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Great Expectations

by

Charles Dickens

1860 -1861



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes.com Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The action of *Great Expectations* takes place in a limited geography between a small village at the edge of the North Kent marshes, a market town in which Satis House is located, and the greater city of London. The protagonist, Pip, grows up in the marsh village. Eventually he becomes a.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Pip - Philip Pirip - He is the narrator and hero of the novel. He is a sensitive orphan raised by his sister and brother-in-law in rural Kent. After showing kindness to an escaped convict, he becomes the beneficiary of a great estate. He rejects his common upbringing in favor of a more refined.....

Joe Gargery - a simple and honest blacksmith, and the long-suffering husband of Mrs. Joe. He is Pip's brother-in-law, as well as a loyal friend and ally. He loves and supports Pip unconditionally, even

Miss Havisham - a bitter and eccentric old lady who was long ago jilted on her wedding day. She continues to wear her faded wedding gown, though it is old and yellowed. The cake, rotted after.....

Estella - the beautiful adopted daughter of Miss Havisham. Haughty and contemptuous, she is a girl with a very cold heart. She has been brought up to wreak revenge on the male sex on.....

Magwitch (also known as *Provis* and *Campbell*) - an escaped convict who initially bullies Pip into bringing him food and a file. Unbeknownst to Pip, the convict later rewards him by bequeathing him a.....

Minor Characters

Mrs. Joe Gargery - Pip's sister. She is a short-tempered woman who resents Pip because he is a burden to her. She is attacked with a leg-iron and spends the rest of her life unable to communicate because

Biddy Wopsle - Pip's confidante and teacher. As a child, she develops a crush on Pip. She runs.....

Mr. Wopsle - a parish lay clerk who had formerly wanted to be a clergyman. He leaves his.....

Mr. Pumblechook - Joe's uncle. He joins Mrs. Joe in bullying and resenting Pip, then takes.....

Additional characters are outlined in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of this novel is Philip Pirip, called Pip. Pip is a sensitive child, orphaned and living under the care of his sister and her husband. His sister resents him and continually reminds him that he is a burden. His brother-in-law, Joe, is kind to him; in fact, he is the only one who shows Pip any love.

An encounter in his childhood leads Pip to aid an escaped convict. In order to repay Pip, the convict secretly bestows him with large sums of money, so that Pip's dream of becoming a gentleman is realized. Pip changes on acquiring wealth and status; his childhood home and friends are embarrassing to.....

Antagonist - The antagonist in this novel is not a person as much as it is an expectation, or rather, a set of expectations. Pip is led into making grave mistakes based on his false expectation of being a gentleman, his false expectation of marrying Estella, and his general false expectation of rising above

Climax - The climax occurs when Pip learns the identity of his benefactor. In that moment, all his great expectations dissolve into shame of the convict and disgust with himself for his.....

Outcome - Pip lays aside his expectations of greatness. He protects his benefactor and realizes that this convict has been more loyal to him than he has been to Joe. He makes sure he will not have

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

As a young child, the orphan Pip lives with his sister and brother-in-law, the village blacksmith. On Christmas Eve, Pip is walking through the marshes when he meets an escaped convict who threatens him into bringing back food and a file to break the leg-irons. On Christmas Day, the convict is captured and returned to the prison ships known as The Hulks. He never reveals Pip's assistance when he is caught and asked how he escaped his irons.

Much later, young Pip is sent to entertain Miss Havisham, a wealthy old lady who lives in a mansion known as Satis House. Miss Havisham is a bitter woman who was jilted on her wedding day long ago. She still wears her wedding gown, and the now-rotten wedding cake sits atop her dining room table. Her adopted daughter, Estella, is beautiful, and Pip instantly falls in love with her. But Estella is cold and distant. Over time, she softens somewhat toward Pip, but her affection is erratic. She tells him she can never love anyone.

Pip is dismissed from Miss Havisham's service and becomes an apprentice to Joe. But Estella has instilled in him a shame in his commonness. He longs to be a gentleman, not a blacksmith. His discontent grows. One day he learns that an anonymous benefactor has left him an enormous sum of money. He is to move to London, where he will be trained to act as a gentleman. A lawyer, Jaggers, will oversee his inheritance. Pip is certain his benefactor is Miss Havisham, and believes he is being trained as Estella's future husband. Pip's happiness is unfathomable as he moves to London, away from the only family and friends he has ever known. He is educated by Mr. Mathew Pocket and strikes a great friendship with his son, Herbert.

His wealth and position changes him, and soon Pip leads a dissipated life full of idleness. He is ashamed of Joe and Biddy, and wants little to do with them. He thinks association with them will lower him in.....

