

## **Man Does Not Live by Bread Alone . . . Unless There is No Bread: An Analysis of Dickens Characters Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

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### **Abstract**

In *Motivation and Personality*, Abraham Maslow claims, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man *can* be, he *must* be" (91). This being what a person can and must be is what Maslow calls "self-actualization." Self-actualization is the apex of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, his theory of human motivation. Below self-actualization are four lower levels of basic physical and social needs. Starting at the bottom of the hierarchy and going up, the other four needs are Physiological, Safety, Love and Belonging, and Esteem. Except in certain circumstances, humans usually seek gratification of needs in the order presented by Maslow's hierarchy. Once a need is met, it is submerged and the next need on the hierarchy emerges as the dominating force. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is the foundation of humanist psychology, provides insight into human motivation that, in turn, can be applied to literary characters. Maslow's theory provides a wealth of potential for literary scholarship. Of course, Freudian psychology has long dominated the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism, and, as a result, critics have neglected other psychology models, including Maslow's. Maslow works especially well with Charles Dickens's novels because the author had a personal interest in psychology, which comes through in the distortion and exaggeration of characters to highlight certain behaviors. Analysis of the motivations behind peculiar, arbitrary, and unintelligible behaviors reveals that the forces behind these behaviors are actually common human motivators. An application of the hierarchy of needs to Dickens's characters provides a reciprocal understanding of both and new insights into the behaviors and relations of characters. Beginning with physiological needs and ending with self-actualization, different Dickens characters will be analyzed at each level. In *Bleak House*, Jo and the brickmaker's family will be analyzed according to physiological needs; in *Hard Times*, the workers of Coketown, represented by Stephen Blackpool, will be assessed in regard to safety needs; in *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham will be interpreted as a character with love and belonging needs, and Pip by esteem needs; finally, in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge will be examined as a character who gets stuck on the safety level of the hierarchy, but, upon the realization of a peak experience, quickly moves toward self-actualization.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, Abraham Maslow, Hierarchy of Needs.

### **1. Introduction**

In *Motivation and Personality*, Abraham Maslow claims, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man *can* be, he *must* be."<sup>1</sup> This being what a person can and must be is what Maslow calls "self-actualization," which is the apex of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, his theory of human motivation. Below self-actualization are four lower levels of basic physical and social needs. Starting at the bottom of the hierarchy and going up, the other four needs are Physiological, Safety, Love and

Belonging, and Esteem. Except in certain circumstances, people usually seek gratification of needs in the order presented by Maslow's hierarchy. According to Maslow's theory, the drive to fulfill the needs of the hierarchy is what motivates human behavior and personality. For example, if a physiological need such as food is not met, then behavior and personality are motivated by the drive to obtain food, and all other needs will be perceived as secondary. For a person starving to death, Maslow says, "Life itself tends to be defined in terms of eating ... Freedom, love, community feeling, respect, philosophy, may all be waved aside as fripperies that are useless, since they fail to fill the stomach. Such a man may fairly be said to live by bread alone."<sup>2</sup> In other words, obtaining bread and preventing starvation become the main motivating factors of life, and everything else is defined in relation to that goal. Once a need is met, it is submerged and the next need on the hierarchy emerges as the dominating force. However, the fulfillment of needs is not necessarily a have/have not dichotomy, but rather a scale of percentages. The next need on the hierarchy can emerge by degrees before the previous need is completely met. Also, the fact that a need has been met previously does not mean that it cannot become dominant again at a later time if the original fulfilling factors are removed. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides insight into human motivation that, in turn, can be applied to literary characters. Of course, Freudian psychology has long dominated the field of psychological criticism, and, as a result, critics have neglected other psychology models that could be fruitfully applied. Maslow's theory supplies a wealth of potential for literary criticism in general, and for Dickens scholarship in particular.

