

What Charles Dickens Understood About Self-Pity

Over the last few weeks I have been making my way through Charles Dickens' [*Great Expectations*](#). In reading it, I have once again been struck by Dickens' remarkable ability to weave multiple, insignificant storylines into a cohesive tale.

It is this talent which perhaps explains why a main theme of the novel did not hit me until I was almost finished with the story. Oddly enough, this theme is one with which our society is currently wrestling: victimhood.

For those unfamiliar with the story, a primary victim in *Great Expectations* is Miss Havisham. Having been conned and then jilted by her fiancé on her wedding day years before, Miss Havisham spends her days in darkened rooms. The stopped clocks, the daily dressing in her wedding gown, and the remains of the untouched wedding feast are continual reminders of how she was wronged, and upon which Miss Havisham appears to revel in remembering.

But the wallowing in self-pity and hate does not remain with her alone. The victimhood mantle is eventually passed on to the two individuals she sees most often – her protégé Pip and her adopted daughter Estella.

Like her adopted mother, Estella embraces the victimhood she has been taught, becomes embittered, and ends up in a disastrous situation. Pip, however, chooses to move beyond his victimhood, making the best of his situation and attempting to move on in life.

Unfortunately, it seems we have far more Miss Havishams and Estellas in today's culture than we do Pips. One need only look at recent headlines to see the truth of this.

Are you a student who feels [uncomfortable with a speaker](#) appearing on campus? If so, you're a victim.

Are you an individual who feels incensed by the presence of a [historical monument](#) referencing the Civil War? If so, you're a victim.

Are you an [NFL player](#) who can't tolerate the sounds of the National Anthem before a game? Yes, you too are a victim.

And somewhere along the way, we have determined that the best way to deal with our victimhood status is to raise a ruckus, display our hate, and make everyone around us experience a similar hurt. But as Dickens demonstrated through Miss Havisham and Estella, such behavior only comes back to haunt us in the end.

In the early days of the Revolutionary War, Thomas Paine declared, "I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection."

Paine and his peers refused to cave to victimhood status, despite having ample reasons for claiming it. In the fictitious world, Pip likewise clawed his way out of the victimhood pit, refusing to let his past treatment drive him toward actions and feelings of self-pity and hatred.

The question is, will we do the same? Or will we, like Miss Havisham and Estella, give way to our emotions and continue to declare our rights to hatred and victimhood in every venue possible?

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