Great Expectations

Introduction - an overview of the historical context of the novel
Textual Excerpts - key excerpts from the (Penguin 1996 edition) of Great Expectations
Character List - descriptions of the novel's major characters
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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. 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.

Topics for Discussion

1) How does Pip’s romantic idealism for self-improvement perpetuate itself throughout the novel? What are the major lessons he learns?

The title of the work itself—Great Expectations—implies a sense of assurance and possibility. Throughout his life, Pip remains motivated for improvement in all facets of his life, and his great expectations for his future perpetuates itself as the paramount theme of the work. At the beginning of the story, Pip deals solely with the problems of his childhood: the absence of his deceased parents, his abusive sister/guardian, and the sad realization of his failures and shortcomings. However, as the novel progresses and Pip gains insight to the life of high society (primarily through his time spent with Miss Havisham and Estella at Satis House), the theme of self-improvement, particularly economic and social, become central to the story. In that sense, Pip’s inherent sense of moral obligation works as a kind of psychological counterpart to the novel’s theme of social advancement. Pip’s defining characteristic is that he is an idealist; whenever he perceives of an opportunity for improvement, he strives to attain it: when he visits Satis House and falls in love with Estella, he longs to be a wealthy gentleman; when he realizes his illiteracy, he learns how to read and write (as well as teaching Joe the same); when he thinks of his moral shortcomings, he longs to be good, etc. Pip’s ambition for moral, social and intellectual betterment motivate both his positive and negative actions throughout the novel. When he leaves for London to become a gentleman, he feels ashamed by his cruel and pretentious behavior towards Joe and Biddy—the two kindest figures to him in his life. His love for Estella prompts him to seek a higher social status and the title of a gentleman. Pip’s fantasy of social superiority allows Dickens to satirize the class system of his time, highlighting the arbitrary nature of its qualifications. As a full education is required of a gentleman, Pip’s desire for intellectual improvement is founded in his quest for social advancement. Ultimately, through the figures of Joe Gargery, Biddy and Magwitch, Pip realizes that true self worth is not determined by social status and grace, but rather found in one capacity for affection and appreciation.
2) How does Dickens explore the class system of Victorian England in his novel?

The theme of the class system of Victorian England provides the catalyst that marks Pip's ambitions for self-improvement and the title of a Gentleman. However, Dickens hones in on the post-Industrial Revolution era, neglecting the nobility and rather focusing on wealth generated through trade and commerce. The connection of high social/financial class to personal effort and advancement ties into Pip's ambition for self-improvement in hopes of upgrading his status among society. Dickens examines the entire range of Victorian society through his characters: Joe Gargery and Mrs. Joe are poor peasants; Magwitch transitions from escaped con and scoundrel to prosperous man of wealth and virtue; Pumblechook represents the middle class, while Miss Havisham is exceedingly wealthy from her family's brewery. Through Pip's interactions with the many characters that make up the class system of England, he realizes that one's character isn't solely dependent on one's status. The wretched and vindictive behavior of the wealthy Miss Havisham is paralleled to the inherent kindness and love of the poor Joe Gargery and Biddy; and this parallel allows Pip to understand by the story's end that money and class are far less important than goodness and self-worth.
3) How does victimization act as a motivating force in the novel?
From the onset of the novel, Pip is a victim of circumstance having lost both his parents and having been raised by a physically abusive sister. Likewise, Miss Havisham is a victim of her past as she was left at the altar by her fiancee who ran off with her money. As the novel progresses, these characters react to their victimization by making choices that vindicate their past. Pip strives to attain a higher social class, while Miss Havisham trains her adopted daughter to inflict cruelty upon men. By the end of the novel, Pip and Miss Havisham develop an awareness of how their motivations were misguided. Pip, after losing Estella to Drummle, realizes how his desire to attain a higher social position has only hurt those closest to him and was futile in his attempts to win Estella's heart. Miss Havisham realizes that she has caused Pip to endure the same heartbreak and pain she once did and begs for his forgiveness. Conversely, Estella who took on the role of victimizer with her mistreatment of Pip, also becomes the victim, as she finds herself in a loveless marriage. At the end of the novel, she expresses her awareness of her victimization as she tells Pip: “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching”.