Dickens's novels lend themselves especially well to criticism using Maslow's theory because the author had a personal interest in psychology. In his essay "Charles Dickens," John Kucich says, "Dickens has been routinely disparaged as a psychologist. This long-standing critical disdain results, however, from a failure to appreciate the kind of psychological analysis Dickens offers ... his depictions of particular characters is always reductive, and always also the product of a deliberate effort to distort and exaggerate ... focusing on what seems peculiar, arbitrary, unintelligible, comic, or terrifying."<sup>3</sup> Kucich reveals that Dickens offers choice subjects for analysis because Dickens distorts and exaggerates characters to highlight certain behaviors, Dickens offers choice subjects for analysis. Examining the motivations behind peculiar, arbitrary, and unintelligible behaviors reveals that the forces behind these behaviors are actually common human motivators. Therefore, an application of the hierarchy of needs to Dickens's characters can provide new insights into the behaviors and relations of characters. Beginning with physiological needs and ending with self-actualization, different Dickens characters will be analyzed at each level. In *Bleak House*, Jo and the brickmaker's family will be analyzed according to physiological needs; in *Hard Times*, the workers of Coketown, represented by Stephen Blackpool, will be assessed in regard to safety needs; in *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham will be interpreted as a character with love and belonging needs, and Pip by esteem needs; finally, in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge will be examined as a character who gets stuck on the safety level of the hierarchy, but, upon the realization of a peak experience, quickly moves toward self-actualization.

## 2. Physiological Needs in *Bleak House*

The first level of the hierarchy is physiological needs, such as food, water, health, and all other requirements for survival. In *Bleak House*, Jo is a starving street sweeper trying to meet these basic needs. Through Mr. Snagsby, Jo comes to the attention of Mr. Chadband, a self-proclaimed minister of "no particular denomination," and is subjected to his preaching.<sup>4</sup> Jo unwillingly listens to an impromptu sermon, during which, Chadband declares, "O glorious to be a human boy! And why glorious, my young friend? Because you are capable of receiving the lessons of wisdom, because you are capable of profiting by this discourse which I now deliver for your good."<sup>5</sup> Yet, for Jo, it is not so glorious to be a human boy because he is starving, homeless, and struggling to survive. As a result, he cannot profit from Chadband's discourse. Chadband says he is delivering "lessons of wisdom" for Jo's own "good," but he does not have the wisdom to see that what will do Jo the most good is food and a decent place to live. When Jo shows his disinterest in the lessons by yawning, "Mrs. Snagsby indignantly expresses her belief that he is a limb of the arch-fiend."<sup>6</sup> She, too, does not understand that, no matter how important the message, it is difficult to pay attention when overcome by hunger pangs. Jo is not an agent of Satan because he does not listen to a sermon; he is simply driven by more fundamental concerns. Once the basic physiological needs are met, only then can Jo concentrate on meeting higher level needs.

Like Jo, the brickmaker's family in *Bleak House* is trying to meet physiological needs, and they have become the objects of spiritual philanthropy from a woman named Mrs. Pardiggle. Mrs. Pardiggle claims to be knowledgeable of the poor. She believes her "charitable business" is "improving to others," but this could not be further from the truth.<sup>7</sup> The brickmaker's family lives in a dirty hovel next to a pigsty. The only water they have available is dirty and

smelly, and it is used for all washing and drinking purposes. But instead of sympathizing with the need for healthier living conditions, Mrs. Pardiggle complains about “the untidy habits of the people.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the narrator tells us, “I doubted if the best of us could have been tidy in such a place.”<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Pardiggle acts as though the lowly living conditions are a choice. However, they are not just a family of lazy slobs; they can afford no better and must make do with the available means. Rather than helping to improve their living conditions, Mrs. Pardiggle ignores the basic health needs of the family, reads the Bible to them, and leaves them books to read, unknowing or uncaring that nobody in the family knows how to read. Even if they did know how to read, the family has more pressing concerns. The brickmaker says, “we’ve had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead infants,” and his wife, Jenny, is currently holding their sixth baby, who is sick and gasping.<sup>10</sup> They know the unwholesome environment is killing their children, and that actuality is the main motivating force in their lives. Mrs. Pardiggle is trying to help them fulfill spiritual needs, which are part of the self-actualization level, and takes no notice that they cannot attend to these needs until their more basic needs are met. Their sick baby dies as she leaves, and all she does is express “her hope that the brickmaker and all his house would be improved when she saw them next.”<sup>11</sup> The realization that improvement is nearly impossible unless needs are met in a certain order never occurs to her.