THEMES

The major themes in the novel are all related to ambition, i.e. "great expectations." Some issues explored under this umbrella theme are greed, envy, pride, arrogance, ingratitude and unkindness. The primary lesson Pip learns is that uncommon-ness on the inside is more important than.....

MOOD

Great Expectations is regarded as Dickens "grotesque tragicomic" conception, probably because of the mix of comedy and tragedy that adorns most of his novels. The opening of the novel is a perfect example of the dual mood. There are moments of touching tragedy and sadness, such as young Pip in a cemetery surrounded by his dead family, and Pip being mistreated by his only surviving relative, Mrs. Joe. At the same time, there is lighthearted comedy, such as when Mr. Pumblechook and Mr. Wopsle weave their.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812. He was the son of John and Elizabeth Dickens. His father, a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, was sent to prison for debt. Young Charles was only twelve years old when he was sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, while the rest of his family joined his father in the Marshalsea Prison. During this time, Charles lived alone in a lodging house, ashamed and frightened. These early experiences became a source of creative energy and a reason for his preoccupation with themes of alienation and betrayal. These early experiences also made him self-reliant, a trait which would later turn him into a hard-

working and dedicated writer.

Dickens returned to school after the financial difficulties were over. When he was fifteen, he went to work as a clerk in a law firm. Later he became a free-lance reporter, first reporting on dull law cases and then the more exciting parliamentary debates. These experiences helped shape his social consciousness. In 1830, he fell in love with Maria Beadwell, the daughter of a banker. The relationship was short-lived, since Dickens was not considered a good match for her, by her parents' standards. He then met and married Catherine Hogarth on April 2, 1836.

Dickens' first published story appeared in 1835. He also started writing under the famous pseudonym "Boz", with the first sketches published in 1836. His success as a writer truly began with the *Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836-37), now known as *The Pickwick Papers*. Its popularity allowed him to embark on a full-time career as a novelist. He wrote *Oliver Twist* in 1837, followed by *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Olde Curiosity Shop*, and *Barnaby Rudge*. Dickens also had a social conscience. He visited Canada and.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Great Expectations was published serially in Dickens' weekly periodical, *All the Year Round*, from December 1860 until June 1861. This serialization was done in order to restore the dwindling readership of the magazine and was a wonderful success. There have been countless adaptations of the novel for the stage and screen and it is often credited as Dickens' greatest work.

Some critics and historians suggest that Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* from an autobiographical perspective, drawing on his own experience as a discontent child. As well, two literary terms are commonly used in describing the style and development of *Great Expectations*. First, the novel is *picaresque*. This term applies to plots that are episodic in nature. As a serial novel, *Great Expectations* is.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Philip Pirip, known as Pip, is a young orphan being brought up by his sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, and her husband the blacksmith. One Christmas Eve, Pip visits the graves of his parents and five dead brothers, trying to imagine what they looked like. He has never known them. He is interrupted by a frightening man, large and mud-smearing, with prison irons attached to his leg. The man demands to know Pip's name, then turns him upside down trying to empty his pockets of any money. Young Pip has only a piece of bread, much to the stranger's disappointment. The man finds out that Pip lives with his brother-in-law, the blacksmith, and demands that Pip bring him a file and some food. The man tells the terrified seven-year old that if he fails to bring these things the next day, his heart and liver will be torn out. He also warns Pip not to breathe a word about their encounter to anyone.

Notes

The first few lines of *Great Expectations* establish with immediacy the sad plot of the orphan Pip. He has never known his parents and is completely alone in a desolate cemetery trying to imagine what they looked like. No other introduction is needed, since this situation is at once compelling and dramatic; after all, the child is only seven years old. It can be assumed he has little history with which to begin his tale; therefore, the reader is thrown at once into his life by means of the narrative action.

Structurally, the novel establishes itself as a first-person retrospective; that means the narrator is remembering the events of his life and has arranged them to suit his fashion in telling the tale. The immediate sympathy gained by the situation (an orphan alone in a cemetery) also reinforces the credibility of the narrator (the older

orphan looking back on his life); the audience is compelled to like the narrator, to trust him and want the best for him.

The author, Charles Dickens, displays mastery of setting and tone in these first few moments, describing vividly the marshes surrounding the small village at the edge of North Kent. In this lonely and serene environment, young Pip turns into “a bundle of shivers.” The stranger with leg irons still attached is ominous and instantly threatening, causing Pip to fear for his life. And yet the convict displays his own vulnerability when he asks for a file to free himself from his chains and some food to relieve his hunger. He alone is not strong enough to sever his chains, nor can he survive without food. These observations, of course, rest solely in the minds of the readers. Young Pip is no less terrified.