source

4) How does Dickens establish and distinguish between the voice of Pip the narrator and Pip the character? Is the late Pip a reliable narrator?
Dickens crafts his bildungsroman with the dual voice of the young protagonist Pip, whose decisions and actions form the basis of the plot, and the narrator Pip, whose reflections of his former life shape the reader's perceptions of the story. Because Pip is narrating events that took place years in his past, the reader cannot help but to question the reliability of the narrator's voice; whether he recalls certain memories accurately and presents an objective account of his former life. Dickens effectively separates the two Pips; he endows the narrator's voice with wisdom and maturity, while the voice of Pip the character transitions through phases of meek innocence, to cruel arrogance, and back to humility and contentedness. The difference in narrative voice is arguably best demonstrated in the novel's early chapter, when Pip can look back on himself and poke fun and criticize his childish antics, such as the dinner scene when he steals the bread from the table. "Conscience is a dreadful thing when it accuses man or boy; but when, in the case of a boy, that secret burden co-operates with another secret burden down the leg of his trousers, it is (as I can testify) a great punishment" (13).

Pip the narrator judges his past actions harshly, rarely praising his good deeds, but consistently chastising his mistakes. This often places the narrator at odds with the reader, who prefers to rely on their own reactions/thoughts of Pip's former life, rather than be given the narrator's judgments. Perhaps the most noticeable snafu to Dicken's use of the dual narrative voices is that the narrator's recounting assuages the danger of his former life. Because the reader is told the story by the older Pip in the present, we know that none of Pip's life-threatening experiences will severely harm or kill him. Thus, the suspense is almost completely lost from the novel. For example, Magwitch threatens Pip's life in the beginning, but because we know Pip is alive later in life we do not feel suspense over whether or not the convict will murder him. We also know that Orlick won't succeed in killing Pip at the novel's end.
"For, though it includes what I proceed to add, all the merit of what I proceed to add was Joe’s. It was not because I was faithful, but because Joe was faithful, that I never ran away and went for a soldier or a sailor. It was not because I had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, but because Joe had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, that I worked with tolerable zeal against the grain. It is not possible to know how far the influence of any amiable honest-hearted duty-doing man flies out into the world; but it is very possible to know how it has touched one’s self in going by, and I know right well, that any good that intermixed itself with my apprenticeship came of plain contented Joe, and not of restlessly aspiring discontented me” (108).

Excerpt 2 -

“My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip” (3).
Analysis: This is the opening of the novel. While it appears to just be creating an adorable anecdote to introduce the character Pip, Dickens is personifying Pip. His life is cast upon him just as his name is: it just happens. He can't pronounce his name, so he goes by Pip. He gets a benefactor who helps him become a gentleman and he goes with it. Furthermore, the name fits him. In a world where class is everything, and a person's name and title are what give them their class, the name "Pip" does not get one too far. But again, things just sort of happen for Pip. Finally, Dickens captures somewhat of a mirror effect with the name that foreshadows the structure of Pip's life. With the exception of the "h" in Philip, Pip's names are all palindromes, and like palindromes, the back end of Pip's life returns to the same form as the beginning. While his love and respect for Joe dissipate toward the middle of the novel, they return once more in the end. Pip's name even changes in the book to the more enriched "Handel" or even "Mr. Pip", however "Pip" reemerges again later in the novel (Not to mention the mirroring of character that Pip sees in Joe Gargery's son who is also named Pip). Even the plot shows this characteristic in the end when Pip, once more, returns to the Satis House, and is reunited with Estella. Within the first few sentences, not only does Dickens characterize Pip, but also delivers the expectations for the novel.

Excerpt 3 -

"I took the opportunity of being alone in the court-yard, to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. My opinion of those accessories was not favourable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages. I determined to ask Joe why he had ever taught me to call those picture-cards, Jacks, which ought to be called knaves. I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too" (62).