### 3. Safety Needs in *Hard Times*

After physiological needs, safety needs, which include physical security, stability, and freedom from fear, are next on the hierarchy. The importance of these needs is made evident in *Hard Times* through the workers of Coketown. Coketown is an industrial city full of factories where working class people labor. These factories contain dangerous equipment, and no safety devices are used to prevent injuries. Rachael’s little sister has her arm torn off by a piece of machinery she is working with and dies. The workers’ jobs do not provide physical security. Indeed, quite the opposite is true; they endanger physical security. In addition, their jobs do not provide financial stability. Maslow asserts that financial security is an important part of the stability aspect of safety needs.<sup>12</sup> Any of the workers can be fired at any time on a mere whim of their employer. They barely make enough money to eke out a living, and it is certainly not enough to allow them to save any substantial amount for hard times, to have a safety net. Stephen Blackpool tells his employer, Mr. Bounderby, “Look how we live, an’ wheer we live, an’ in what numbers, an’ by what chances, and wi’ what sameness; and look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no nigher to onny dis’ant object—ceptin awlus, Death.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Blackpool is making clear that he and the other workers live without safety and security. They spend their entire lives working, but never get any closer to satisfying these needs. Death, the one stable factor that can be counted on in their lives, is all they have to look forward to. For his honesty about the workers’ state of affairs, Blackpool is fired—without severance pay, without unemployment benefits, and with no means of supporting himself.

The precarious position of Blackpool and the other factory workers leaves little room for concerns that are higher up on the hierarchy of needs. Similar to Mrs. Pardiggle and Mr. Chadband, we again see people who have all of their basic physical and social needs met trying to push self-actualization goals such as spirituality/morality onto people who are still trying to obtain lower level needs. In Coketown, the churchgoers are “indignantly petitioning for acts of parliament that should make these people religious by main force.”<sup>14</sup> The laboring people do not go to church, but rather, gaze “at all the church and chapel going, as at a thing with which they had no manner of concern.”<sup>15</sup> The people for whom self-actualization needs are dominant foolishly think that everyone else is, or should be, on the same level. They do not recognize that people on different levels have different priorities. The reason the workers are not concerned with church and chapel going is plain when viewed through Maslow’s hierarchy. The workers are motivated by safety concerns, not self-actualization. This is not to say that people motivated by safety cannot or will not go to church, but that the need for some sort of spirituality is not a dominating force in their lives. The fact that none of the workers go to church is an example of Dickens’s reductive character portrayals, which work so well for psychological analysis precisely because they highlight a particular action, in this case a uniformity of action. Instead of going to church, the workers use what little spare time they have to go to union formation meetings where they are promised help in achieving safer working conditions and better pay. These are the issues that interest them because they address their safety needs.

#### 4. Love and Belonging Needs in *Great Expectations*

Following safety needs on the hierarchy are love and belonging needs, which encompass affection and friendship as well as love and the feeling of belonging to family or some sort of group. In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham provides a grim illustration of what can happen when the needs of this level are not met. Havisham does not have a loving family. Her mother and father are dead, and the one sibling she has is a half-brother who “cherished a deep and mortal grudge against her” because he believes that she is responsible for their father disinheriting him.<sup>16</sup> Her other relatives do not love her but only pretend to in the hopes of getting money out of her. In her search for love, Havisham falls for a con man named Compeyson and places the fulfillment of her love and belonging needs completely in his hands. The one relative who is not after her money, Matthew, warns her against “placing herself too unreservedly in his [Compeyson’s] power.”<sup>17</sup> She ignores the warning, accuses Matthew of wanting her money, and continues with her intention to marry Compeyson. The wedding day arrives, but the bridegroom does not. After swindling her for everything he can, he sends her a letter breaking off the engagement. Since Havisham entrusts her need for love entirely to Compeyson, his betrayal completely devastates her. Her resultant psychological state demonstrates Maslow’s claim that “the thwarting of these needs is the most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology.”<sup>18</sup> Miss Havisham is far beyond “maladjustment” and deep into “severe psychopathology.” She lays her estate to waste, never looks at daylight again, and remains stuck in the moment when love is lost, wearing her rotting, yellowed bridal dress. By keeping herself firmly in the past with constant reminders of her broken heart, she appears to have given up on finding love.