Young Pip’s willingness to provide information about his family and to deliver help, albeit out of fear, reflects his natural giving nature. As well, it sets him up for the future events of the novel. Interestingly, the turning upside down of Pip by the stranger becomes a symbolic moment in the boy’s life; after meeting this man, Pip’s world is turned upside down.

As an introduction to this serial novel, the first chapter succeeds admirably in establishing setting, tone, and character. A troubling dilemma happens almost right away, and the entire novel follows as a consequence.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

Pip returns to his home and interacts with his sister and her husband. His sister Georgiana, known as Mrs. Joe, is two decades Pip’s senior, and a vigorous bully. Joe and Pip are comrades in the household, both victims of Mrs. Joe’s bad temper and rough spirit. In her customarily gruff way, Mrs. Joe gives both Pip and Joe bread and butter for their supper. Pip hides his in his trousers, to take to the stranger.

That night, Joe tells Pip that two convicts have escaped from the nearby Hulks, which are prison ships. Young Pip is so frightened by his secret acquaintance with one of these convicts that he cannot sleep. Early the next morning, Christmas Day, he collects food from the pantry, including a pork pie specially made for dinner. He also pours out some brandy from the brandy bottle and replaces it with water, so as not to get caught. Having stolen Joe’s file from the forge, he runs off in search of the convict.

Notes

This chapter describes Pip’s guardians, Mr. and Mrs. Joe. The formal relationship between Pip and his sister is evident, as he calls her Mrs. Joe. She is the dictator of the house and commands unchallenged obedience not only from Pip but also from her husband. She frequently vents her anger on both of them, often without justification or excuse. When she believes that Pip has swallowed his bread in one bite, she gives him foul tasting tar water as punishment.

Mrs. Joe always wears an apron with an “impregnable” bib, which is a palpable symbol for the drudgery she imposes on herself. The pins and needles attached to her bib signify her self-punishing aggressiveness, which is in forceful contrast to Joe’s mild-natured simplicity. She seems to resent the burden of Pip on her household and makes Pip aware of his imposing existence.

Joe and Pip share a very tender relationship. They are exceedingly fond of each other mainly because they are victims of the same terror. At the dinner table, they share moments of comradeship; Joe is concerned for Pip when he thinks the child has eaten too quickly. Joe has paternal affection for Pip, and Pip loves Joe as well.

This chapter highlights the strong differences between Pip’s relationship to his sister and his relationship to Joe. The latter is much closer, which is of particular importance when one considers the “great expectations” of the

plot. Pip will abandon Joe in search of a better life, despite his natural love and affection for the blacksmith.

CHAPTER 3

Summary

On his way to meet the convict, Pip comes across another convict who startles and runs away. When he reaches the gruff man he met the day before, who hungrily devours the food, Pip tells him about the other convict. The stranger becomes very angry and excited, hurriedly trying to file away the chains on his leg. Pip realizes the stranger is too busy to notice, so he slips away and rushes home, knowing his absence will have been noticed.

Notes

The primary effect of this chapter is a fuller characterization of Pip, and also of an enormously influential friendship which will shape the novel. It begins with a scene loaded with aspects of character: a young, innocent boy seeks to reconcile the necessary theft of food and drink from his own family for the sake of a convicted felon. Clearly, his actions go against the good behavior he has been taught. Still, he covers his tracks artfully when he fills the brandy decanter with water. Such skill would seem to indicate practice at deception, were it not for the boy's all too apparent innocent nature. This naivete is most easily apparent when he takes the pork pie, since he must surely know he will be caught. But it is obvious he is not even thinking about consequences. And as he watches the convict eat, he is filled with satisfaction that his efforts have been appreciated, despite their dubious moral qualities. Young Pip feels immense sympathy toward the man, as he has been alone without food, drink or shelter in the wilderness of the marshes. He empathizes with the feeling of isolation and seems to almost forget the threatening demeanor of the felon.

Most evident and remarkable about this chapter is Pip's concern for the convict and the convict's gratitude towards Pip. A friendship is forged which will go on to shape Pip's entire future.

CHAPTER 4

Summary

Pip rushes home, certain that his theft of the pork pie has been discovered. To his relief, the crime is still unknown. Mrs. Joe is busy arranging for the grand Christmas dinner to which Uncle Pumblechook, Mr. Wopsle and Mr. and Mrs. Hubble have been invited.