Analysis: This passage is said by Pip, who was just on his way out of Miss. Havisham's house for the first time. Pip, who was playing cards with Miss. Havisham and Estella, says Jacks instead of knaves and is made fun of by Estella for it. Pip takes Estella's taunting of his "lingo," thick boots, and coarse hands to heart and starts to depreciate his low social/working status. After finally leaving the Havisham house, Pip cries all the way home ashamed of his poor, sensitive upbringing and his lack of knowledge which he blames on Joe and Mrs. Joe. Although this moment of shows Pip's vulnerability, it highlights Pip's initial phase of his fanatic desire to become a "gentleman" through wealth and education.
"So subdued I was by those tears, and by their breaking out again in the course of the quiet walk, that when I was on the coach, and it was clear of the town, I deliberated with an aching heart whether would not get down when we changed horses, and walk back, and have another evening at home, and a better parting. We changed, and I had not made up my mind, and still reflected for my comfort that it would be quite practicable to get down and walk back, when we changed again"(160).
Analysis: This takes place right at the end of Vol. 1 of *Great Expectations*. Pip is on his way to London, where he hopes to become a gentleman. His longing to return home, if even for just one more night, is derived from the guilt he feels for how he said goodbye to Joe Gargery, his father figure, caretaker, and closest friend. However, he does not. Time and time again Pip sees opportunities to return, but every time, he refuses to get off the coach. This is very indicative of his character throughout the majority of the novel. Pip never seems to take control of his life, yet he seems to always know that he has options, and for the most part, which option is morally right. However, he is blinded by his goal to become a gentleman, and goes in that direction regardless of how he feels emotionally.

Excerpt 5 -

“When I was a hired-out shepherd in a solitary hut, not seeing no faces but faces of sheep till I half forgot wot men’s and women’s faces wos like, I see yourn… but wot, if I gets liberty and money, I’ll make that boy a gentleman! and I done it.” (317).

Analysis: This passage occurs towards the end of the novel when Magwitch having returned to London from his isolation in Australia, confronts Pip as a mad stranger taking Pip’s hands onto his own and kissing them. Magwitch then drills Pip with questions concerning how he had done so well while dropping hints about details of Pip’s life that no stranger would know. Finally Magwitch reveals to Pip that SPOILER ALERT! he had been his benefactor all along. The significance of this passage is that (as the novel exclaims) it marks “THE END OF THE SECOND STAGE OF PIP’S EXPECTATIONS” (325).

Excerpt 6 -

“For now my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe” (319).

Analysis: This passage occurs shortly after the “end of the second stage of Pip’s expectations.” This moment of the novel illustrates Pip’s shifting self awareness as he realizes how his actions had hurt Joe and how in many ways Magwitch had been a more noble character than himself.


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**Character Description**

**Philip Pirrip (Pip):** Pip is both the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, and the recounting of his former life provides the catalyst for Dicken's bildungsroman. The story begins with Pip as a naïve and conscientious young orphan with an ambitious imagination. However, his meetings with Miss Havisham and the beautiful Estella introduce Pip to the lavish lifestyle of high society, and he is consumed with idealistic motivations for higher social standing and gentility. After receiving a fortune from a mysterious benefactor Pip's innocence and compassion are replaced by snobbish pretensions of his home and those around him. As the novel ends and Pip discovers the identity of his benefactor, he also experiences the ultimate self-realization of what a true gentleman should strive to be. Through crafting Pip's character, Dickens conveys that true self worth derives itself from pure virtues and innate goodness, rather than one's worldly value.

**Joe Gargery:** Joe is Pip's brother-in-law and he also works as the town blacksmith. Though married to Pip's sister, Mrs. Joe, Dickens portrays Joe more as a father figure than as a brother to Pip. Joe is loving and virtuous, especially towards Pip, and he cares for him even after Pip is cruel towards Joe and abandons him for an affluent life in London. Although Joe is not Pip's father or even a blood relative, he is the most caring person in Pip's life. Dickens contrasts Joe's subdued and kind nature with the urgent ambition and self-satisfaction of other figures in the story, conveying that true virtue and self-worth is not defined by status or intellect, but rather stems from honesty, empathy, and kindness. Pip spends his entire life learning this lesson himself, and is shocked with his discovery that, in Joe, the greatest example of personal value was in front of him all along.

**Mrs. Joe:** Pip's sister and Joe's wife, known only as "Mrs. Joe" throughout the novel. Mrs. Joe is a stern and overbearing figure to both Pip and Joe. Often abusive towards Pip, both physically and with her words, Mrs. Joe may be seen as a significant motivation for Pip to escape his oppressive life at the forge. Possession her own ambitions for a better life, it may be assessed that she inwardly seeks to achieve her own higher expectations vicariously thorough Pip.