Contrary to appearances, however, we discover that Miss Havisham is still looking for love when she adopts Estella. Havisham transfers her need for love from her lost fiancé to her adopted daughter, but this backfires because she also passes her psychopathology on to Estella. Havisham raises her “to wreak revenge on all the male sex,” and she becomes “hard and haughty and capricious.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Estella is taught that love is a weakness that leads to pain and should be avoided at all costs. She is hard-hearted, and Havisham is broken-hearted. Their warped relationship does not satisfy the needs of either of them because “both giving *and* receiving love” is required.<sup>20</sup> When Estella asks Havisham what she wants from her, she replies, “Love.”<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, this is the one thing Estella does not know how to give. Too late, Havisham discovers the mistake she made; she “bred her and educated her, to be loved,” but not to return love.<sup>22</sup> She spends the majority of her life futilely pursuing love and being thwarted at each attempt. Love is her sole objective because her lower level needs are met, and her psychopathology does not leave room for concern with higher level needs such as esteem. She is known for miles around as “an immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion.”<sup>23</sup> Miss Havisham is considered to be mad by the townspeople, or eccentric at best. This does not bother her, though, because she is fixated on revenge and lost love. In the end, she dies without having her love and belonging needs fulfilled.

#### 5. Esteem Needs in *Great Expectations*

Unlike Miss Havisham, Pip, who is also in *Great Expectations*, does care about meeting esteem needs, which can be divided into two categories, self-esteem and esteem from others. Self-esteem is the desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery and competence, confidence, independence, and freedom.<sup>24</sup> Esteem from others is the desire for reputation or prestige, respect, status, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, and appreciation.<sup>25</sup> In the beginning of the novel, Pip is relatively happy. He has his physiological needs, safety needs, and love needs met. Although his sister does not love and sometimes beats him, he is never in fear for his life. He has a sense of belonging to a family, Joe loves him, and he loves Joe in return. Joe even meets Pip’s esteem needs at first. Joe respects Pip and calls him an “oncommon scholar.”<sup>26</sup> Also, Pip tells us, “I was to be apprenticed to Joe, and until I could assume that dignity I was not to be what Mrs Joe called ‘Pompeyed,’ or (as I render it) pampered.”<sup>27</sup> Pip had thought that is was a dignity to be apprenticed to Joe. Joe would have taught him to be a competent and independent blacksmith. The townspeople would have recognized him as a hard-working individual, and, like Joe, he would have had “a place he is competent to fill, and fills well and with respect.”<sup>28</sup> However, Pip rejects all of this because he loses respect for the common life after meeting Estella, which causes Pip to devalue Joe’s esteem. Estella calls Pip “a stupid, clumsy labouring-boy.”<sup>29</sup> Instead of shrugging the insult off, chalking it up to class differences, and maintaining his self-esteem, Pip admits that her “contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I

caught it.”<sup>30</sup> Pip is young and impressionable, and Estella’s insults and derision shatter his self-confidence. Pip mistakenly thinks that everyone must respect him for his esteem needs to be satisfied.

After Pip finds out that Estella does not respect him, he comes to correlate all esteem with gaining Estella’s approval. Maslow warns of the very dangers that Pip is facing, the “dangers of basing self-esteem on the opinions of others rather than on real capacity, competence, and adequacy to the task.”<sup>31</sup> Basing his self-esteem on Estella’s opinion turns out to be his downfall. Rather than valuing what he could do and the people who do respect him, Pip turns his back on the people who care about him and focuses all of his energies on becoming a gentleman because he thinks that it will gain him Estella’s respect. When he comes into money, he leaves home and forgets about Joe and Biddy. Later, he comes to see he has associated his esteem needs with Estella, and that “it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood – from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe.”<sup>32</sup> He knows hankering after money and gentility is “wretched” and “ill-regulated,” yet he continues his pursuit of Estella and his neglect of home and Joe. Pip confuses the power of money and the attention it brings with prestige. His dream is to be recognized and respected by everyone, especially Estella. Conversely, his nightmare is to be shamed in front of everyone. At one point, he goes to bed thinking of Estella and dreams that he has to “play Hamlet to Miss Havisham’s Ghost, before twenty thousand people, without knowing twenty words of it.”<sup>33</sup> Having to play a part without knowing the words would show incompetence, the opposite of what is required for esteem. So, we see that not only is Pip’s every waking moment preoccupied with gaining esteem, but his subconscious is apparently preoccupied with it as well. Only after he loses all chances of being with Estella, all his money, and all the attention that came with having money, does Pip realize the “most stable and therefore most healthy self-esteem is based on *deserved* respect from others rather than on external fame or celebrity and unwarranted adulation.”<sup>34</sup> He takes a job as a clerk, stops chasing after gentility, and through hard work finally earns a good name and the esteem he has been looking for.

