Status, labels, and other materialistic judgments form the majority of modern society’s hierarchy system, oftentimes creating an inaccurate representation of the people residing within it. Set well over a century ago, *Great Expectations*, a novel by Charles Dickens, places Pip Gargery, a young and insecure boy in England into the face-value system. Upon visiting Miss Havisham and her raised-tormentor, he begins the ascent to wealth and concurrently his descent into isolation and self-loathing. Helped by a “benefactor,” Pip receives large sums of money to aid him in his desire to become a “gentleman.” Abandoning all that was once good to him, Pip pushes out everyone from his life, finally ending in his return to sanity. Through this, *Great Expectations* not only asserts that the labels society applies to us are flawed, but fundamentally contrived, quantifying his claim through various characters’ attributes and lack thereof and Pip’s self-vexed reflective narration.

To begin with, Pip demonstrates the negative effects the labels cast on him from the start, pushing away those dearest to him throughout his life. Pip knows as he ascends the social ladder, “...in my keeping away from Joe, because I knew she would be contemptuous of him. It was but a day gone, and Joe had brought the tears into my eyes; they soon dried—God forgive me!—soon dried.” (Dickens 227). Though noting this does not absolve him of what he does, both in this particular case, and in the novel’s entirety, it does represent a glimmer of hope that he is not fully submerged. Those around him have labeled him as a gentleman, yet he has not fully relinquished — at minimum internally — his title as Joe Gargery’s son. Contrastingly to his environment, Pip’s managed to maintain his (however small) amount of lineage-self worth, though he publicly behaves ashamedly of it, and only builds guilt internally consequentially. Stemming from this, Pip continues his downward spiral as a result of his ever-increasing debt, falling into a loop of pain and misery, ultimately concluding in his return to Joe’s care. Pip’s primary behavioral changes, exhibited throughout the novel, demonstrate the clear negative impact they have on society, hurting both the members who are directly affected and the bystanders who are isolated as though they were an unbearable limb.

Pip, “authoring” the story in a similar fashion to a memoir, pointedly notes this ad nauseam within the sections of commentary adorning each chapter. At the beginning of his rise relative to his great expectations, he notes, “It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home. There may be a black ingratitude in the thing and the punishment may be retributive and well deserved, but that it is a miserable thing, I can testify.” (Dickens 99). Pip doesn’t necessarily conclude that he is incorrect to feel the way he does, as (rationally) he reasons that there are valid reasons to be ashamed of one’s home. In this case, however, he is aware that his guilt is unfounded and based purely in shallow reasons. As a result, he appears to nearly expect retribution — despite that he is excused from his immoral behavior by Joe and Biddy as merely a side effect of doing well. Their continuation of crediting him, and not the other way around, shows why Pip holds them in such high esteem nearing the end of the novel, and demonstrates to the reader who is really fighting the good fight. Consequentially, one can see the definite tone and overall shadow cast by the narration is not one cast of self-apathy or empathy, but of self-loathing.

