

Comparative Study of the Themes in *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative literary analysis of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* through Marxist and psychoanalytic theoretical lenses. Despite the century-wide gap and divergent settings—Victorian England and 1980s post-industrial Scotland—both novels share striking thematic resonances in their portrayals of poverty, class (im)mobility, familial dysfunction, and identity formation. The study employs close reading and critical theory to examine how each protagonist – Pip and Shuggie – navigates harsh socio-economic realities and internal turmoil shaped by their environments. A Marxist framework illuminates the influence of class structures and material conditions on their life trajectories, while a psychoanalytic approach reveals the impact of childhood trauma, family dynamics, and internalized anxieties on their personal development. The analysis finds that both Dickens and Stuart use the Bildungsroman form to critique social inequality and explore psychological resilience, showing how literature across eras can voice the struggles of the marginalized and offer insight into the human capacity for endurance. The conclusion underscores the enduring value of literary studies in understanding social injustice and psychological resilience through the mirror of narrative.

Keywords: Great Expectations; Shuggie Bain; Comparative Literature; Marxist Criticism; Psychoanalytic Criticism; Class; Poverty; Familial Dysfunction; Identity; Resilience

I. Introduction

Literature often serves as both a mirror to society and a lens that interrogates the human condition. In this study, we undertake a comparative analysis of two powerful coming-of-age novels separated by over a century: Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020). Though rooted in vastly different socio-economic landscapes—Dickens's Victorian England and Stuart's late 20th-century Glasgow—these works are bound by striking thematic parallels, notably their shared concerns with poverty, class mobility, familial dysfunction, and the formation of personal identity. Both center on vulnerable young protagonists – Pip in *Great Expectations* and Shuggie in *Shuggie Bain* – whose formative years are shaped by economic disadvantage and entrenched class structures. Dickens presents Pip's journey from a humble rural childhood to the expectations of gentility within the rigid hierarchies of 19th-century Britain, while Stuart portrays Shuggie's coming-of-age amid the post-industrial decay of 1980s Scotland, marked by unemployment, addiction, and social neglect.

Despite their different contexts, each novel examines how an oppressive social environment and troubled home life can circumscribe a young person's dreams and self-concept. This research explores how Pip and Shuggie respond to the socio-economic constraints that define

their worlds, and how their stories encapsulate the emotional costs of ambition and longing in cultures of inequality. Through a close-reading methodology supported by Marxist and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks, the study illuminates both the historical specificity and the broader human dimensions of these narratives. The Marxist perspective helps uncover the material conditions, class relations, and power dynamics that shape each character's trajectory, while a psychoanalytic lens offers insight into their psychological development, family relationships, and internal conflicts. Ultimately, this comparative study seeks to demonstrate how a canonical Victorian novel and a contemporary work of fiction both provide profound critiques of social injustice and portrayals of human resilience. By examining *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain* side by side, we affirm literature's enduring role as a medium of social critique and reflection, capable of shedding light on issues of class and identity across different eras. The significance of this inquiry lies in showing that literary narratives, old and new, can deepen our understanding of social inequality and psychological resilience, bridging temporal and cultural divides through shared thematic concerns.

II. Literature Review

Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). As one of the most celebrated novels in the English canon, *Great Expectations* has generated a vast body of scholarship. Early critics such as Humphrey House (1963) highlighted Dickens's incisive portrayal of class consciousness in Victorian society, noting how the novel explores the "*dangerous allure of upward mobility*" and critiques the ideology of self-improvement when divorced from moral integrity. Pip's aspiration to rise above his "common" station is depicted with an acute awareness of the rigid stratification of Victorian England, reflecting Dickens's broader criticism of a class system that measures worth by wealth and status. John Lucas (1999) emphasized a melancholic undercurrent in Pip's narrative, interpreting it as a cautionary tale about the emotional and ethical costs of forsaking one's origins in pursuit of gentility. In a similar vein, Julian Moynahan's classic 1959 essay described Pip's social climb and subsequent disillusionment as a form of "self-betrayal," suggesting that Dickens critiques not only class ambition but also the internalization of shame and guilt by those who become estranged from their humble beginnings.