## 6. Self-Actualization in *A Christmas Carol*

Esteem is the last level of the hierarchy before the apex of self-actualization. Basically, it involves living up to one’s potential, accepting one’s strengths and limitations, accepting other people for who they are, being spontaneous, acting creatively, acting independently of other’s opinions, and concern with morality/spirituality.<sup>35</sup> Before reaching self-actualization at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge starts out stuck on the safety level. When Scrooge is a child, his family is very poor. He attends a boarding school of “broken fortunes” where there is “a chilly bareness in the place, which associated itself somehow with too much getting up by candle-light, and not too much to eat.”<sup>36</sup> His physiological needs, such as food, are scarcely being met, and he has no sense of security that they will be continue to be met. This insecurity as a child leads to psychological problems as an adult, namely, neurosis. In *Personality Theories*, James Hess states, “Neurosis occurs when early deprivation of lower order needs occurs, people can fixate or obsess about losing those needs even when those needs have been met.”<sup>37</sup> Scrooge is obsessed with money because he is worried about losing the financial security he has obtained, which ensures the fulfillment of basic survival needs. Consequently, he becomes a miser. In “The Primitive Keynesianism of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*,” Lee Erickson confirms that “Scrooge’s hoarding is the manifestation of fear about the financial future.”<sup>38</sup> Fear of the financial future, and the resulting obsession with money, causes Scrooge to lose his fiancé, Belle, reject his nephew, Fred, and turn down all attempts at friendship. He remains on the safety level, ignoring love and higher level needs.

Eventually, Scrooge is freed from his fixation with the safety level of the hierarchy and proceeds to self-actualization after having a peak experience. Maslow describes a peak experience as “the feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe, the loss of placing in time and space with, finally, the conviction that something extremely important and valuable had happened, so that the subject is to some extent transformed and strengthened.”<sup>39</sup> Scrooge’s peak experience happens when he is visited by Marley’s ghost and the Three Spirits of Christmas. First, the Spirits inspire a sense of wonder and awe in Scrooge. Second, he feels ecstasy when he wakes up in bed alive and well on Christmas day. Third, we see his loss of placing in time when he says, “I don’t know how long I’ve been among the Spirits.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, convinced of the importance and value of his experience, he transforms into a new man so that his nephew hardly recognizes him. He achieves love and belonging by making amends with his nephew and befriending his clerk, Bob Cratchit. His esteem needs are met because he respects the new man he has become. Also, he apologizes to the man who came to collect for charity and donates to his cause, thereby earning respect from others. Thus, Scrooge reaches self-actualization at last. His description at the end of the story is a

perfect description of a self-actualized person: “He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew ... Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them ... knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.”<sup>41</sup> In short, Scrooge lives up to his potential. He develops a sense of humor, acts spontaneously and independently of other’s opinions, and learns to accept himself and others for whom they are. His own heart laughing is all he needs.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, analyzing what characters need using Maslow’s hierarchy presents new information about character motivation. For instance, Jo, the brickmaker’s family, and the workers of Coketown all demonstrate the importance of meeting lower level needs before higher level needs. They cannot pay proper attention to things such as spirituality when the basic requirements for survival are not being met. Next, Miss Havisham and Scrooge have blatant psychological problems, and in light of Maslow’s hierarchy it is plain to see that these problems are the result of thwarted love and safety needs, respectively. Similarly, Pip has obvious issues trying to meet esteem needs because he tries to fulfill them in the wrong way. Understanding what motivates characters, and how they overcome or do not overcome their problems, can provide us with a better comprehension of our own psychology and how to progress past troubles toward self-actualization. In other words, we can benefit from the mistakes and psychological states of characters. Therefore, in addition to providing a new way of looking at literature and an uncharted method of psychological criticism, this approach also allows us to learn about ourselves by equipping us with a realistic way of understanding and relating to characters.

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## 9. Endnotes

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