

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

November 2009

These study materials are produced for use with the Classic Players production of *Great Expectations*.

smart

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The Shaping of Pip's Character

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860–61) is an "autobiographical narrative." Its subject is not the author himself but the character he created to narrate the story, Philip Pirrip, or "Pip." The work traces Pip's growth in understanding and judgment over a period of 27 years.

The inspiration for the form of *Great Expectations* was a type of German literature called *Bildungsroman*, or the "novel of formation." Dickens was familiar with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), the classic exemplar of a work that focuses on the formative years of its main character.

By 1844 Dickens owned Thomas Carlyle's translation of this book that deeply influenced other illustrious British novelists during the Victorian era, including Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli. Goethe's novel provided an excellent model for an examination of the values so revered by Victorian society: education, self-improvement, social refinement and materialism.

A *Bildungsroman* is told in retrospect by a first-person narrator. *Great Expectations* is Dickens' second and final work in the genre. His first, *David Copperfield* (1849–50), also centers around the title character's development from childhood to manhood. These are the only two Dickens' novels narrated in the first person.

Dickens is a master and an innovator in representing a child's point of view in fiction. The narrators Pip and Davy, mature men who look back on their childhoods, involve the reader directly with their youthful traumas and trials.

The story of a *Bildungsroman* usually unfolds in two contrasting settings, one rural and the other urban. In the case of *Great Expectations*, the settings are the village where Joe's forge is located and the metropolis of London.

The "novel of formation" also portrays the emotional fluctuations the protagonist experiences in love and in his prospects for attaining success and happiness. Such aspirations for romance, fortune and worldly advancement constitute Pip's "great expectations."

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David Schwingle as Pip in the 2009 Classic Players production of *Great Expectations*

"There is no other major novelist comparable to Dickens. He cannot be judged in conventional terms of criticism. The more often he is read the richer and more profound does his work appear, the more imaginative his symbolism, the more real and vigorous that extraordinary world he created out of the real world of Victorian England. It does not matter that it is a fantastic, even grotesque world. It is vibrantly alive and vivid, teeming with characters who, however exaggerated they may be, are never types but always brilliantly realised and memorable individuals. It is a world that once visited can never be forgotten." —Christopher Hibbett

Classic Players will perform a 1994 stage adaptation of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations by Robert Johanson, artistic director of the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, N.J.

Pip's Character, *continued*

Dickens portrays Pip as a boy whose dreams have their basis in false values and self-deception. Pip believes that his “great expectations” lie in inheriting wealth from the eccentric Miss Havisham, who lives hidden from the sun in a dark, decaying house. Pip also yearns to win the heart of her arrogant ward, Estella. Actually, however, the spinster ruthlessly manipulates them both for her own vengeful purposes.

Drawn by the power of money, Pip leaves the toil and soot of the blacksmith's shop for the vanity and deceit of London society. His move represents a rejection of the genuine love and goodness of Joe and his loyal friend Biddy for the moral ambiguity of sophisticated London society.

By extension, Dickens indicts his own English contemporaries for casting off the simplicity and virtue of past generations and embracing the corrupt values of wealth and upward mobility.

In London Pip becomes a mean-spirited snob, part of a leisure class that thrives on falsehood and frivolity. He and his friends exist comfortably on money they have done nothing to earn.

The young men in Pip's circle of friends, the Finches of the Grove, live out 19th-century society's grand dreams of materialism: riches achieved by the sweat of those less fortunate in the class system. The Finches have no occupations and no ideals. Their lives are consumed by playing cards, drinking, going to the theater and showing off their expensive clothing. Yet for all their airs and pretensions, they lack real refinement, interest in the arts, or desire for learning. Worse yet, they know nothing of human warmth and values.

Joe Gargery, on the other hand, is a type of the long-suffering English poor man who is entirely content with his life. He is characterized by integrity, selflessness, a sweet temperament and humility. While Mrs. Joe and her friend Pumblechook would use Pip for their own selfish gain, Joe tears up his apprenticeship papers and releases him to the London lawyer Jaggers to seek his fortune.