**Pumblechook:** An avaricious merchant, Pumblechook is also Pip's pompous, arrogant uncle. Responsible for arranging Pip's first meeting with Miss Havisham and Estella at Satis house, Pumblechook will shamelessly credit himself for Pip's rise in social status (even though he has nothing to do with it, since Magwitch is Pip's true benefactor rather than Miss Havisham).
Miss Havisham: Miss Havisham is the wealthy, eccentric old woman who lives at Satis House near Pip’s village. Manic and often neurotic, wears a faded wedding dress, and surrounds herself with clocks purposely frozen at twenty minutes to nine. As a young woman, Miss Havisham was jilted by her fiancé minutes before her wedding, and now she has a vendetta against all men. She deliberately raises Estella to be the tool of her vicarious revenge, training her beautiful ward to break men’s hearts.
Estella: Estella is the romantic love interest in Pip's life. Raised by Miss Havisham as an adopted daughter, Estella is taught to regard love in a very cynical and cold manner, and that she must “break Pip's heart.” Estella grows up to be apathetic and heartless and treats Pip in such a way, warning him to leave her so he can find happiness. Despite Pip's advances, Estella marries Drummle and achieves security in a high social position at the expense of a damaging marriage. Through her suffering, she becomes aware of the suffering she has inflicted upon Pip. As the novel ends, Estella's origins are revealed, as SPOILER ALERT! Pip learns that she is actually the daughter of Magwitch and consequently came from a lower social class. Pip’s discovery of Estella’s true background forces him to reassess his perception of true gentility.
**Jaggers:** Magwitch hires this powerful and foreboding lawyer to supervise Pip's rise to gentility. As one of the most important criminal lawyers in London, there is more to the ruthless Jaggers than his impenetrable exterior. He often seems to care for Pip, and before the novel begins he helps Miss Havisham to adopt the orphaned Estella. Jagger's humorous habit of obsessively washing his hands reflects his desire to purify himself of the criminal filth he encounters in his daily profession. This motif of cleansing is one that perpetuates itself throughout the story, particularly with Pip cleansing himself of the dirt at the forge.

**Herbert Pocket:** Pip first meets Herbert Pocket in the garden of Satis House, when, as a pale young gentleman, Herbert challenges him to a fight. Years later in London they once again encounter each other, and Herbert becomes Pip's best friend and key companion during Pip's quest for gentility. He is the son of Matthew Pocket, Miss Havisham's cousin. His motivations for social status and wealth are similar to Pip's: both influenced by love, as Herbert hopes to become a merchant so he can afford to marry his beloved Clara Barley.

**Bentley Drummle:** An oafish scoundrel and classmate of Pip's at the Pockets' house. Drummle is a minor member of the nobility, and the sense of superiority makes him feel justified in acting cruelly and harshly toward everyone around him. Drummle eventually marries Estella, to Pip's dismay; she is miserable in their marriage and reunites with Pip after Drummle dies some eleven years later.

**Abel Magwitch:** Magwitch is first introduced in the novel as a convict on the run living around the graveyard across the marshes of Pip's home. Magwitch sees Pip at the graveyard and tricks him into getting a file and wittles. Despite his apprehension by the authorities on Christmas Eve, Magwitch is touched by Pip's kindness and claims that he himself stole the file and wittles. Magwitch returns at the story's end and reveals himself as Pip's true benefactor, having devoted his life to attaining a fortune and secretly funding Pip's life as a gentleman.

**Compeyson:** A criminal and the former partner of Magwitch. Compeyson is an educated, gentlemanly outlaw who contrasts sharply with the coarse and uneducated Magwitch. Compeyson is responsible for Magwitch's capture at the end of the novel. He is also Miss Havisham's former fiance. Thus, Compeyson is not only partly responsible for Miss Havisham's cruelty towards Estella, but also for Magwitch's motivation to better himself by helping Pip become a gentleman.

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**Resources and Links**


3) Jasmine's brain


Charles John Huffam Dickens was born February 7, 1812, to John and Elizabeth Dickens in what is now Portsmouth, UK. He was the second of eight children. His father enjoyed the finer things in life, but due to merely being a clerk at the Navy Pay Office, and the mentioned ample loin product, he ended up in debtor's prison. This would put an end to Charles' five year stint at school, and put him to work at Warren’s Blacking Warehouse, where he would work ten hour days for 6 shillings a week. His memories of the working conditions would go on to inspire much of his work. Soon the rest of the family would join John in debtor’s prison, except Charles, who stayed with a family friend. Eventually, his father was released and regained his job. However, Charles would continue to work at Warren’s Blacking House until later in life when disagreements with his supervisors occurred.

