

# Great Expectations

Charles Dickens



## About the author

Charles Dickens, the most popular writer of the Victorian age, was born near Portsmouth, England, in 1812 and he died in Kent in 1870. When his father was thrown into debtors' prison, young Charles was taken out of school and forced to work in a shoe-polish factory, which may help explain the presence of so many abandoned and victimised children in his novels. As a young man he worked as a reporter before starting his career as a fictional writer in 1833. In his novels, short stories and essays, Dickens combined hilarious comedy with a scathing criticism of the inhuman features of Victorian industrial society. Many of his novels – *Great Expectations*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist* etc, have been made into first-rate TV and film versions.

For more details see the Introduction.

## Summary

**Chapters 1–7:** In *Great Expectations* the major character is Philip Pirrip, known as Pip. He tells his story from the vantage point of his adulthood. He seems to be looking back over all the experiences which have made him what he is. When the story opens Pip is already an orphan being brought up by his bad-tempered sister, Mrs Gargery, who is married to a warm-hearted village blacksmith, Joe Gargery. One day, Pip helps a convict who has escaped from a prison ship by providing him with a file and some food which he steals from his sister's kitchen. The convict is then recaptured after fighting in the marshes with another convict, who was his deadly enemy, and both are sent back to the prison ship. When Pip is older, he is sent to play at the house of a rich old woman, Miss Havisham, who is dressed in a faded wedding dress. Miss Havisham has a beautiful but cold child named Estella

living with her. Pip falls in love with this girl but she makes fun of him. Pip starts to feel ashamed of his lowly origins.

**Chapters 8–13:** After a few years as an apprentice to Gargery, a mysterious benefactor enables Pip to leave the blacksmith's forge and to be educated as a gentleman in London on condition that he will never try to find out where the money comes from. As a young man with 'great expectations' he is now looked after by his guardian, Mr Jaggers, and is ashamed of his humble background and hopes to acquire an education so that he will be worthy of Estella. He believes that Miss Havisham is his benefactor and this is what she has planned so that one day he may marry Estella.

**Chapters 14–18:** In London, Pip makes friends with Herbert Pocket, a young man whom he had previously met at Miss Havisham's house. It is he who tells Pip the sad story of Miss Havisham's life and how both her half-brother and her husband to be had taken advantage of her. He enjoys living in London in great comfort, spends lavishly and abandons his family and friends back in the village because he feels Estella would not approve of them. Miss Havisham sends Estella to London for her to learn how to behave like a lady and to broaden her social circle. The promise of a life with Estella becomes Pip's obsession now that she lives so close to him.

**Chapters 19–22:** Reckless in his handling of his benefactor's money, Pip is somewhat redeemed by his generosity towards Herbert when he comes of age. It is only when he learns that he owes his great expectations to the former convict that his pride suffers a mortal blow. Abel Magwitch, or Provis, has come all the way from the New World to meet the young gentleman he has made though he knows that if he is caught he will be sentenced to death. It is at this moment that Pip realises that Miss Havisham's intentions towards him have been a dream of his own making and that Estella has not been meant for him. Worse still is the shame he feels at having deserted Joe Gargery and Biddy for people whom he considers despicable.

**Chapters 23–27:** The convict wants to stay in England for good to be close to Pip but Pip soon learns that he is being pursued both by the police and by Compeyson, the man he had fought with in the marshes. Together with Herbert, he keeps him in hiding until he can be taken abroad. In the meantime, Estella marries Drummle, in keeping with Miss Havisham's plan of revenge against

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men. However, Miss Havisham's anger against the world seems to have decreased: she apologises to Pip for all the suffering she has caused him and provides him with information concerning Estella's origin. Later Pip finds out that Mr Jaggers' housekeeper is Estella's mother and that Magwitch/Provis is her father.

**Chapters 28–32:** Pip and his friends try to help Magwitch escape but he is caught, imprisoned and sentenced to death. It is while caring for Magwitch in his deathbed that Pip learns to value a human being for himself rather than according to his social position. Not only does he look after him with loving care but he also lets Magwitch know that his daughter is alive and that he, Pip, loves her dearly. After Magwitch's death Pip sells all he has in London and settles down in Cairo with his great friend Herbert. Eleven years later Pip returns to England and meets Estella, now a widow. At the end of the story it seems that the suffering that both have gone through has helped them reach maturity. Pip no longer feels ashamed of Joe Gargery as he used to at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, it is Joe who raises Pip's spirit after Magwitch's death and nurses him back to health. Estella no longer feels the need to take revenge on men for her aunt's predicament. She has been 'bent and broken into a better shape.'

### Background and themes

During most of Dickens's life the Queen of England was Queen Victoria. Her reign was so long that the nineteenth century in England is often called the Victorian Age. The early Victorian era, lasting from about 1830 to 1860, was a period of immense social change. The enormous expansion of trade as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the invention of the railways was accompanied by political reform, giving power to the middle classes, and setting up numerous social reforms aimed at improving sanitation and working conditions. Dickens played an active part in promoting reforms by awakening the conscience of the middle classes through his novels, although in many cases the abuses Dickens referred to had already been removed. For example, the practice of confining prisoners to hulks in the Thames belonged to his childhood and had ceased by 1860. It was also during this period that the novel first reached all classes of society, and also became respectable as an art form.

