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## Sketching Victorian Society: A Corpus Assisted Study of Social Class in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

### Abstract:

*The present work deals with the adjectives used by Charles Dickens to portray the social class in the novel Great Expectations. The study used a corpus linguistics methodology for data preparation, corpus development, and data analysis. The text of the novel was collected from online sources and used in the compilation of the corpus. The corpus was filtered of additional information and tagged using a part-of-speech tagger (POS tagger). The tagged data was analyzed using AntConc software. The findings of the study suggest that the use of adjectives plays a substantial role in the portrayal of the social class in the novel Great Expectations. The findings also show that there was a clear divide between upper and lower classes. The members of the lower class were humiliated and looked down upon by the members of the upper class.*

### Key Words:

Social Class, Corpus Linguistics, Great Expectations, Adjectives

### Introduction

This paper investigates the use of adjectives in the depiction of social class in the novel, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. The novel, *Great expectations*, presents the social and cultural divide between the working classes and the upper classes. Language plays a primary role in the creation and maintenance of social structures. The role of lexical items such as nouns, pronouns, and adjectives cannot be undermined in the representation and depiction of social inequalities, gender discrimination, and cultural divides. Adjectives are considered to be central to the depiction of characters, locations, and emotions in any literary text. The use of digital tools in the study of large-scale literary texts has allowed researchers to explore the use of language elements, linguistic patterns, and thematic schemes. Researchers working in the field of digital humanities, for example, make extensive use of corpus analysis tools for a simple and accurate review of large corpora of different literary texts. The key concern in this paper is the depiction of social class which was a characteristic feature of Victorian society.

Most societies in the world are divided based on socioeconomic status. The formation of a class structure generally depends on a set of standards reflecting differences between individuals ([Upham, 2012](#)). Social stability is a complex social phenomenon that produces different types of social structures and maintains different groups, which are

referred to as social classes ([Grusky and Ku 2008](#)). The attitudes of individuals and their prospects for life are due to the stratification of the social class and their socioeconomic position in society, and there is no doubt that the influence of the social class has reached far beyond the economic sphere. It encompasses all aspects of human life ([Van der Waal et al. 2007](#)).

The present study is a corpus-based exploration of the adjectives used in the novel "Great Expectations" written by Charles Dickens. This research focuses mainly on the use of adjectives to show how the social class has been portrayed through adjectives. The novel was published in the mid-Victorian period and deals mainly

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with class structure conflicts. The goal of people from the lower class was to be members of a respectable social class in society. Dicken's novel deals with this class problem, where the main character Pip is in continuous conflict with his character in order to achieve social mobility.

## Research Objectives

There are two main objectives of this research.

1. To find out the most frequently used adjectives in the novel
2. To examine how adjectives play a role in the depiction of the social class.

## Research Questions

1. What is the frequency of various adjectives used for the portrayal of social class in the novel, *Great Expectations*?
2. How does the use of adjective contribute to the description of social class in the novel, *Great Expectations*?

## Significance of the Study

During its development, corpus linguistics was primarily used to apply techniques that could help in the exploration of linguistic variations. In recent years, however, it has also become an important additional consideration for discourse analysis of written and spoken texts. It is also believed that the lexical elements such as adjectives, nouns, verbs, etc. used in the text represent social practices, cultural norms, political ideologies, and religious beliefs. Corpus is increasingly used these days in the linguistic and thematic exploration of large literary and nonliterary texts. This work is important in two ways. First, it tries to explore the use of lexical elements in the depiction of the social class system in Victorian society. Second, it exploits digital tools for the study of a literary piece of work.

## Delimitation

Due to time constraints, the research only presents the analysis of the 11 most used adjective for the depiction of social class in the novel, *Great Expectations*. The study is concerned only with a single theme of the novel.

## Literature Review

In the last two decades, corpus linguistics has emerged as a very important field of linguistic analysis that enables researchers to carry out a large-scale analysis of texts. Corpus analysis plays an innovative role in text analysis, allowing researchers and scholars to respond to problems and questions using this method of analysis (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998; Biber & Conrad, 2009; Gavioli, 2005; Meyer, 2004; Reppen & Simpson, 2002). This research focuses on the use of adjectives to demonstrate the disparity in class in the 19th century. As adjectives are important as nouns and verbs, they belong to the largest word class (Leech, 1989). Adjectives play an important role in the description of incidents and individuals (Fellbaum, Gross, and Miller 1993). Adjectives have been examined in the background of the social class in the present analysis.