More recent scholarship has brought diverse theoretical lenses to *Great Expectations*. Feminist critics like Hilary Schor have examined characters such as Miss Havisham as symbols of arrested development and failed domesticity, highlighting how Dickens interrogates Victorian gender norms within the domestic sphere. Postcolonial readings by scholars including Edward Said and Sara Suleri situate the novel within the broader context of the British Empire, interpreting the fortunes of characters like Magwitch (whose wealth originates in penal exile abroad) as critiques of imperialist economic networks that underpin the story's moral binaries. Additionally, Dickens's narrative techniques have been studied for their contributions to the novel's social and psychological depth. The first-person retrospective narration allows an intimate portrayal of Pip's conscience and regrets, while the rich use of symbolism (for instance, Satis House as a decaying relic of wealth and Miss Havisham's eternal bridal attire) reinforces themes of stagnation and social decay. The novel's *Bildungsroman* structure – tracing Pip's growth from childhood innocence through painful experience to maturity – is deeply entangled with questions of class and identity. This structure has been noted for enabling a layered exploration of personal development amid structural inequality, making *Great*

Expectations a foundational text for studies of identity formation in class-conscious societies. In summary, the critical literature on Dickens's novel consistently underscores its interrogation of social hierarchy and its insight into the psychological toll of ambition and class mobility.

Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020). Though published over 150 years later, Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* has rapidly attained a prominent place in contemporary literary discourse, especially regarding working-class and queer narratives. The novel, which won the 2020 Booker Prize, has been widely lauded for its unflinching realism and emotional depth in portraying life in 1980s Glasgow. Scholars and critics note that Stuart, in his debut, provides a "gritty and visceral portrayal" of a boyhood shaped by the collapse of industry, pervasive poverty, and a parent's alcoholism. James Brown (2021) observes that *Shuggie Bain* offers a sensitive and authentic depiction of addiction, masculinity, and queer identity in a working-class context, effectively reclaiming such narratives from stereotypical or reductive portrayals. The novel's thematic reach indeed intersects with multiple critical domains: it has been discussed in the frames of queer theory (due to Shuggie's emerging sexual identity and the homophobia he faces), trauma studies (given the chronic neglect and abuse in Shuggie's family life), and feminist criticism (especially through the character of Agnes, Shuggie's mother, and the portrayal of motherhood under duress). Agnes Bain has drawn comparisons to tragic heroines of literature, as she is a character of great complexity—at once charismatic and loving, yet self-destructive due to her alcoholism and crushed dreams. Stuart grounds Agnes's tragedy in stark social realism, painting her not as a caricature of vice but as a product of systemic neglect and personal despair, thereby invoking readers' empathy rather than judgment.

Critics have also admired Stuart's literary style and the novel's aesthetic achievements. His prose has been described as combining lyrical, even poetic, richness with brutal realism. Alex Preston, writing for *The Guardian*, noted the "poetic brutality" of *Shuggie Bain*—the way tenderness and violence coexist within a domestic landscape fractured by addiction and social decay. Such narrative craftsmanship allows Stuart to depict scenes of hardship and abuse that are devastating yet imbued with dignity and love. Moreover, Stuart's nuanced handling of Shuggie's queerness in a hyper-masculine, homophobic environment has been celebrated as a significant contribution to LGBTQ+ literature, particularly within the working-class milieu. From a socio-political perspective, commentators have situated *Shuggie Bain* in the context of Thatcher-era Britain. The novel does not explicitly preach politics, but it unambiguously documents the human cost of neoliberal economic policies: the unemployment, the erosion of the social safety net, and the sense of abandonment that defined many working-class communities in the 1980s. One reviewer observes that the story is a "deeply political novel" dramatizing the impact of Thatcherism on Glasgow, a place where "men [were] rotting into the settee for want of decent work" [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com). Thus, *Shuggie Bain* operates on dual levels: it is a heart-wrenching personal tale of a boy's devotion to his troubled mother, and simultaneously a broader social commentary on the structural forces that govern their plight [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com). Early scholarly and critical discourse on the novel underscores its achievement in rendering visible the lives of those often marginalized in literature – the poor, the queer, the addict – with profound empathy and an unflinching critical eye.