It is not until many years later that Pip's false values and delusive hopes are at last confronted by truth. He learns that his “great expectations” are not derived from the inherited wealth of an high-born spinster but from the hard-earned labor of a man who represents the dregs of society.

Even so, Pip must suffer a near-fatal illness before he experiences a genuine change of heart. Then he comes to understand his own guilt in terms of pride and arrogance; betrayal of his humble, loyal friends and providers; and participation in a corrupt social system. Joe, with his simple yet profound moral viewpoint, has been Pip's greatest teacher.

Upon his final return to Joe and Biddy at the forge, Pip is no longer a self-absorbed boy but a subdued man who has gained self-knowledge and moral maturity. He is profoundly moved by the love of his two old friends and the existence of their young son, whom they call Little Pip.

Great Expectations is not merely a work about the dangers of indulging in “great expectations.” It also explores the nature of true gentility, suggesting that property and social status do not produce happiness.

More importantly, it reveals that much human suffering may be attributed to a lack of pure, selfless love. Pip comes to realize that the emotion he felt as love for Estella was actually a selfish desire to receive rather than to give. He learns that in a society full of cruelty, greed and injustice, meaningful relationships depend on humility and compassion.

Pip is not the only character who achieves self-knowledge. Miss Havisham and Estella also learn through suffering. In her insane obsession with vengeance, Miss Havisham has selfishly deprived herself and her two young “playthings” of love, friendship and happiness. Pip comes to understand and graciously forgives her. At the end of the novel Pip and Estella stand, wisely and hopefully, on the threshold of a new beginning. ☞



An engraving of the author titled “Mr. Charles Dickens' Last Reading”

Charles Dickens (1812–1870): Writer, Humanitarian & Social Reformer

Charles Dickens is the most popular and, by most estimates, the greatest novelist in the English language. Next to Shakespeare, he is the most widely read English writer in the world.

Among the most prominent marks of his literary genius are his highly colorful characters, his incomparable command of dialogue, his comic vitality, his unflinching ear for tone and emphasis, his varied and purposeful range of styles, and his skill in weaving the fine threads of a complex plot into a credible, meaningful pattern.

Great Expectations is one of Dickens' most brilliant works. His friend and biographer John Forster wrote, “Dickens' humour, not less than his creative power, was at its best in *Great Expectations*.”

In this mature work Dickens turns his probing critical gaze both inward to man's individual failings and outward to society's evils. In so doing, he shifts with ease from one captivating mode of expression to another, including caricature, melodrama, mystery, tragedy, comedy, satire and sentimentality. Although the plot is one of his most complex, Dickens develops it with gripping irony in about half the average length of his novels.

Dickens is often thought of as a model Christian writer, not because his works embody religious doctrine but because he espouses philanthropy (love of humankind in general) and humanitarianism (the promotion of human welfare and the advancement of social reforms). He also draws many literary allusions from the Bible, the *Book of Common Prayer* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Dickens' novels do not define his own religious position, but in private life he considered himself a traditional Anglican, not a more conservative evangelical. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) he powerfully employs the New Testament theme of Christ as “the Resurrection and the Life,” and it appears again among the very last words he wrote, a description of a beautiful spring morning from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*: “Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields . . . preach the Resurrection and the Life.”

Dickens' mature works all argue for man's regeneration and society's reform. For the most part, however, his writings allude to Christ as comforter of the oppressed rather than the only Savior Who can atone for man's sins.

In *Great Expectations* Dickens employs the Christian pattern that all are implicated in inherent sinfulness; that sin will be punished; and that those who repent and ask pardon will be forgiven. Mrs. Joe, Pip, Miss Havisham and Estella all ask for human forgiveness. But Pip also alludes to a higher form of forgiveness and mercy that come from God and heaven.

Until a few decades ago, Dickens was reputed to be a sincere, honest man in his personal life and a champion of the home. Documentary evidence available today unfortunately suggests otherwise.