The theme of social class is very a dominant theme of the novel, *Great Expectations* (Upham, 2012). Social class is a division of society or individuals because of their economic situation. The novel, *Great Expectations*, revolves around a boy named Pip. Initially, Pip belongs to the working class, a local boy from the area who worked as a blacksmith and lived his life in a small village in the early nineteenth century. The unexpected news of Pip's hidden benefactor has drastically changed the story, and Pip's decision to take advantage of this

financial opportunity in London has raised concerns about the relationship between the individual and the bourgeois society. Pip wanted to be a member of a respectable social class. Since Pip wants to be a gentleman, he adopts middle-class etiquette and moral principles in a submissive manner. As a consequence, the sense of individuality of Pip is increasingly being suppressed by the social system.

The thought of being a gentleman came to Pip's mind because of Miss Havisham and Estella's attitude towards Pip. Estella and Miss Havisham were of the upper class, and they treated Pip very poorly, as he began to despise his lower class. When he had the chance to change his class and become a gentleman, he took advantage of that opportunity.

Pip was uncertain about the class structure; he wanted to gain respect in society. Pip noticed that different people from the upper class are respectable, so he felt that to be respectable, he had to do some work to make a living, so that he could be considered respectable. He had some expectations in his mind related to social class. To achieve those expectations, he had to put his focus on his education. He was unable to use proper terminologies, and due to this, he was mocked by Estella. ([Upham, A., 2012](#)).

Dickens exposed the truth of the social class structure by portraying criminals like Magwitch and low-class people like Biddy and Joe, Pumblechook as middle class, and Mr Jaggers and Miss. Havisham is a member of the upper class. After the industrial revolution, the word gentleman has to do with the appearance of the middle class. This word has other requirements; it was important to be rich and to wear expensive clothing, and to have an arrogant attitude, to be called a gentleman. Joe was described as a working-class; he's the one who loves Pip the most and takes care of all Pip's debts and expenses. Joe was uneducated, and Pip wanted him to make a gentleman by educating him, but Joe was a real gentleman who didn't need money or education to be called a gentleman. Pumblechook was a selfish middle-class man. Miss. Havisham and Estella belong to the upper class and falsely treat and ridicule the lower class. Miss Havisham adopted Estella and nourished her for the vengeance of men by breaking their hearts. She was using Estella. At the end of the book, Pip realizes that only good deeds and good actions will bring attention to you. He discovered that social status is related to one's character and personality, not to one's class. At the end of the day, Pip returned to his birthplace from where he belonged. Pip realized that love, morality, and loyalty are more important to human beings than class status and wealth ([Ahmed, 2017](#)).

## **Research Methodology**

Current research includes the methodology of corpus linguistics for the analysis of data. First of all, the novel was downloaded in pdf format from the internet. The PDF file was then converted into plain text format using an online text converter. All the headings and the additional information were removed from the text—the text with saved and named as GreatExpectations\_Corpus. The data was tagged using a part-of-speech tagger called POS tagger. After that, the corpus was uploaded to AntConc([Anthony, 2007](#)) software for analysis. After corpus compilation and tagging, the frequencies for the adjectives were counted using the word frequency function of Antconcc. After that, the frequencies of the adjectives were presented in the form of a graph in the data analysis section. The selected adjectives were explained with their linguistic context.

## **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using a corpus method, and the frequencies of the selected adjectives are presented below in the form of a graph followed by a table that carries the linguistic context for each adjective. After that, a detailed description of each adjective is given with contextual information. After that, there are some examples in a table from the novel explaining the adjective in their linguistic context. The selected adjectives are pleasant, bright, coarse, common, despicable, hard, ashamed, ignorant, laboring, rich, and cruel.

