

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

CHARLES DICKENS (1812 - 1870)





Context

- Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, and spent the first nine years of his life living in the coastal regions of Kent, a county in southeast England. Dickens's father, John, was a kind and likable man, but he was incompetent with money and piled up tremendous debts throughout his life. When Dickens was nine, his family moved to London.




Context (cont.)

- When he was twelve, his father was arrested and taken to debtors' prison. Dickens's mother moved his seven brothers and sisters into prison with their father, but she arranged for the young Charles to live alone outside the prison and work with other children pasting labels on bottles in a blacking warehouse (blacking was a type of manufactured soot used to make a black pigment for products such as matches or fertilizer).



Context (cont.)

- Dickens found the three months he spent apart from his family highly traumatic. Not only was the job itself miserable, but he considered himself too good for it, earning the contempt of the other children. After his father was released from prison, Dickens returned to school.
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Context (cont.)

- He eventually became a law clerk, then a court reporter, and finally a novelist. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, became a huge popular success when Dickens was only twenty-five. He published extensively and was considered a literary celebrity until his death in 1870.

Context (cont.)

- Many of the events from Dickens's early life are mirrored in *Great Expectations* which is his most autobiographical novel. Pip, the novel's protagonist, lives in the marsh country, works at a job he hates, considers himself too good for his surroundings, and experiences material success in London at a very early age, exactly as Dickens himself did. In addition, one of the novel's most appealing characters, Wemmick, is a law clerk, and the law, justice, and the courts are all important components of the story.



Context (cont.)

- *Great Expectations* is set in early Victorian England, a time when great social changes were sweeping the nation. The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had transformed the social landscape, enabling capitalists and manufacturers to amass huge fortunes. Although social class was no longer entirely dependent on the circumstances of one's birth, the divisions between rich and poor remained nearly as wide as ever.



Context (cont.)

- London, a teeming mass of humanity, lit by gas lamps at night and darkened by black clouds from smokestacks during the day, formed a sharp contrast with the nation's sparsely populated rural areas. More and more people moved from the country to the city in search of greater economic opportunity. Throughout England, the manners of the upper class were very strict and conservative: gentlemen and ladies were expected to have thorough classical educations and to behave appropriately in innumerable social situations.



Context (cont.)

- These conditions defined Dickens's time, and they make themselves felt in almost every facet of *Great Expectations*. Pip's sudden rise from country laborer to city gentleman forces him to move from one social extreme to another while dealing with the strict rules and expectations that governed Victorian England.



Context (cont.)

- In form, *Great Expectations* fits a pattern popular in nineteenth-century European fiction: the bildungsroman, or novel depicting growth and personal development, generally a transition from boyhood to manhood such as that experienced by Pip.

Characteristics of Charles Dickens' novels:

- The title of a novel was extremely important to Dickens.
- Dickens used suspense and mystery.
- Novels rely heavily upon his use of symbolism (, for example, how he uses fire, hands, the mist, the river, the signpost in *Great Expectations*).
- Dickens uses comedy as relief from the serious and unhappy sections of his novel.
- Writes from the point of view of the lowest classes living in a large city.





Plot Overview

- Pip, a young orphan living with his sister and her husband in the marshes of Kent, sits in a cemetery one evening looking at his parents' tombstones. Suddenly, an escaped convict springs up from behind a tombstone, grabs Pip, and orders him to bring him food and a file for his leg irons. Pip obeys, but the fearsome convict is soon captured anyway. The convict protects Pip by claiming to have stolen the items himself.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- One day Pip is taken by his Uncle Pumblechook to play at Satis House, the home of the wealthy dowager Miss Havisham, who is extremely eccentric: she wears an old wedding dress everywhere she goes and keeps all the clocks in her house stopped at the same time. During his visit, he meets a beautiful young girl named Estella, who treats him coldly and contemptuously. Nevertheless, he falls in love with her and dreams of becoming a wealthy gentleman so that he might be worthy of her. He even hopes that Miss Havisham intends to make him a gentleman and marry him to Estella, but his hopes are dashed when, after months of regular visits to Satis House, Miss Havisham decides to help him become a common laborer in his family's business.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- With Miss Havisham's guidance, Pip is apprenticed to his brother-in-law, Joe, who is the village blacksmith. Pip works in the forge unhappily, struggling to better his education with the help of the plain, kind Biddy and encountering Joe's malicious day laborer, Orlick. One night, after an altercation with Orlick, Pip's sister, known as Mrs. Joe, is viciously attacked and becomes a mute invalid. From her signals, Pip suspects that Orlick was responsible for the attack.