Until the 1830s novels were expensive and only read by the middle classes, who generally preferred to read

poetry or essays, but when penny magazines were established, appearing weekly, novels could be serialised and read by everyone. Dickens, first as author and then as magazine editor, was the foremost exponent of this kind of production and soon became the best-known novelist in the English-speaking world. Perhaps his greatest contribution to society was in making it possible for ordinary people to read novels at prices they could afford, which led to literacy rising in the population from 50% to 97% by the end of the century. The technique of publishing in weekly episodes, with the need for an exciting climax to keep readers interested and appeal to the widest possible audience, explains the melodramatic features of Dickens's novels and their reliance on coincidence. Though in his mature novels, like *Great Expectations*, he planned more thoroughly than before, it is hard for us nowadays to accept as realistic the links between the past lives of Magwitch, Compeyson, Miss Havisham and Estella, but these were the twists in the plot that his original audience loved. His popularity endures today for different reasons, especially because of the power of his imagination, which fills the novels with so many memorable characters and scenes.

*Great Expectations* was first published serially in 1860–61 and issued in book form in 1861. It belongs to the sequence of great novels anatomising Victorian society that Dickens began with *Bleak House* (1853). In particular, it contrasts the materialistic aspirations of the middle classes with the simple but honest lives of 'the deserving poor'.

Dickens focuses on the way in which Pip is corrupted by his 'great expectations'. He becomes ashamed of his relationship with the kind blacksmith, Joe Gargery, and is horrified to discover that his benefactor is not the rich but bitterly revengeful Miss Havisham but the ex-convict, Magwitch. He only achieves regeneration when he admits his faults and returns to poverty.

The novel reflects much of Dickens's personal experience. It begins on the marshes in the Thames estuary, where he had spent five years of his childhood, and he was once more living nearby in the fine house he had dreamed of owning when he was young. While Pip is not so clearly an autobiographical figure as David Copperfield, the legacy that had enabled Dickens to resume his own education had been a stroke of luck like Pip's great expectations, even if Dickens had afterwards made better use of it by hard work.

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*Great Expectations* is a Bildungsroman or novel of education. Its major character, Pip, learns, through a lot of suffering, a number of lessons:

- that love, friendship and loyalty are more important than social advancement, fame and wealth.
- that to be a true gentleman or 'gentle woman' has more to do with the gift of empathy than with social class.
- that hardships in life can be overcome by hard work and an honest behaviour.
- that greed and ambition corrupt people's judgement and behaviour.
- that human beings can change for the better.
- that adults sometimes use their children as tools to help them obtain what they want.
- that an unhappy childhood often leads to an unhappy adulthood.
- that social prestige and wealth not always bring happiness.
- that human beings are mostly born good.
- that those who are considered bad may not have been taught how to love.

## Discussion activities

### Introduction

#### Before reading

- 1 **Research:** Popular novelists  
Have students find out the name of the most popular nineteenth century writer(s) in their own country. Then tell them that Dickens is considered the most popular writer in England in the same century.
- 2 **Research:** Life in the nineteenth century  
Charles Dickens was born in England in 1812. Using books or the Internet, have students look up information about what life was like in their own country in the early nineteenth century.

#### After reading

- 3 **Research:** Novels turned into films  
Suggest to students going to a video shop to find out which of the many titles which figure in this Introduction have been turned into films.

### Chapters 1–7

#### Before reading

- 4 **Guess:** Have students brainstorm the ideas that come to their minds when they read the title of the story:  
*Have you ever had great expectations about something?*

#### While reading

- 5 **Read carefully and check:** *Who is talking in these chapters? Is he talking about the past or the present? How old is he now?*

- 6 **Artwork:** Have students draw the place where Pip lived which is described on page 1.
- 7 **Write a poem:** Have students write a list poem with the following title 'My Ten Earliest Memories.'
- 8 **Read carefully and guess:** Pip's sister  
*What did Pip's sister mean when she said that she had brought him up 'by the hand'? Why did she lay her hand on her husband? Would you like to meet Pip's sister? Why/Why not?*
- 9 **Discuss:** Lying  
Have students discuss why it is that children lie so often: *Do children lie because they have a great imagination or is it because they want to feel more important? Do they lie to adults when they are afraid? Do you remember why you used to lie? Do you remember any big lie? How did you feel afterwards? Were you ashamed of yourself?*
- 10 **Predict:** Have students imagine Pip taking revenge on his sister because she has wished him in his grave many times (page 8). *What will he do to her?*