Toward a Comparative Perspective. While substantial scholarship exists on *Great Expectations* and a growing body on *Shuggie Bain* individually, there is limited research directly comparing these two works across time. This study situates itself in the tradition of

comparative literature that bridges historical periods to reveal continuity and change in literary treatments of social issues. By drawing on Marxist literary criticism (e.g., the theories of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton on literature and class) and psychoanalytic theory (particularly Freudian concepts of family romance and Lacanian notions of desire and identity), our analysis builds a conceptual framework for examining how each novel reflects and critiques the socio-economic conditions of its era. The literature reviewed above provides a foundation: Dickens's novel is understood as a critique of Victorian class structure and personal psychology, and Stuart's as a commentary on late-20th-century poverty and identity. This comparative study extends that scholarship by exploring these works side by side, highlighting how both authors use narrative to address enduring concerns about class oppression, personal ambition, family influence, and identity formation across vastly different contexts. In doing so, we aim to contribute to scholarly conversations in Victorian studies, contemporary working-class studies, and narrative theory by demonstrating that certain thematic preoccupations—poverty, social mobility, and resilience—transcend their original milieus and continue to resonate powerfully in literature over time.

III. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodological approach grounded in close reading and critical theory. The core method is a comparative textual analysis of *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain*, examining each novel's narrative elements and themes in detail and then drawing connections between them. The study is fundamentally exploratory and interpretive, seeking to uncover nuanced thematic and structural parallels across the two texts. Rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis, it proceeds inductively through careful examination of the novels, guided by our theoretical frameworks.

Research Design: We began with an extensive literature review of scholarly works on both novels and relevant theory (Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism), which established a conceptual foundation and identified gaps in existing research. This was followed by a phase of close textual analysis for each novel. Key steps in the close reading included identifying core recurring themes (such as ambition, alienation, poverty, and resilience) and motifs, examining narrative structure and point of view, analyzing symbols and language use, and mapping character development in relation to the socio-economic contexts depicted. For example, we paid special attention to how Dickens and Stuart construct their protagonists, Pip and Shuggie, as products of their environments and as psychological subjects shaped by trauma, aspiration, and social rejection. Detailed notes and thematic annotations were made for each chapter of both novels, which were then compared to discern patterns of similarity and difference.

Theoretical Frameworks: The analysis is enriched by the application of two complementary critical frameworks. First, Marxist literary criticism is employed to interrogate each text's representation of class relations, economic struggle, and ideology. Using concepts from Marx and Engels as well as literary critics like Raymond Williams, we examine how material conditions and social class dynamics influence the narrative. For instance, we consider how *Great Expectations* portrays the class system of Victorian England – the hierarchy from Joe's forge to Miss Havisham's decaying mansion – and how *Shuggie Bain* portrays the working-class disintegration of Thatcher-era Glasgow. Marxist analysis illuminates the "social

alienation” experienced by the protagonists and the “*illusion of upward mobility*” that both novels critique. We ask questions such as: What do Pip’s expectations say about the capitalist values of his society? How does Shuggie’s environment reflect the outcomes of neoliberal policy? In parallel, we apply psychoanalytic literary theory, drawing largely on Freudian and Lacanian ideas, to delve into the inner lives of Pip and Shuggie. This involves analyzing family dynamics (Pip’s relationship with his abusive sister and the quasi-parental figures of Joe, Magwitch, and Miss Havisham; Shuggie’s bond with his alcoholic mother and absent father) and examining how early experiences, desires, and repressions shape their identities. Psychoanalytic criticism helps interpret symbols and episodes in terms of subconscious conflicts and formative traumas – for example, Pip’s feelings of guilt and “great expectations” can be read alongside Freudian notions of internalized guilt and the superego, while Shuggie’s struggles with his sense of otherness can be related to the formation of identity under societal taboo and the need for maternal acceptance. Combining these frameworks allows for a multidimensional interpretation: Marxist critique situates the characters in their historical-economic context, and psychoanalysis provides insight into their interior emotional landscapes.