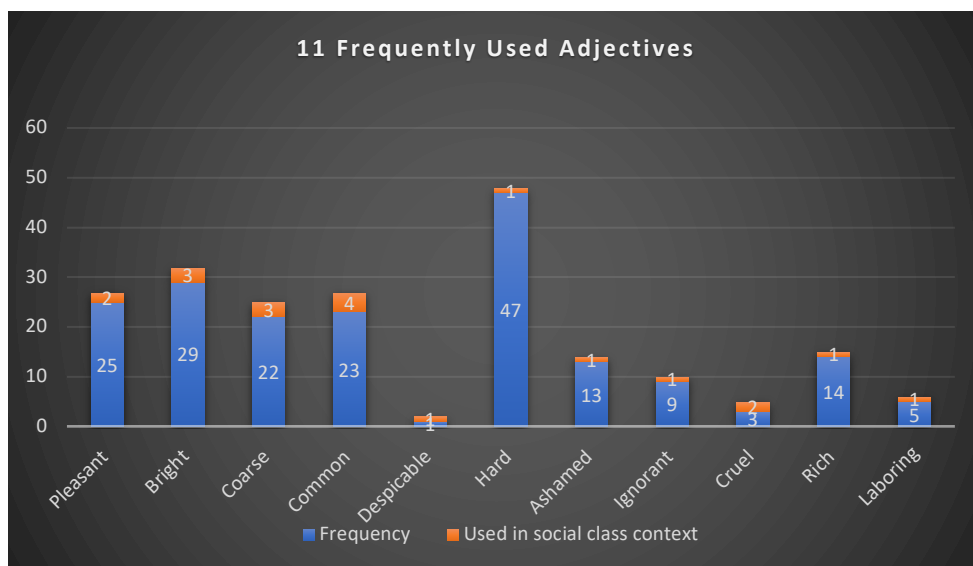


Figure 1: Frequencies of most Frequently Occurring Adjectives.

In the following table, we provide a linguistic context for each adjective used to predict the social class. This table is followed by a detailed explanation of the adjective and the context.

Table 1. Adjectives with linguistic context taken from the novel.

S.No	Adjective	Linguistic Context
1	Pleasant	“Home had never been a very pleasant place to me, because of my sister’s temper.”
2	Bright	“Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table.”
3	Coarse	“And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!”
4	Common	“Miss Havisham and Estella never sat in a kitchen but were far above the level of such common doings.”
5	Despicable	“I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way”.
6	Hard	“She says many hard things of you, but you say nothing of her. What do you think of her?”
7	Ashamed	“I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before, but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair.”
8	Ignorant	“I wanted to make Joe less ignorant and common, that he might be worthier of my society and less open to Estella’s reproach.”
9	Cruel	“It would have been cruel in Miss Havisham, horribly cruel, to practice on the susceptibility of a poor boy, and to torture me through all these years with a vain hope.”
10	Rich	“Mr Havisham was very rich and very proud. So was his daughter.”
11	Laboring	“With this boy? Why he is a common labouring boy!”

## **Pleasant**

The adjective, pleasant, is seen in the corpus 25 times. But it has only been used two times in the context of social class, as shown in the graph. The word, pleasant, has been used by Dickens in such a manner that it shows the difference between the upper and the lower classes. This adjective has been used to refer to Mrs Joe, the sister of Pip. Throughout the novel, she has been shown as an angry woman. She hates her social status of becoming a blacksmith's wife. Because of her lower status, she's always angry and unhappy with her husband and brother. Mrs Joe is angry at her social status, which affects Pip. That's why the place to stay at home is not a pleasant place for Pip because coming home reminds him of his very low social standing in society.

On the other hand, when Pip went to London, he saw the people of the upper class, and he was mesmerized by their standard of living, and he was very pleasant to be in their place. The adjective, pleasant, was used in two contexts, first when he was at his sister's place, where home was not pleasant to him, and second when he was at Mr Pocket's place in London, where he was very pleasant because of their high standard of living. By using the adjective, pleasant in two opposite situations, Dickens has highlighted the divide between the pleasant (upper class) and the unpleasant (lower class)

## **Bright**

The bright adjective is shown 29 times in the corpus. It has been used three times in the context of social class representation. Bright was used for describing Miss Havisham's appearance. Pip used a "bright" word to talk about materialistic things. He used it to describe money, jewellery, and these expensive ornament. Pip called these material things bright because these things were a lot better and brighter than his lower working class. By using the adjective, bright, for the expensive and materialistic things, the writer has successfully shown how the people from the lower classes aspire to jump to the upper class. They are ambitious about this upward social mobility because they do not have their own working class.

## **Coarse**

The adjective, coarse, can be seen in the corpus 22 times. It has been used three times in the context of social class representation. This adjective was used for the poor class. As we know that Pip is a representative of the working-class, his hand is hard and coarse because of the nature of the work he does. Estella used this adjective for Pip's hands. Coarse hands refer to the working class, so his hands were rough because he worked as a blacksmith. The upper class doesn't have to work as much as the lower class people do, so they take advantage of it and make fun of the poor class. The use of the adjective, coarse for Pip's hand, shows the nature of work people from the upper and lower class engage in.

## **Common**

The adjective, common, is shown 23 times in the corpus. It has been used four times in the context of social class depiction. Pip used this common word for his class that they were a lot more common and ordinary people as compared to the upper class. The use of this shows the inner feelings of Pip towards his class and people. He thinks that people who belong to his class are ordinary and do not possess anything special. They did not have anything extraordinary. He compared his class to Miss Havisham and Estella's class. A lot was going on inside his little mind. Estella called his boots common because he was of the lower class and had no standards at all. Pip also considered Joe to be a common man, because he was of the same poor class and had nothing like the upper class. In his mind, he was comparing different classes, and it was all because of the society around him that made him think this way.