Plot Overview (cont.)

- One day a lawyer named Jaggers appears with strange news: a secret benefactor has given Pip a large fortune, and Pip must come to London immediately to begin his education as a gentleman. Pip happily assumes that his previous hopes have come true—that Miss Havisham is his secret benefactor and that the old woman intends for him to marry Estella.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- In London, Pip befriends a young gentleman named Herbert Pocket and Jaggers's law clerk, Wemmick. He expresses disdain for his former friends and loved ones, especially Joe, but he continues to pine after Estella. He furthers his education by studying with the tutor Matthew Pocket, Herbert's father. Herbert himself helps Pip learn how to act like a gentleman. When Pip turns twenty-one and begins to receive an income from his fortune, he will secretly help Herbert buy his way into the business he has chosen for himself. But for now, Herbert and Pip lead a fairly undisciplined life in London, enjoying themselves and running up debts.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- Orlick reappears in Pip's life, employed as Miss Havisham's porter, but is promptly fired by Jaggers after Pip reveals Orlick's unsavory past. Mrs. Joe dies, and Pip goes home for the funeral, feeling tremendous grief and remorse. Several years go by, until one night a familiar figure barges into Pip's room—the convict, Magwitch, who stuns Pip by announcing that he, not Miss Havisham, is the source of Pip's fortune. He tells Pip that he was so moved by Pip's boyhood kindness that he dedicated his life to making Pip a gentleman, and he made a fortune in Australia for that very purpose.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- Pip is appalled, but he feels morally bound to help Magwitch escape London, as the convict is pursued both by the police and by Compeyson, his former partner in crime. A complicated mystery begins to fall into place when Pip discovers that Compeyson was the man who abandoned Miss Havisham at the altar and that Estella is Magwitch's daughter. Miss Havisham has raised her to break men's hearts, as revenge for the pain her own broken heart caused her. Pip was merely a boy for the young Estella to practice on; Miss Havisham delighted in Estella's ability to toy with his affections.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- As the weeks pass, Pip sees the good in Magwitch and begins to care for him deeply. Before Magwitch's escape attempt, Estella marries an upper-class lout named Bentley Drummle. Pip makes a visit to Satis House, where Miss Havisham begs his forgiveness for the way she has treated him in the past, and he forgives her. Later that day, when she bends over the fireplace, her clothing catches fire and she goes up in flames. She survives but becomes an invalid. In her final days, she will continue to repent for her misdeeds and to plead for Pip's forgiveness.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- The time comes for Pip and his friends to spirit Magwitch away from London. Just before the escape attempt, Pip is called to a shadowy meeting in the marshes, where he encounters the vengeful, evil Orlick. Orlick is on the verge of killing Pip when Herbert arrives with a group of friends and saves Pip's life. Pip and Herbert hurry back to effect Magwitch's escape. They try to sneak Magwitch down the river on a rowboat, but they are discovered by the police. Compeyson tipped off. Magwitch and Compeyson fight in the river, and Compeyson is drowned.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- Magwitch is sentenced to death, and Pip loses his fortune. Magwitch feels that his sentence is God's forgiveness and dies at peace. Pip falls ill; Joe comes to London to care for him, and they are reconciled. Joe gives him the news from home: Orlick, after robbing Pumblechook, is now in jail; Miss Havisham has died and left most of her fortune to the Pockets; Biddy has taught Joe how to read and write. After Joe leaves, Pip decides to rush home after him and marry Biddy, but when he arrives there he discovers that she and Joe have already married.

Plot Overview (cont.)

- Pip decides to go abroad with Herbert to work in the mercantile trade. Returning many years later, he encounters Estella in the ruined garden at Satis House. Drummle, her husband, treated her badly, but he is now dead. Pip finds that Estella's coldness and cruelty have been replaced by a sad kindness, and the two leave the garden hand in hand, Pip believing that they will never part again.



Character List





Pip

- As a bildungsroman, *Great Expectations* presents the growth and development of a single character, Philip Pirrip, better known to himself and to the world as Pip. As the focus of the bildungsroman, Pip is by far the most important character in *Great Expectations*: he is both the protagonist, whose actions make up the main plot of the novel, and the narrator, whose thoughts and attitudes shape the reader's perception of the story. As a result, developing an understanding of Pip's character is perhaps the most important step in understanding *Great Expectations*.



