they may not face the same issues that women have faced in their lifetime, so they do not have the means to empathize with those sufferings, nor do they have the means to put them into words. In addition, as people with vested interests, they would like to see women who are willing to worry about love and men, which must be said to carry a point of contempt and ridicule from the superior to the inferior.

As a woman grows up, in addition to facing direct difficulties and challenges, she is also prone to encounter some sweet poison, the seemingly gorgeous dress is actually layer after layer of constraint, simultaneously evoking a sense of self-esteem and pride. During every woman's development, they are subjected to varying degrees of social oppression and male pressure, and some negativity from their own families. Especially for

those women who lived before us, in the absence of advanced technology, there was no way to keep abreast of the outside world, and there was no way for their ideas to germinate. As women of the new age, it is our collective responsibility to read, communicate, and travel as much as we can. Only when we have acquired enough information can we compare it with our own life and find out the difference or the direction in which we want to work harder; we now have better conditions than the previous generation of women, thus we should make good use of these conditions to improve ourselves and fight for all the things we want. Knowing what we want to fight for, realizing what we can do, and actively putting them into action after reading the book should be the most valuable thing we can get from the works of our predecessors.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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