Mrs. Joe customarily serves Pip the worst food and the smallest portions, commenting on what a burden he is. Joe is helpless to intercede on behalf of his little friend; instead, he tries to sneak him larger portions of the Christmas meal. During the meal, Mrs. Joe goes to get the pork pie. Full of fear, Pip decides to run for the door. When he pulls it open, he is stunned to see a party of officers holding handcuffs out to him.

Notes

Though the scene is rife with comic incidents (Joe described as a scarecrow, Mr. Pumblechook taking a swig of the watered-down brandy) it also contains some heart-wrenching drama. Pip is made to feel like an unwanted responsibility and is forced to express his constant gratitude to Mrs. Joe. For her part, she simply abuses Pip and then insists he flatter her with praise and thanks. Joe does his best to counter his wife's dour disposition and horrid treatment in the only way he is able: he heaps ladling spoonfuls of gravy into Pip's plate. This sweet, pathetic gesture on Joe's part once again brings out the love between him and the young boy. Both have experienced the pain of Mrs. Joe's neglect. They are in this together.

The whole time, Pip's mind is preoccupied with impending doom. Mrs. Joe will certainly find out about his theft, and he will certainly pay. The suspense through the meal is incredible; when she rises to get the pie, Pip's fear is palpable. It carries him to the door consumed only by flight. And the shock of being greeted by outstretched hands holding handcuffs is a dramatic pay-off only a master storyteller could have envisioned.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Pip - Phillip Pirip is aptly nicknamed Pip, a word commonly used to denote the seed of an apple. From early childhood well into adulthood, Pip's budding maturity is the focus of the novel. In keeping with the *Bildungsroman* genre, Pip is at first an innocent young child whose place in this world has not been well defined. He is an orphan whose only sister finds him a nuisance and a burden; she resents him to the point of cruelty. Two random events happen which at first seem like mere episodes in the life of a child:

Pip helps an escaped convict by giving him food and means of escape, and Pip is called to the home of Miss Havisham to entertain her and her daughter. The full consequence of these.....

Joe Gargery - As the village blacksmith and Pip's brother-in-law, Joe's commonness is expressed in his name: simple, short, and undecorative. He is a thorough gentleman at heart and is always helpful. He stands out as a loving figure in Pip's life. Joe and Pip share a relationship based on love and trust, easily likened to the relationship between father and son, or brothers. They play games and participate in friendly competitions among themselves, in order to enliven the atmosphere of their home.

Joe is a simple man who looks forward to the day when Pip will become his.....

Magwitch - Magwitch is an interesting character on many counts. For most of the novel, he is unnamed, referred to simply as "the convict" or "Pip's convict." Coincidentally, it is during these parts of the novel that he appears menacing and evil. He is a dangerous and desperate convict who keeps popping up in Pip's life. When he finally reveals himself to Pip, however, he expresses love and gratitude, admiration and

Estella - Like Joe and Pip, Estella's name is a reflection on her character. Estella, like a star (stellar), is cold and distant. After all, she has been reared from the tender age of three to conduct herself without emotion. Her bewitching beauty captures Pip's heart and as a young boy, he is infatuated with her. Somehow, despite her cruelty to Pip, she becomes the star of his expectations. Critics have often dismissed Estella as.....

Miss Havisham - Miss Havisham has lived to be one of the most memorable characters created by Dickens, both for her bizarre appearance and her eccentric behaviors. Betrayed by her lover on her wedding day, she literally freezes time in Satis House. All the clocks have been stopped at twenty minutes to nine, the exact time at which her fiancé had abandoned her. She wears her wedding dress the rest of her.....

Mrs. Joe - What is most interesting about her is that her actual name, Georgiana Maria, is uttered by chance by a character in the 58th chapter, long after her death. All through the book she is called Mrs. Joe. For the most part, she is an unpleasant woman who abuses Pip and makes him feel like a.....

Biddy Wopsle - Biddy is a complete antithesis of Mrs. Joe. She is calm, friendly, down to earth and loving. She also becomes Pip's friend at the evening school where Pip studies. The school belongs to her grandmother. Biddy promises Pip that she will help him become an "uncommon" gentleman and.....

Mr. Jaggers - Jaggers is a powerful and interesting character. As a criminal defense lawyer, he represents a profession that Dickens strongly detested. His unsavory career is reflected in the.....

Wemmick - Wemmick is Mr. Jaggers' clerk and one of the most universally good characters in the novel. Interestingly, however, he lives a dual life. At the office, he is stern and officious, in.....

Herbert Pocket - Herbert is a simple and uncomplicated character. He becomes Pip's most loyal friend in London. They first meet as young boys at Miss Havisham's house when Herbert dares Pip to fight, and is promptly knocked down.