Comparative Analysis: After the individual analyses, findings from each novel were synthesized to construct a comparative perspective (Month 5 of the research plan). We systematically juxtaposed instances where both novels address similar themes – for example, scenes depicting the stigma of poverty, or moments of the protagonist’s self-realization – to examine how each author’s treatment converges or diverges. We also considered the narrative form: both novels are *Bildungsromane*, and we analyze how each work adapts this form to its context (the serialized 19th-century novel versus a 21st-century retrospective narrative) and to what effect. Throughout, we remained attentive to the historical and cultural distances between Dickens’s and Stuart’s worlds, ensuring that comparative claims account for context rather than implying a false equivalence. The ultimate goal of this methodology is to produce a coherent comparative interpretation that is firmly grounded in textual evidence and informed by theory. All interpretations are supported by direct textual examples from the novels and, where appropriate, by scholarly sources or critical commentary. This method enables us to address the research objectives with academic rigor, yielding insights into how two distinct works of literature echo and illuminate each other on issues of class, family, and identity.

IV. Preliminary Data (Analysis of Thematic Parallels)

Poverty and Class Stratification: Both *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain* offer unflinching depictions of poverty and social stratification, serving as incisive critiques of the class systems in their respective contexts. In Dickens’s Victorian England, class boundaries are rigid and vividly illustrated through Pip’s encounters: from his humble beginnings as a blacksmith’s apprentice living in the marsh country to the grandeur and decay of Miss Havisham’s Satis House, Pip becomes acutely aware of the social gulf separating the poor from the wealthy. The novel portrays systemic inequality as a defining feature of Pip’s world; wealth and gentility confer power and prestige, while lack of money consigns characters like Joe Gargery to social invisibility. Crucially, Dickens exposes how the possibility of “*mobility*” in such a society is often an illusion or comes at great personal cost. Pip’s sudden elevation to the status of a gentleman—facilitated not by his own labor but by a secret benefactor’s money—suggests that in a capitalist society, money can purchase class position, yet this very process alienates Pip from his origins and true self. Indeed, as a Marxist reading highlights, Pip’s

transformation due to unearned wealth leads to a profound alienation; he becomes ashamed of the honest labor and loving family (Joe and Biddy) that defined his early life. Scholars have noted that Dickens critiques the ethos of self-advancement by showing how Pip's "*great expectations*" ultimately bring disillusionment rather than fulfillment. By the novel's end, Pip gains a sobering class consciousness, recognizing that social rank and virtue do not necessarily coincide, and that upward mobility can impose moral and emotional burdens.

In *Shuggie Bain*, class stratification is likewise depicted as a trap, but one shaped by late 20th-century economic policies and urban poverty. Set in the impoverished housing schemes of Glasgow, the novel shows a community mired in unemployment and social decay after the collapse of coal and manufacturing industries. The characters live under the shadow of Thatcher-era austerity, which has eroded the traditional working-class livelihoods and the welfare supports. Poverty in Shuggie's world is grinding and inescapable: families subsist on meager benefits, the landscape is dotted with shuttered businesses and idle men, and hope for upward mobility is virtually nonexistent. Stuart's narrative emphasizes that systemic inequality is maintained through both economic structures and social stigma. For instance, Agnes Bain, Shuggie's mother, perceives the gulf between her reality and her aspirations to a better (more "respectable") life, but her efforts to maintain appearances of middle-class propriety are tragically futile. The *illusion* of mobility is present as a cruel mirage: characters fantasize about moving to better neighborhoods or jobs, yet remain confined by circumstances. One particularly poignant aspect of *Shuggie Bain* is how it portrays the *shame of poverty* – a theme Dickens also touched upon – as deeply internalized by the characters. The Guardian's Alex Preston observes that Stuart is "brilliant on the shame of poverty" in Glasgow, showing how even in dire straits people cling to small dignities to keep going. Both novels thereby underscore that class is not merely an external social category, but something that penetrates the psyche of individuals. Each protagonist learns, in his own way, that class-based injustice is a structural force against which personal will and virtue may struggle in vain. By comparing these two works, we see a continuity in literature's concern with class oppression: from the 19th-century critique of gentlemanly capitalism in *Great Expectations* to the 20th-century critique of neoliberal poverty in *Shuggie Bain*, the fundamental question persists – how do economic systems determine the fates and self-worth of individuals?