Dickens' writings are unquestionably moral in tone, promoting that which is good and condemning evil. Like his mentor Thomas Carlyle, Dickens defines “doing good” as bringing comfort or pleasure to others. In an age in which authorities were often callous toward human suffering, Dickens used his novels to publicize social reform issues. He condemns both man's inhumanity to his fellow beings and public institutions' inhumane abuse of power. To make his social points, Dickens employs two methods: he portrays the lack of compassion toward others as ridiculous; and he uses sentimentality to dramatize the plight of the oppressed.

In the world of *Great Expectations*, children and criminals alike are subject to authority that is ruthless, degrading and arbitrary. Both Pip's and Estella's mistreatment occurs at the domestic level and illustrates the sad lot of children exploited by poor substitutes for natural parents. Both characters ultimately rise above their unfortunate upbringing, however, and Pip's actions demonstrate that he at last learns the necessity of human kindness. The two characters who wrong Pip and Estella most severely—Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham—both suffer death from violent causes.

Although Magwitch does no injury to Pip, he uses the youth to manifest his own pride against a society that has victimized him. On the whole, however, Magwitch is a character more sinned against than sinning. His gratitude and sacrificial love toward the one person who has ever performed a kind deed for him make him one of Dickens' most moving creations.

The events that precede Magwitch's death evoke great sympathy for his plight. Even after he makes an honest fortune in New South Wales, it is a capital offense for him to return to England. But he risks his life to see Pip as the “gentleman” of his making. In an attempt to leave the country again, he by chance encounters an old enemy, and the event results in his being charged with murder.

Magwitch is thus one of 32 “wretched creatures” who stand together before a Judge to receive a collective Sentence of Death. Of this injustice Dickens writes,

“The sun was striking in at the great windows of the court . . . and it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the Judge . . . perhaps reminding some . . . how both were passing on, with absolute equity to the greater Judgment that knoweth all things and cannot err. Rising for a moment . . . the prisoner said, ‘My Lord, I have received my sentence of death from the Almighty, but I bow to yours’ . . . Then, they were all formally doomed.”

The Almighty mercifully removes Magwitch from the earth before the Law can execute its judgment. The final insult comes after his death, however, when the Crown confiscates his entire fortune. Ironically, Magwitch fails to make a gentleman of Pip after all, nor does he ever understand that money and education cannot truly “make” a man. In Pip's case, the Law's final injustice toward Magwitch actually frees his intended heir to pursue an altogether richer, more fulfilling life. ☞

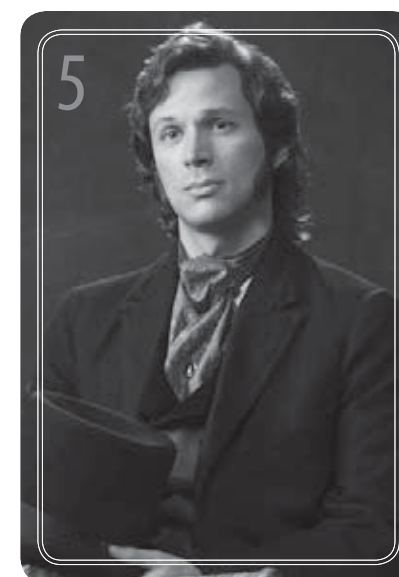
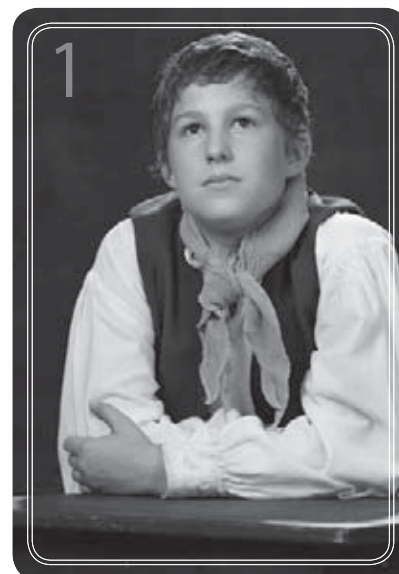
GREAT EXPECTATIONS