After Warren's Blacking House, Charles would become a court stenographer at the age of seventeen, and eventually become a parliamentary reporter for the Morning Chronicle. This is where his publishing career began. In 1833 his sketches were put in periodicals under Dickens' pen-name: “Boz”. He would go on to produce a collection of these sketches in 1836.
He would also marry in 1836, to Catherine Hogarth, with whom he eventually separated from in 1858. However, during this twenty-two year period of marriage, he had 10 children, developed many odd habits and wrote some of the greatest works in literary history. Amongst many other works that Dickens simultaneously wrote in this time, he produced *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*. These were published in periodicals, which developed his characteristic rhythm and typical cliffhanger style of writing (a tactic employed by Dickens to get his keep excited about the next installment). Because he was writing so many things at once, he was known to finish much of his work as it was due. However, despite being crunched for time, he was a family man, and spent much time with his children, giving all ten of them nicknames such as “Skittles” and “Porrn”. He also found time in his schedule to comb his hair hundreds of times a day, clean everything in his house, as well as others’ houses, make sure every bed he slept in faced north to south (even when travelling), and touch things three times out of obsessive compulsion. On top of OCD, he also suffered from epilepsy, and thought that hypnotism was a cure for most ailments, which he practiced on his family and friends (including Edgar Alan Poe, who was known to play with Dickens’ raven, Grip, during visits). Despite all this, he still managed to write the previously mentioned works, many more less notable publications, and joke works such as Noah’s Arkitecture and a nine book series titled Cat's Lives, which he merely used to fill a secret door in his study that was disguised as a bookshelf. Again, Catherine Hogarth and Dickens separated in 1858.

Despite his quirks and recent divorce, Dickens would go on to write *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859 and *Great Expectations* in 1861. He would then go on to write many more novels including in what scholars call his “dark period” until his death in 1870.

Dickens is currently buried in the poet’s corner of Westminster Abbey.

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Documents

“Great Expectations,” “A Good Name?”

-Jerome Meckier
Delves into the allusions to works by John Milton and Sir Philip Sidney, and how it influences “the only Victorian novel with a title that reflects unfavorably on a national attitude it considers detrimental.”

link

**Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations: A Defense of the Second Ending**

-Jerome Meckier

Analyzes the appropriateness of Dickens’ second ending to Great Expectations in regards to how it fits with the rest of the novel, specifically focusing on George Bernard Shaw’s argument against revised ending.

link

**The Bible in “Great Expectations”**

-Jennifer Gribble

Discusses the “Great Expectations” of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke and how it reflects the story and character of Pip.

link

**Pip’s Spiritual Exercise: The Meditative Mode in Dickens’ Great Expectations**

-James Crowley

Explores the human desire for “love and social integration”, how this creates an the expectations and the need to meet these self-imposed expectations, and how this relates to the character “Pip”.

link

**Communication in Great Expectations**

-George Levine

Levine discusses how Dickens’ evangelical conception of interdependence is not fully appreciated in contemporary society due to current views on isolation. He goes on to discuss Pip’s “final union”.

link

**The Poor Labyrinth: The Theme of Social Injustice in Dickens’s “Great Expectations”**


Hagan claims that, while on the surface, *Great Expectations* appears to be nothing more than another typical example of the perennial genre, Dickens is using Pip’s character to reveal the organization of society.

link
Fire, Hand, and Gate: Dickens' Great Expectations

-Harry Stone

Discusses the use of literacy in Great Expectations, and how it not only creates, distinguishes, and shows the progress of characters, but how it connects the reader to the work. Stone explains the "silent" connection between the members of the literate community.

A Child’s Interview with Charles Dickens

-Kate Douglas Wiggins; The Literary Digest, 1912

Describes Kate Douglas Wiggins account of her childhood train ride in the 1840's in which she chatted with Charles Dickens as he traveled the United States on a reading tour.

Media / Pop Culture Adaptations

Television, Wishbone: Groomed for Greatness, Part 2:

[OS] Youtube

Television, Southpark, Season 4, Episode 14:

[OS] Youtube

Film, Great Expectations, Directed By Alfonso Cuarón, 1998:

[OS] Youtube

Film, Great Expectations, Directed By David Lean, 1946:

[OS] Youtube

Play, Great Expectations, Adaptation by Tanika Gupta, Directed by Nikolai Foster, 2011

[OS] Youtube

Image Gallery
St James Cooling, Kent. The churchyard gravestones which prompted Charles Dickens to write the opening of Great Expectations; source