Ambition, Aspiration, and the Illusion of Mobility: Alongside depicting poverty, both novels center on the theme of personal aspiration and its often painful consequences. Pip and Shuggie each harbor desires shaped – and thwarted – by their social contexts. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's yearning to become a gentleman is ignited by his exposure to wealth at Satis House and by Estella's scorn for his commonness. This ambition, encouraged by the mysterious promise of fortune, leads Pip to London in pursuit of a higher social station. Dickens uses Pip's trajectory to examine the moral and psychological toll of striving for a better life in an oppressive social structure. Pip's single-minded pursuit of gentility initially causes him to reject the forge and the people who genuinely care for him, suggesting that social climbing can engender personal betrayal. Literary critics note that Dickens frames Pip's advancement as a cautionary journey; John Lucas points out the "*melancholy*" that pervades Pip's narrative, as the hero realizes that material success and social status do not equal happiness or integrity. Julian Moynahan's notion of Pip's self-betrayal is evident when Pip feels deep guilt and regret for having hurt Joe and Biddy in the process of elevating himself. Ultimately, Pip's "great expectations" crumble – the fortune vanishes, the true benefactor is a social outcast

(Magwitch), Estella is unattainable – forcing Pip to confront the emptiness of the very dream he had chased. His journey dismantles the myth that one can simply transcend one's class without moral consequence; Dickens thus critiques the Victorian narrative of meritocracy, exposing how those "expectations" were built on a foundation of exploitation (Magwitch's transported labor and ill-gotten wealth) and illusion.

In *Shuggie Bain*, aspiration takes a different form yet leads to similarly poignant outcomes. Shuggie, as a boy, does not dream of wealth or gentility – his hopes are more basic: a stable family, his mother's sobriety, perhaps a sense of belonging or a chance at a normal life. However, his mother Agnes embodies a kind of thwarted ambition that echoes Pip's longing. Agnes dreams of upward social mobility in a modest sense; she prides herself on dressing well and keeping a tidy home, clinging to the manners and airs of a higher class, even as her reality crumbles. Her "aspiration" is to escape the working-class destitution and the stigma of being an alcoholic single mother, but the structural barriers prove insurmountable. For Shuggie, the coming-of-age process is about navigating these broken aspirations. There is a heartbreaking scene in which Shuggie meticulously studies ways to appear more "masculine" and "normal" – as if performing a different version of himself could win social acceptance and thereby change his and his mother's fortunes. This is analogous to Pip's early conviction that becoming a gentleman will solve his sense of inadequacy. Both characters learn harsh truths: Shuggie cannot single-handedly save Agnes or fully shield himself from poverty's consequences, just as Pip cannot buy genuine gentility or happiness. Through a Marxist lens, Shuggie's story critiques the neoliberal myth that anyone can "pull themselves up" by their bootstraps. And through a psychoanalytic lens, his and Agnes's aspirations reflect deep-seated desires for love, security, and recognition – desires continually frustrated by external reality. The emotional cost of these aspirations is tremendous. Agnes's repeated attempts and failures to stay sober and improve their life lead to cycles of hope and despair that scar Shuggie's psyche. Stuart, much like Dickens, thus illustrates the *psychological consequences* of striving for a better life in an environment rigged against one's success. Both novels convey a sobering message: personal ambition in a deeply unequal society can often be a double-edged sword, providing impetus to endure hardship but also engendering disillusionment and self-blame when the structural odds prevail.

Familial Dysfunction and Influence: The family unit – or the breakdown thereof – is central to both *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain*, serving as the immediate context in which the protagonists' identities are forged. Each novel portrays a deeply dysfunctional family environment and investigates how these conditions affect a child's psychological development. In Dickens's novel, Pip is an orphan raised by his sister Mrs. Joe, whose "bringing up by hand" is notoriously harsh. The Gargery household is characterized by a lack of warmth: Mrs. Joe's aggression and dissatisfaction contrast with Joe's kindness but limited agency. Pip's early experiences of domestic abuse and lack of parental affection leave him with feelings of inadequacy and longing for a true family. Surrogate and substitute parental figures emerge – most notably Magwitch, the escaped convict whose unexpected benevolence becomes the source of Pip's fortunes, and Miss Havisham, who seeks to use Pip in her revenge against the world of men. Both of these figures are problematic: Magwitch, though well-intentioned toward Pip, is a criminal shaped by an unjust society, and Miss Havisham is an embittered recluse who manipulates Pip and Estella for her own ends. Through these relationships, Dickens explores how dysfunctional parental figures can impose their own traumas and