{charles dickens}

Plot Summary

- 1 The orphan Pip is reared by his shrewish sister and her gentle husband, Joe Gargery, the village blacksmith. Joe's affection and friendship help to compensate for the verbal and physical abuse Mrs. Joe heaps upon the helpless boy.
- 2 Late one afternoon in the churchyard cemetery where his parents are buried, Pip is accosted by a wild-looking escaped convict, who demands food and a file for removing the iron chain from his leg. Fearing for his life, Pip becomes a "criminal" himself, stealing a pork pie from Mrs. Joe's kitchen and a file from Joe's forge and delivering them to "his convict." Little does he suspect that this terrifying act of enforced kindness will affect the entire course of his life. Shortly thereafter a vicious attacker assaults Mrs. Joe, leaving her a helpless, mute invalid who suffers for years before dying.
- 3 Mrs. Joe's greedy friends introduce Pip to the wealthy Miss Havisham, a bitter, half-crazed spinster who was deserted by her fiance on their wedding day 20 years earlier. To avenge herself, Miss Havisham is rearing a beautiful but haughty girl, Estella, to torment the entire male sex.
- 4 Pip and Estella meet at Miss Havisham's gloomy, decaying estate, where Pip is introduced to the eccentric old woman, who, he hopes, will one day be his benefactor. When Pip falls in love with Estella, he becomes ashamed of his low social station and the coarse hands and thick boots that go with it.

- 5 Pip thus aspires to become a gentleman. After he acquires money and the promise of more wealth from a mysterious source, he abandons the illiterate world of Joe and the forge for a genteel life in London.
In time, misfortunes come Pip's way. He learns that his benefactor is an escaped convict named Magwitch, who has grown wealthy by hard labor as an exile in Australia. Although Pip still loves Estella, she marries his rival, the brash bully Bentley Drummle. Pip's "great expectations" all vanish, leaving him penniless and alone. When he undergoes a serious illness, Joe comes to his side, nurses him back to health, and even pays off a debt for which Pip faces imprisonment.
- 6 Hoping to rectify his wrongs against his friends, Pip returns to the forge. He arrives on the day of Joe's marriage to the sweet-tempered, dutiful Biddy, who once had been a domestic worker in Joe's house and Pip's faithful friend.
Soon thereafter Pip leaves England and works in the East in the mercantile business he secretly helped to acquire for Herbert Pocket. Pip's new life there is simple and fulfilling, and he earns enough to pay off all his debts. Returning to see his true benefactors, Joe and Biddy, Pip is finally reunited with Estella, who, like him, has found suffering to be her greatest teacher.



Characters

Pip

“All other swindlers upon earth are nothing to the self-swindlers, and with such pretences did I cheat myself. Surely a curious thing ... that I should knowingly reckon the spurious coin of my own make, as good money.”



Estella (the object of Pip's romantic delusions)

Pip: “Estella came back, with some bread and meat and a little mug. ... She put the mug down on the stones of the yard and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry ... that tears started to my eyes. The moment they sprang there, the girl looked at me with a quick delight in having been the cause of them.”



Miss Havisham (the embittered spinster upon whose wealth Pip's “great expectations” are founded)

Miss Havisham: “On this day of the year, long before you were born, this heap of decay was brought here. It and I have worn away together. The mice have gnawed at it, and sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me. When the ruin is complete and when they lay me dead in my bride's dress on the bride's table ... so much the better if it is done on this day!”

Pip: “Oh, Miss Havisham, I can [forgive you]. There have been sore mistakes; and my life has been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much to be bitter with you.”



Joe Gargery (Pip's brother-in-law, the village blacksmith)

Joe: “Well your sister's a master-mind. A master mind. And I ain't a master-mind. ... I'm dead afeerd of going wrong in the way of not doing what's right by a woman, and I'd fur rather of the two go wrong t'other way, and be a little ill-convenienced myself. I wish it was only me that got put out, Pip; I wish there warn't no Tickler for you, old chap. I wish I could take it on myself; but this is the up-and-down-and-straight on it, Pip, and I hope you'll overlook shortcomings.”