Throughout the novel, contrastingly, it’s easy to see the figures that draw retrospective-Pip’s ire — the *quintessential gentleman* and role model figures which surround him. This contrasts to his relative sympathy and loving which he passes to characters which truly supported him, demonstrating the lack of appreciation gained even from Pip’s retrospective position. For instance, a classic example of a gentleman, also in process of being educated by Mr. Pocket, is observed as, “...[coming] of rich people down in Somersetshire, who had nursed this combination of qualities until they made the discovery that it was just of age and a block-head. Thus Bentley Drummle had come to Mr. Pocket when he was a head taller than that gentleman, and half a dozen heads thicker than most gentlemen.” (Dickens 189). Pip notes in his observations mostly negative qualities, ignoring any positive assets in possession (aside from material). Whether this is biased or not, as Pip is still a commoner on the inside, is unclear, however, it is made well aware to the reader that Drummle is a generally detestable character. In contrast, other characters, such as Wemmick or Jaggers, are not as put down as these “perfect” examples in society. In Pip’s view, seemingly, there is a desire to bring down all of these faux characters merely filling a role — in this case, like Drummle, as he is still only a gentleman in appearance. The irony in this, however, is that Pip is, in a broad sense, falling into that category, saved only by his place of origin. In contrast, another character, introduced right from the start, does not even receive a briefing or explanation of history. Pip bluntly notates very early on in his journey, “That fearful impostor, Pumblechook, immediately nodded, and said, as he rubbed the arms of his chair: ‘It’s more than that, mum.’” (Dickens 96). Pumblechook, serving only from this example, is just a buffoon. This is expanded out, however, upon looking at his character “development” as a whole, which is abstractly Pip’s hatred of him growing over time, rather than actual change. Consistently, throughout the novel, he is regarded as a gentleman-figure, even though he is merely seeking attention. Early on, even, Pip develops a sense of hatred towards fake characters like Pumblechook, as they are highly esteemed by others such as Mrs. Joe and Wopsle, neither of which Pip particularly favors. Yet again, ironically, Pip joins their ranks, and even so later realizes he is amongst them in their playing field, but he gives special precedence to the one who has consistently made it worse for him. One can reason from this, that part of Pip’s return to ground in regards to his social status was envisioning how he differed from such a “horrendous” figure as Pumblechook. Undoubtedly, however, this doesn’t absolve Pumblechook of his guilt in exploiting the contrived societal labeling system, just as Drummle did. Consequentially, the negative effect the faux society-labels have on others, glowing especially brightly from impostor-like figures, is clear to see in Pip’s narration.

In strong contrast to the other figures throughout the novel, there are few *bona fide* gentleman through the course of the novel. Though they do come and go, they exist merely as placeholders for Pip as to what he really *should* appreciate, but he ignores them due to the labels which are cast upon them. For example, Biddy notates this in her letter to Pip, writing, “I hope and do not doubt it will be agreeable to see him even though a gentleman, for you had ever a good heart, and he is a worthy worthy man.” (Dickens 203). It is not only observed by Biddy, but Pip as well in the following segments of the book, that Joe is in fact a real gentleman. Despite this, Pip refuses to accept this and acknowledge his presence beyond only the most basic means. Furthermore, he’s willing to engage with those *whom he doesn’t even appreciate*, fraternizing with them solely on the basis of social tier. Internally, Pip feels conflicted and guilty about these acts, yet still persists in his behavior. This is solely due to his internal insecurity caving to the contrived labels society has applied to him and those surrounding him. Consequentially, the flawed nature these present and impose is clear to see, though it is visible as a reader what the reality is. Another instance occurring in the book is that of Mr. Pocket, who is also justifiable as a *true* gentleman. During Pip’s pilot visit to Pocket’s home, he notes, “There was a sofa where Mr. Pocket stood, and he dropped upon it in the attitude he said, with a hollow voice, ‘Good night, Mr. Pip,’ when I deemed it advisable to go to bed and leave him.” (Dickens 182). This interaction, occurring at the end of the visit, signifies the undignified nature of life that a real gentleman must endure. Pip understands that Mr. Pocket seems to conceal this aspect of his life, as it doesn’t conform the standardized image imposed by the label, “gentleman,” he is given. It is however, in his nature that he is also a genuine gentleman, for he takes far more grief than he ever inflicts, dealing with not only his “raised by tumbling” children, but his oblivious and inconsiderate wife. Both of these characters, along with several others yet unmentioned, form the spine of the novel’s society: they are forced to bend to the labels society’s applied to them, yet they soldier on and maintain their personal and family responsibilities.

Clearly, the implications Dickens asserts are at the hands of society’s labels are evident within the text of *Great Expectations*. Whether through the narration and commentary of Pip, or through the development of characters throughout the story, Dickens’s case for proving the contrived and harmful ways of society is self-evident upon reading the tale. This point, however, only becomes apparent once the hero’s journey (Pip’s) is over, concluding the transformation from being under the grip of society to independent and reason thought, which the reader has the foresight of developing, just like Pip in narration form. Through Pip’s transcendence of said labels, their flawed, deleterious, and contrived existence is revealed and set at the forefront of the novel, showcasing Charles Dickens’s argument for all to see.