obsessions on the young. Pip is torn between Joe's simple, honest love and the more toxic, complex bonds he forms with Magwitch and Miss Havisham. A psychoanalytic reading might view Pip's interactions with Miss Havisham and Estella as a distortion of the family romance – Miss Havisham acting as a kind of perverse mother figure who conditions Pip to love Estella, only to break his heart. This dynamic leaves lasting emotional scars on Pip, contributing to his sense of guilt and loss. The novel ultimately suggests that surrogate family love (Pip's reconciling with Joe, for example) is his salvation, whereas the dysfunction (Miss Havisham's and Magwitch's interventions) nearly ruins him. Thus Dickens links familial stability with personal integrity, and family dysfunction with psychological turmoil.

Shuggie Bain presents family dysfunction in an even more visceral manner. Shuggie's family life is dominated by his mother Agnes's alcoholism and his father Shug's philandering absence. By the time the main narrative unfolds, Shuggie lives with Agnes (who has left his father) and his older siblings in a public housing estate. The household is plagued by neglect, chaos, and the burden placed on Shuggie to care for his mother. Agnes's addiction drives the family into cycles of crisis: she often squanders the welfare money on drink, leaving the children hungry; she brings home abusive or enabling men; and her attempts to quit drinking repeatedly collapse. Stuart's portrayal of this mother-son relationship is complex and compassionate. Agnes is not rendered as a one-dimensional villain; rather, she is "*troubled, lovable, vulnerable and resilient*," a woman with genuine affection for her children and real aspirations, but who is overwhelmed by her dependency and despair. Shuggie, in turn, is fiercely devoted to Agnes. Their bond is described as "*strong and complex*," to the point that Shuggie's very fate seems to hang on his mother's self-destructive impulses. This co-dependent dynamic is at the heart of the novel's emotional power. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one could say Shuggie is forced into a premature caretaker role (a kind of parentified child), blurring the boundaries of the parent-child relationship and leaving him with deep-seated insecurities. The lack of a reliable father figure – Big Shug appears only sporadically, bringing more harm than help – further destabilizes Shuggie's world. The novel starkly shows how a dysfunctional family environment, marred by addiction and abuse, can circumscribe a child's opportunities and shape their psyche. Shuggie's every decision and social interaction (for instance, his difficulty fitting in at school, or attempts to hide his mother's condition from others) is influenced by the need to manage or compensate for his family situation. Stuart, much like Dickens, uses the family as a microcosm for broader social issues: Agnes's plight is tied to societal neglect, and the family's breakdown reflects the fraying social fabric of their community. Both authors thus dramatize that familial dysfunction is not merely private tragedy but intertwined with social context – Victorian domestic violence and orphanhood in *Great Expectations*, and the collapse of the working-class family under economic stress in *Shuggie Bain*. Importantly, both Pip and Shuggie demonstrate agency and empathy despite their upbringing: Pip secretly helps Magwitch out of compassion even as a child, and Shuggie shows remarkable loyalty and hope for his mother. These qualities provide glimmers of resilience within each dysfunctional family narrative.

Identity Formation and Internalized Struggles: The experiences of class pressure and family turmoil in these novels critically inform the protagonists' identity formation. Pip and Shuggie each undergo a process of developing selfhood under the weight of social expectations and personal secrets, and both struggle with a sense of otherness. Pip's identity crisis in *Great Expectations* revolves around who he is versus who he wishes to become. When we first meet

Pip, he is a naïve, kind-hearted boy content with his lowly status. However, after being exposed to Miss Havisham's world and receiving his "expectations," Pip becomes ashamed of his origins – a shame that Dickens vividly portrays and critiques. Pip attempts to remake himself into the image of a gentleman, adopting new manners, speech, and attitudes. Yet the very process of changing class identity creates an internal split. Pip's story can be read as a psychological conflict between his authentic self (tied to his childhood, the marshes, Joe's forge) and his aspirational self (the educated gentleman in London). He internalizes the class snobbery that once wounded him: for a time, Pip looks down on Joe and feels embarrassed by him, illustrating how class ideology can penetrate one's sense of self. As Julian Moynahan and others have noted, Pip experiences profound guilt and self-loathing as he realizes that he has betrayed his own past and the people he loved in pursuit of a societal ideal. Dickens, through Pip's first-person reflections, allows us to see the formation of conscience – Pip's gradual awakening to the moral emptiness of his pretensions is effectively the reassertion of his true identity. By the novel's conclusion, Pip's identity has been tempered by suffering and remorse; he is poorer in wealth but richer in self-knowledge and humility. In this way, *Great Expectations* suggests that identity, especially in a class-bound society, is something that must be negotiated between personal values and external labels. The novel demonstrates how class identity is constructed through external forces (money, education, social acceptance) but also *internalized psychologically* by the protagonist, often in damaging ways.