Pip: “I loved Joe—perhaps for no better reason in those early days than because the dear fellow let me love him—and, as to him, my inner self was not so easily composed.

“It was much upon my mind particularly when I first saw him looking about for his file that I ought to tell Joe the whole truth. ... The fear of losing Joe's confidence tied up my tongue.”



Abel Magwitch (a convict)

Magwitch: “Yes, Pip, dear boy, I've made a gentleman on you! It's me wot has done it! I swore that time, sure as ever I earned guinea, that guinea should go to you! I swore arterwards sure as ever I spec'lated and got rich, you should get rich. I lived rough that you should live smooth; I worked hard that you should be above work.”

Pip: “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 toward me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe.”



Mrs. Joe (Pip's sister)

Pip: “She pounced on me, like an eagle on a lamb, and my face was squeezed into wooden bowls in sinks, and my head was put under taps of water butts, and I was soaped, and kneaded, and towelled, and thumped, and harrowed, and rasped ... (I may here remark that I supposed myself to be better acquainted than any living authority, with the ridgy effect of a wedding ring passed unsympathetically over the human countenance.)”



Biddy (Pip's village friend)

Pip: “Imperceptibly I became aware of a change in Biddy. ... Her shoes came up at the heel, her hair grew bright and neat, her hands were always clean. She was not beautiful—she was common and could not be like Estella—but she was pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered. ... [S]he had curiously thoughtful and attentive eyes; eyes that were very pretty and very good.”

Other Characters

from the 2000 *Classic Players'* production

TOP Magwitch and Compeyson, both fugitive convicts, engage in a struggle to avenge past wrongs. Many years later in London, Compeyson plots to kill Magwitch (alias Provis).

MIDDLE John Wemmick and his employer, the shrewd criminal lawyer Mr. Jaggers, are worldly-wise London professionals who efficiently administer the funds upon which Pip rests his "great expectations."

BOTTOM Living with his friend Herbert Pocket in London, Pip is transformed from a humble blacksmith's apprentice into a gentleman with "great expectations."



The stories of Pip and Estella come together and resolve through the revelation of these two secrets: (1) Arthur Compeyson, the convict who struggles with Magwitch on the marshes, is also revealed to be the man who deserted Miss Havisham on her wedding day. (2) Magwitch is Estella's father. Her mother is Molly, a murderer and Jaggers' "rehabilitated" housekeeper. ☞

Plot Secrets:
Read at Your Own Risk!

How Does the Story End?

Dickens' original intention was to end *Great Expectations* unhappily with Pip's meeting Estella in London. No trace of hope for a union between the two of them would remain because Estella is a widow who has already remarried.

At the urging of his friend Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens substituted a new ending, even before the serial version of the novel was published. In the revised ending Pip and Estella, Bentley Drummle's widow, meet on the ruined grounds of Satis House. They agree to resume their old friendship, and Pip sees "no shadow of another parting from her." Robert Johanson's script, greatly compressed after Magwitch's death, offers a third possibility. Johanson expands the role of Joe and Biddy's son, Little Pip, who is silent in the novel.

As Pip strolls through the churchyard with Little Pip, the boy's lines underline the moral parable Johanson extracts from Dickens' novel. Little Pip refers to Pip's "great expectations" as having come from Magwitch, the man who "changed the entire course of [Pip's] life." Joe and Biddy then tell Pip of the fate of Bentley Drummle.

In the final scene Johanson appropriates Dickens' revised ending, which he stages as expressionistic, with characters and lines from the early scenes enacted by Pip, Estella and Miss Havisham. Little Pip also plays a role in the finale.

For the two secrets which are crucial to Dickens' resolution of the various threads of plot, see the block above. They are printed upside-down so readers who prefer to be surprised at the performance won't stumble across them. ☞

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