

**“Eating and drinking are valued by Dickens as proofs of sociability and ceremonies of love.” Discuss the significance of food and meals in the novel Great Expectations.**

In the Great Expectations, there are several scenes which Dickens uses to illustrate the theme of the novel, and at the same time, to show personalities of the characters. It is also interesting that Dickens sets the meals in pairs to create contrast between the characters and the values held by the characters. Two examples of the pairs are the supper at Wemmick’s castle and dinner at Jaggers’s house, and Pip’s meal with Herbert in Barnard’s Inn and Pip’s meal with Joe during his visit.

The meal at Wemmick’s house shows the theme of that nobility lies in one’s inner quality and love instead of money makes one truly happy. Wemmick’s house is like something out of a dream, an absurd “castle” in Walworth that he shares with his “Aged Parent.” Pip observes that Wemmick seems to have a new personality when he enters his home: while he is cynical and dry at work, at home he seems jovial and merry. By showing his good-natured teasing of his “Aged Parent”, Dickens emphasizes the inner goodness beneath Wemmick’s callous exterior. The heart-warming atmosphere in Wemmick castle makes Pip happy and thus commented that “the supper was excellent” and he was “heartily pleased” even though “the Castle was rather subject to dry-rot insomuch that it tasted like a bad nut”. Through the scene, Dickens shows that Wemmick is a creative and sensitive man who is stuck in the drudgery and soul-killing job of a law clerk. is trying to support himself and his father on a meager income. Struggling to get by, he is, out of necessity, very interested in any “portable property” he can acquire. He is not greedy, but is realistic about his finances He has no choice because of his financial needs, so to keep from being emotionally crushed by the crime he has to deal with every day, Wemmick survives by keeping his home and office lives completely separate. Wemmick as a character, shines due to his love for his aged parent, his little servant and his house. This quality of love is the source of real happiness nobility.

In contrast, Jaggers’s house is oppressive and dark, shared only with a gloomy housekeeper, Molly. Jaggers’ life is his work, which is clear because his house is in need of repair. At the dinner, instead of having a lovingly casual conversation, Jaggers dissects the psyches of the young men, getting them to reveal their flaws (“he wrenched the weakest part of our dispositions out of us”). Drummle especially interests him and later Jaggers tells Pip he likes the man because Drummle is one of the "true sort." The lawyer's interest in Drummle is probably a professional one. He compares Drummle to a "spider", an insect which predares and associated with evilness and darkness, shows that he is sharp in seeing people and is very perspective in observing people’s personality. However, at the same time, it reflex on his lack of love for the others as he dose not treat people as human, but of insects, something lower than him in status and can be easily manipulated. His profession makes him cold and inhumane to the others. His inconsideration and disrespect to the others are shown through his treatment to his servant, which is harsh and cold. He likes to hold Molly “in suspense, commands her to show how “muscular” her arms are even when she dose not want to. A methodical, disciplined man, Jaggers promptly ends the dinner at nine-thirty to return to work. The

meal at Jaggers' house is full of conflicts and rejection. The guests only appeared to be happy but are not really happy. The comparison of Drummle, a supposedly high class noble person to a spider highlights the fact that Drummle is not noble in personality but only appeared to be noble due to his status. Materialistic pursuits drive people cold and deprive them of love and happiness. Same as Wemmick, Jaggers himself does not feel good about his career, Pip observes Jaggers washing his hands of them. The hand-washing, gargling, finger-nail cleaning ritual is likely Jaggers' way (his only way) of separating himself from the criminal world of his office and from any emotional attachments in his life.

Pip's first meal with Herbert is a bridge to their friendship. Herbert is a genial friend who is open to conversation and is willing to share with his friend anything he knows. Herbert is willing to help Pip to become a gentleman and subtly corrects Pip's poor table manners, ("he offered these friendly suggestions in such a lively way, that we both laughed and I scarcely"). He asks Pip to call his Christian name and gives him the nickname "Handel," and tells him the whole story of Miss Havisham. It is obvious that Herbert's friendliness makes Pip to feel very comfortable while having the meal with him as Pip has commented that Herbert is "extremely amiable and cheerful". We notice that although they are having a dinner together, that is hardly any description on the food itself. The older Pip as the narrator, is engrossed in telling us about Pip's communication with Herbert that he forgets to even mention about the taste of the food. This meal signifies the beginning of Pip and Herbert's sincere and cordial friendship.

In contrast, Joe's visit is a nightmare for both Joe and Pip. Joe is not proud, but wants to be correct, so he is dressed in his uncomfortable Sunday clothes. He addresses Pip as "Sir," which irritates Pip. And he keeps fidgeting with his hat, which Pip refers to sarcastically in the book as the "bird's nest." Joe's lack of sophistication shows in his table manners. In Joe's visit, Pip is in the position of Herbert, who is supposed to welcome Joe heartily and teach him the table manners without embarrassing him. However, Pip is so snobbish that he looks down on his childhood friend and does not have the intention of having any sincere communication with Joe. In contrast to the meal Pip had with Herbert, which the older Pip recalls "he (Herbert) was so communicative, I felt that reserve on my part would be a bad return unsuited to our years." Pip is not communicative to Joe at all. In return, Joe leaves with his dignity intact, delivering his message and departing quickly. Although Joe is angry with Pumblechook for going about town pretending that he was Pip's childhood playfellow, he says, "though it signify little now, Sir." Joe knows things have changed, the past is past, and none of that means much anymore to Pip. This is a sad scene highlighting how turning into a "gentleman" has caused Pip to become cold and insincere, even to his best friend of childhood. Compared to Herbert who played the same role as the host when Pip first came to London, Pip proves himself not a true "gentleman". This again emphasized the idea that nobility comes within an individual, and it is one's inner goodness that makes him shine.

Dickens' descriptions and contrast of several meals give us opportunities to observe the conversations among the characters, shows their personalities through their conversation and their actions. Through these scenes, we get a better understanding of different

characters and at the same time, we have a better understanding of the message Dickens trying to convey---it is futile to try to obtain nobility and happiness by materialistic means, for they both come from simplicity and one's inner goodness.