In *Shuggie Bain*, identity formation is equally fraught, particularly around Shuggie's sexual identity and gender expression. From a young age, Shuggie is perceived by others as "different" – he is gentle, artistic, and not conforming to the rough masculinity expected of boys in his environment. This makes him a target of bullying and ostracism, and even Agnes at times worries about him not being "normal." Stuart handles Shuggie's emerging gay identity with subtlety and empathy, showing his confusion and loneliness as he comes to terms with being queer in a homophobic context. Shuggie's sense of self is deeply shaped by the social norms of his community; he internalizes the idea that his mannerisms and interests are wrong for a boy. This internal conflict is evident in scenes where Shuggie practices acting "manly" or prays to be made "normal," reflecting a heartbreaking struggle for self-acceptance. As one critic notes, the novel is "*heartbreakingly good on childhood and Shuggie's growing sense of his otherness*", portraying how he slowly understands that he is "not the same as the other boys". In psychoanalytic terms, Shuggie's development is marked by a conflict between his true self and the self that would win his mother's approval and society's acceptance. His identity formation is also tied to his role in the family – being a caretaker for Agnes gives him purpose and maturity beyond his years, but it also blurs his own identity as a child. Through Shuggie, Stuart demonstrates how identity is both personally felt and socially constructed: Shuggie's queer identity and sensitive disposition are inherent parts of him, yet the shame and secrecy around them are imposed by the intolerant environment. Over the course of the novel, Shuggie endures tremendous hardship that forces him to become resilient and self-reliant. By the end, although he faces a tragic loss, there is a sense that Shuggie has survived with his sense of self intact, perhaps even strengthened by what he has overcome. Both novels thus explore identity as an *interdependent axis* shaped by both individual essence and social forces. Pip and Shuggie internalize the judgments of society – class inferiority for Pip, sexual otherness for Shuggie – and their journeys involve confronting those internalized beliefs. Their stories show the psychological toll of navigating rigid or collapsing social hierarchies, and they highlight the

need for personal reconciliation: Pip reconciles with his past and moral values; Shuggie, we can hope, moves toward accepting himself beyond the cruel judgments of his surroundings.

In comparing the two, we see that literature from different centuries converges on a similar celebration of the human spirit's capacity to withstand hardship. Dickens and Stuart each, in their own style, allow for "brief sublime moments" or small victories amidst suffering. Whether it is Pip's reconciliation with Joe or Shuggie finding solace in moments of kindness with his mother, these instances prevent the narratives from becoming utterly despairing. From a broader perspective, the resilience theme in both novels reinforces the idea that personal stories of struggle can illuminate larger truths about hope and survival. Both works suggest that even in the face of relentless social forces – be it the entrenched classism of Victorian England or the ravages of poverty and addiction in 1980s Scotland – individuals can assert their humanity through acts of love, forgiveness, and perseverance. As such, these novels contribute to a literary understanding of psychological resilience: they show how enduring hardship can lead to personal growth or at least a deeper understanding of oneself and others. In sum, the comparative analysis of *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain* reveals a remarkable thematic continuity: across time and space, literature returns to the intertwined issues of class oppression and human resilience, using the tools of narrative to critique social inequality and to celebrate the endurance of the human spirit.