As their friendship develops, Herbert helps and supports Pip through hard times. He is a hard-working boy with aspirations of business success that Pip finds unlikely. Later, however, in appreciation of his friendship, Pip secretly extends financial help to Herbert in order to make his dreams a reality. Later, when Pip has realized the futility of his own great expectations, he follows Herbert's example and even works for him as a clerk. All along, Herbert has been practical while Pip was lost in his dreams. He is a good stabilizing influence on Pip.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Charles Dickens is said to have explored a new ground in his novel, *Great Expectations*. The theme of self-knowledge explored in the novel expresses in part Dickens' own search for a sense of self. Many readers and historians have suggested that Pip has a touch of Dickens in him, making the fictional book feel almost autobiographical.

Structurally, the novel is a narration by a mature and retrospective Pip. It is divided into three distinct "stages," each labeled as a specific "stage of Pip's expectations." In chronological fashion, these chapters trace Pip's progress from industrious obscurity as a child through willful idleness as an adolescent and young adult, to a resigned and modest acceptance of his true place in society. This is an obvious variation on the picaresque theme and carries with it many of the significant overtones of earlier picaresque novels.

The first stage introduces all the major characters and sets the plot in motion. Pip's situation is developed fully, including the first seeds of his desire to be "uncommon." It leads to the revelation by Mr. Jaggers, the lawyer, that Pip is to inherit a huge fortune and become a gentleman. It is something Pip considers.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Pip's great expectations are a dramatized exploration of human growth and the pressures that distort the potential of an ordinary individual, especially in the process of growing up. Pip is a simple blacksmith's boy who aspires to cross social boundaries when he realizes his own upbringing is common; however, he has no means to change. Mysteriously, he is given the means, but wealth only brings with it idleness. He learns that happiness in life can be achieved only by hard work and that great expectations not grounded in reality can only lead to tragedy and heartache.

Part of this theme is an exploration of the dignity of labor. Pip initially feels ashamed to associate himself with Joe but later realizes that hard work brings honor to a man. As for honor, Pip realizes the importance of traits like loyalty and kindness, and eventually understands that no amount of money can make up for the lack of those traits. Supplementary to this theme is the sharp juxtaposition of

AUTHOR'S STYLE

Dickens has shaped *Great Expectations* on the lines of the *Bildungsroman* genre, which closely follows the inner growth of a protagonist from his childhood to middle age. In many respects, it contains themes and emotions directly related to the author's experience. However, the fictional nature of the story allows Pip to relate incidents and events that are similar to sensitive spots in Dickens' own life.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: *Great Expectations*

Author: Charles Dickens

Date of first publishing: Published in serial format 1860 -1861.

Meaning of the Title: As a young man, Pip is led into making grave mistakes based on his false expectation of being a gentleman, his false expectation of marrying Estella, and his general false expectation of rising above his past. Ultimately, he learns that true worth comes from inside a man, and turns away from his once-great expectations.

Type of novel/Genre: Victorian, Gothic, Social Criticism, Bildungsroman (depicting growth and personal development). Autobiographical fiction.

Point of view: First person narrative in the past tense.

Narrator: Pip.

Setting: England, between a small village at the edge of the North Kent marshes, a market town in which Satis House is located, and the greater city of London.

ESSAY TOPICS / ESSAY IDEAS

1) Is "Great Expectations" like a soap opera?

Comments from readers:

Consider all that Pip went through, or just take parts, like his trial with the girl, at first, she didn't like him, and then later on in his life, she loved him. Also, what are the chances that some poor boy that no one knows ends up inheriting a huge sum of money out of the blue one day, and that the person who leaves it to him is an escaped criminal who Pip just happened to help out one day. All of these things are coincidence, and that's mostly what soap operas are based on.

2) What are the 3 stages in Pip's Expectations?

Comments from readers:

1st- He is going to be apprenticed to Joe.

2nd- He is expecting to be of upper class.... a gentlemen.

3rd- His very much lowered expectations.

3) Many of the characters other than Pip have their own expectations as well. Discuss both Herbert Pocket and Pip's expectatons. Compare and contrast.

Comments from readers:

Herbert's expectations are different to Pips in that he does not raise his expectations, like Pip does. He wants simple things, like for Clara to marry him; a good life; no complications or distractions.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. What is the *Bildungsroman* genre and how well does *Great Expectations* fit into it? Trace Pip's development under the definition of *Bildungsroman* using specific examples.
2. Identify the basic plot twists in each of the three stages of Pip's great expectations.
3. Several of the characters' names are a symbolic reflection of their personalities. Make a list of them, and explain the appropriateness of their names?.....

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