## **Despicable**

The adjective, despicable, is described in the corpus for one time. It has been used for one time in the context

of social class representation. Pip used this adjective for himself because he belongs to a class for which education was not important. They only focused on making a living so that they could afford their bread and butter. Pip was not educated, so he didn't know the exact terminology for different things, and because of that habit, he was called "despicable", and he was mocked by Estella. This shows the attitude of the upper class towards the working class.

### **Hard**

The adjective, hard, is presented 47 times in the corpus. It has been used just once in the context of social class representation. This adjective was used by Miss Havisham when Estella called a hard thing about the appearance of Pip. Estella made fun of Pip's hands, his boots, and his language. The attitude of the upper class towards the lower class is shown in the novel. The characters of the upper class say hard things about the characters of the lower class, but in return, the characters of the lower class say nothing because they are not powerful enough to say anything against the upper class. This shows the helplessness of the people of the working class. This also indicates that people from the lower class have developed a sense of inferiority complex which torments them.

### **Ashamed**

The adjective, ashamed, is seen in the corpus 13 times. It has been used for one time in the context of social class representation. This adjective was used by Pip, after being insulted by the upper class, and Pip was ashamed of his class, so he decided to change his social status. This shows that the treatment people of lower classes receive from the members of the upper class, and this humiliating behavior is pushing them to a desire for upward social mobility.

### **Ignorant**

The adjective, ignorant, can be seen nine times in the corpus. It has been used for one time in the context of social class representation. Pip was insulted many times by Estella, and therefore he wanted to educate Joe so that he may be insulted by Estella. He did not want to give Estella a chance to insult his class. This shows the inferiority complex among members of the working class. It also shows the insulting and demeaning attitude of the upper class towards the working class.

### **Cruel**

The adjective, cruel, is given three times in the corpus. It was used once in the context of social class representation. This adjective refers to Miss. Havisham, as she let Estella play with the little heart of Pip. This cruelty shows the behavior of the upper class towards the lower class that they do not care about the feelings of the lower class. This shows the cruel nature of the upper class and how they make fun of the feelings of people from the lower classes.

### **Rich**

The adjective, rich, was presented five times in the corpus. It was used just once in the context of social class representation. This adjective was used to refer to the status of Miss Havisham. She was very spoiled when she was a child, which shows the behavior of upper-class children. They are usually very spoiled, and they treat the poor class very badly and with disdain. So, Miss Havisham did the same thing to Pip. This shows how the children of the upper class are brought up.

### **Laboring**

The adjective, laboring, is shown in the corpus five times. It has been used once in the context of social class representation. This adjective referred to the lower class when Miss Havisham asked Estella to play with Pip,

and then she was astonished at Miss Havisham's request that why would she play with this common laboring boy. It shows the attitude of the upper class that they did not want to have any relationship or connection with the poor class. Pip thought of himself as a common laboring boy, because Estella made him realize that he was a common man, and there was nothing special about him. So, he was so heartbroken, and he began to feel ashamed of his class. This shows the attitude of the upper class towards the lower class. This also shows that people from the lower class are aware that they are looked down upon by the members of the upper class.

## Conclusion

The present study concludes that there were eleven frequently used adjectives in the novel, which were used by Dickens to present the divide between the upper and the working class. The findings also suggest that adjectives can play a substantial role in the depiction of the upper class and lower class, along with their superiority and inferiority complexes. Victorian society had established social classes. The attitude of the upper class was humiliating and demeaning towards the working class. Since Charles Dickens belongs to that time, we find glaring instances of the social class structure of Victorian society in his novel. Dicken, with the use of appropriate adjectives, has very successfully presented the frustrations, predicaments, and aspirations of members of the lower class. We can see that members of the lower class lack self-confidence and they are repeatedly subjected to mental torture by the upper class with the use of demeaning and debasing words. The study also highlighted the aspirations of the representatives of the lower-class to become members of the respectable upper class. The use of adjectives has very clearly shown the ambitions of the members of the lower class to move to the upper class. Unfortunately, their conditions, despite their ambitions, hamper their way to join the upper class. Likewise, the appropriate use of adjectives has also depicted the insulting attitude of the upper towards the lower class. The use of insulting words for the lower class helps them maintain distance between the lower and the upper class. It means the members of the upper class do not even like to mix up with the members of the lower class. The characters are representing the upper class in the novel, *Great Expectations*, try to maintain a social distance from the characters representing the lower class by the use of humiliating and degrading language.

The primary aim of this study was to apply corpus methods to study the representation of social class in *Great Expectations* written by Charles Dickens. It may be argued in the light of the above discussion that the adjectives have played a substantial role in the depiction of social class in Victorian society.

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