V. Statement of Limitation

While this study offers in-depth insights into the parallels between *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain*, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the scope of analysis is deliberately narrow, focusing only on two novels. This exclusive focus allows for detailed comparative reading, but it also means that the conclusions drawn may not be readily generalizable to all Victorian or contemporary novels dealing with similar themes. There are many other literary works – by authors such as Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, James Kelman, or Irvine Welsh – that engage with poverty, class, and identity; however, examining those lies outside our scope. The study briefly notes such parallels in passing but does not analyze them, which could be seen as a limitation in situating our findings within the widest literary context. Second, our analysis employs primarily Marxist and psychoanalytic frameworks, which, while illuminating for class and psychological dimensions, do not encompass all possible angles. Other critical perspectives (for example, a feminist analysis of *Shuggie Bain* focusing on Agnes's character, or a postcolonial lens on *Great Expectations* regarding imperialism) are touched upon in the literature review but not exhaustively pursued in the analysis. Thus, some facets of the novels – such as gender dynamics beyond the mother figure, or colonial implications in Dickens – receive limited attention, marking a boundary to our interpretive lens.

Another limitation concerns the difference in historical and cultural context between the two novels. Any direct comparison must navigate the distinct contexts of 1860s England and 1980s Scotland. While we identify common themes, these themes manifest differently due to context, and our comparative approach cannot fully account for every contextual nuance. For instance, "poverty" in Victorian London has different causes and social meanings than poverty in post-industrial Glasgow, and the psychological notion of individualism or family will differ across eras. We have striven to contextualize each novel's setting, but the comparative format might

inadvertently gloss over some contextual specificities in favor of thematic alignment. In this sense, there is a risk of anachronism or oversimplification when drawing parallels, a risk we acknowledge and have tried to mitigate by grounding each analysis in the novel's own milieu.

VI. Conclusion

This comparative study has examined how *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain*, two novels separated by time and context, converge on a set of enduring themes and social concerns. Through Marxist and psychoanalytic readings, we have illuminated the ways in which Dickens and Stuart each engage with poverty, class mobility, family dysfunction, and identity formation in their narratives. The analysis revealed that both novels serve as poignant critiques of social inequality: Dickens scrutinizes the class-bound world of Victorian England, exposing the moral emptiness and personal disarray that often accompany the pursuit of gentility, while Stuart lays bare the human cost of deindustrialization and neoliberal neglect in late 20th-century Scotland, highlighting the despair and dignity of those left behind. In both cases, literature becomes a vehicle for social commentary, transforming the personal struggles of Pip and Shuggie into reflections on the wider structural realities of their societies.

Equally important, the study underscored the psychological dimension of these works. Using psychoanalytic insights, we explored how Pip and Shuggie internalize their hardships – Pip through feelings of gentility and shame, Shuggie through his secret self and caretaker role – and how they each seek identity and self-worth amid chaos. Despite the trauma and failures they experience, both characters demonstrate remarkable resilience. Pip's moral recovery and Shuggie's survival against all odds illustrate the capacity of individuals to endure and grow, suggesting that literature from any era often gravitates towards stories of human perseverance. By comparing a classic Victorian novel with a contemporary Scottish novel, we have seen that certain human experiences and questions persist across time: How do socio-economic forces shape one's destiny? How does family love or dysfunction mold one's psyche? What is lost and what is gained in striving beyond one's station? And importantly, what inner resources enable people to survive hardship? Both *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain* offer complex answers to these questions, wrapped in narratives that are as emotionally compelling as they are socially insightful.

In reinforcing the significance of this literary comparison, we conclude that studying such works side by side enhances our understanding of the *continuities and evolutions* in literary treatments of social class and personal identity. It highlights that the novel as a form has long been a site for grappling with issues of social justice, empathy for the marginalized, and the psychology of adversity. The fact that a 19th-century novel and a 21st-century novel can speak to each other thematically testifies to the "*enduring relevance of literary study in understanding real-world social struggles and psychological resilience*". Through Dickens's and Stuart's stories, we witness how narrative art not only mirrors society's inequities but also imagines the emotional realities of those who endure them. Such a comparative perspective enriches our appreciation of both texts, and affirms that literature – whether classic or contemporary – remains a powerful lens for examining the forces of inequality and the strength of the human spirit. In sum, this study demonstrates that crossing temporal and cultural boundaries in literary analysis can yield profound insights, reminding us that the core challenges of poverty, identity, and resilience have been and continue to be central to the human

experience as captured by novelists. The dialogue between *Great Expectations* and *Shuggie Bain* ultimately reinforces why we turn to literature: to understand ourselves and our societies, to critique injustice, and to find, amidst darkness, narratives of hope and endurance.

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