Pip

- Because Pip is narrating his story many years after the events of the novel take place, there are really two Pips in *Great Expectations*: Pip the narrator and Pip the character—the voice telling the story and the person acting it out. Dickens takes great care to distinguish the two Pips, imbuing the voice of Pip the narrator with perspective and maturity while also imparting how Pip the character feels about what is happening to him as it actually happens. This skillfully executed distinction is perhaps best observed early in the book, when Pip the character is a child; here, Pip the narrator gently pokes fun at his younger self, but also enables us to see and feel the story through his eyes.



Pip

- As a character, Pip's two most important traits are his immature, romantic idealism and his innately good conscience. On the one hand, Pip has a deep desire to improve himself and attain any possible advancement, whether educational, moral, or social. His longing to marry Estella and join the upper classes stems from the same idealistic desire as his longing to learn to read and his fear of being punished for bad behavior: once he understands ideas like poverty, ignorance, and immorality, Pip does not want to be poor, ignorant, or immoral.



Pip

- Pip the narrator judges his own past actions extremely harshly, rarely giving himself credit for good deeds but angrily castigating himself for bad ones. As a character, however, Pip's idealism often leads him to perceive the world rather narrowly, and his tendency to oversimplify situations based on superficial values leads him to behave badly toward the people who care about him. When Pip becomes a gentleman, for example, he immediately begins to act as he thinks a gentleman is supposed to act, which leads him to treat Joe and Biddy snobbishly and coldly.



Pip

- On the other hand, Pip is at heart a very generous and sympathetic young man, a fact that can be witnessed in his numerous acts of kindness throughout the book (helping Magwitch, secretly buying Herbert's way into business, etc.) and his essential love for all those who love him. Pip's main line of development in the novel may be seen as the process of learning to place his innate sense of kindness and conscience above his immature idealism.



Pip

- Not long after meeting Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip's desire for advancement largely overshadows his basic goodness. After receiving his mysterious fortune, his idealistic wishes seem to have been justified, and he gives himself over to a gentlemanly life of idleness. But the discovery that the wretched Magwitch, not the wealthy Miss Havisham, is his secret benefactor shatters Pip's oversimplified sense of his world's hierarchy.





Pip



- The fact that he comes to admire Magwitch while losing Estella to the brutish nobleman Drummle ultimately forces him to realize that one's social position is not the most important quality one possesses, and that his behavior as a gentleman has caused him to hurt the people who care about him most. Once he has learned these lessons, Pip matures into the man who narrates the novel, completing the bildungsroman.







Estella





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- Estella is a supremely ironic creation, one who darkly undermines the notion of romantic love and serves as a bitter criticism against the class system in which she is mired. Raised from the age of three by Miss Havisham to torment men and “break their hearts,” Estella wins Pip’s deepest love by practicing deliberate cruelty. Unlike the warm, winsome, kind heroine of a traditional love story, Estella is cold, cynical, and manipulative.

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- Though she represents Pip's first longed-for ideal of life among the upper classes, Estella is actually even lower-born than Pip; as Pip learns near the end of the novel, she is the daughter of Magwitch, the coarse convict, and thus springs from the very lowest level of society.

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- Ironically, life among the upper classes does not represent salvation for Estella. Instead, she is victimized twice by her adopted class. Rather than being raised by Magwitch, a man of great inner nobility, she is raised by Miss Havisham, who destroys her ability to express emotion and interact normally with the world. And rather than marrying the kindhearted commoner Pip, Estella marries the cruel nobleman Drummle, who treats her harshly and makes her life miserable for many years. In this way, Dickens uses Estella's life to reinforce the idea that one's happiness and well-being are not deeply connected to one's social position: had Estella been poor, she might have been substantially better off.

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- Despite her cold behavior and the damaging influences in her life, Dickens nevertheless ensures that Estella is still a sympathetic character. By giving the reader a sense of her inner struggle to discover and act on her own feelings rather than on the imposed motives of her upbringing, Dickens gives the reader a glimpse of Estella's inner life, which helps to explain what Pip might love about her. Estella does not seem able to stop herself from hurting Pip, but she also seems not to want to hurt him; she repeatedly warns him that she has "no heart" and seems to urge him as strongly as she can to find happiness by leaving her behind.

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- Finally, Estella's long, painful marriage to Drummle causes her to develop along the same lines as Pip—that is, she learns, through experience, to rely on and trust her inner feelings. In the final scene of the novel, she has become her own woman for the first time in the book. As she says to Pip, “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching. . . . I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape.”