#### After reading

- 11 **Artwork:** Design posters  
Have students design two 'wanted' posters: one for the 'fearful man' and the other for the other convict.
- 12 **Group work and artwork:** Have students draw the photographs taken of Pip and his family on Christmas day (or dress up and take pictures of themselves playing the different roles).
- 13 **Discuss:** Christmas meals  
Have students discuss what Pip and his family eat and drink on Christmas day and compare the meal to the ones they have when they have a family celebration.
- 14 **Discuss:** Relationships between children  
Have students discuss how much sensitive children suffer when in contact with aggressive children. *Estella treats poor Pip very harshly. Children can make other children suffer a lot by what they say to them. As a child, were you similar to Estella or to Pip? Do you remember any occasion on which you made somebody suffer? Were you aware of what you were doing?*

### Chapters 8–13

#### While reading

- 15 **Write and discuss:** The enigma of Miss Havisham  
As soon as Pip reaches his house he asks his sister lots of questions about Miss Havisham. Have students write down at least five questions he could have asked her. Then Pip lies to her about Miss Havisham. Ask students why he does so.
- 16 **Artwork:** Miss Havisham's room  
Have students draw the room as described on pages 26–27.
- 17 **Discuss:** Estella's first kiss to Pip  
Have students discuss why it is that Estella allows Pip to kiss her after his fight with the pale young man (page 29).

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**18 Role play:** Joe's conversation with Miss Havisham  
Have students role play the conversation paying close attention to all the instructions or 'stage directions' Dickens gives us (pages 31–33).

**19 Pair work:** Shame  
Have students analyse Pip's feelings of shame.  
*Would any child in similar circumstances feel the shame Pip felt or does his shame have to do with his great insecurity?*

## After reading

**20 Guess:** Pip's future  
Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following:  
*What difference, if any, will Pip's great expectations make to the way in which he is regarded by (a) Joe; (b) Biddy; (c) Mr Pumblechook; (d) Estella?*

**21 Discuss:** Pros and cons of Pip's great expectations  
Have students discuss the pros and cons of Pip's 'good fortune':  
*Would you like to be in Pip's shoes or not? Would you like to live far away from your family like Pip? Would you like to owe your good luck to such a crazy woman as Miss Havisham? What risks is he running?*

**22 Pair work:** Orlick or the convict?  
Have one student play the part of a policeman investigating the attack on Pip's sister and asking Pip questions. The other plays the part of Pip.  
*The policeman suspects Pip's convict. Why? Pip does not believe it. Why does he suspect Orlick?*

## Chapters 14–18

### While reading

**23 Discuss:** Miss Havisham's definition of love  
Have students discuss the following:  
*'Real love is blind faithfulness, complete acceptance, trust and belief in spite of yourself and of the whole world, giving up your heart and soul to your love'. Do you agree with Miss Havisham's definition?*

**24 Role play:** Joe in London  
Have students read the scene on pages 53–55 very carefully for them to act it out in pairs. Joe's hat is all important in it.

**25 Role play:** Miss Havisham's personality  
Have a student impersonate Miss Havisham's psychologist for the others to ask him questions concerning Miss Havisham's weird behaviour.

### After reading

**26 Write:** The letter of the husband-to-be  
Have students write down the letter which the husband-to-be sent Miss Havisham when she was dressing for their wedding.

**27 Pair work and role play:** Herbert and Pip  
Have students write down and then act out their dialogue. The following questions may be of help:  
*Herbert wants to give Pip sensible advice about Estella. Will she ever love him as he loves her? Will he ever be able to marry her? Does Pip accept Herbert's advice?*

**28 Discuss:** Work  
Mr Jaggers told Mr Pocket that Pip wasn't designed for any profession and that his only job was to educate him. Have students discuss the importance of work.  
*Why doesn't Pip's benefactor want him to have a profession and earn a living? Would you get bored if you had nothing to do?*

## Chapters 19–22

### While reading

**29 Discuss:** Whose responsibility?  
Have students discuss who is responsible for Pip's careless behaviour with money.  
*Is Pip careless by nature? Should his benefactor have been less generous to him? Should he/she have made Pip earn his own money for him to value it? Would you behave like Pip in similar circumstances?*

**30 Write:** Metaphorical language  
Have students explain in their own words what Estella and Pip mean by:  
**a** 'All sorts of insects are drawn to a lighted candle. Can the candle help it?' (Estella's words on page 76)  
**b** 'I began fully to know how wrecked I was, and how the ship in which I had sailed had gone to pieces.' (Pip's words on page 80)

**31 Discuss:** The convict's intentions  
Have students discuss why the convict made Pip a gentleman.  
*Was it a way of thanking him for helping him in the marshes? Did he want Pip to have the possibilities in life that he hadn't had? Was it a way of proving to the world or to himself that money had made him powerful? Was it generous or selfish on the convict's part to have made Pip a gentleman?*

### After reading

**32 Discuss:** Pip's feelings  
Have students analyse Pip's reaction when he finds out who his benefactor is.  
*What does Pip feel when he finds out that his benefactor is a criminal? Do you understand him? How would you feel?*

**33 Guess:** The convict's return  
*Why has the convict returned if he was sent away for life? Isn't he running a great risk?*



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## 34 Research: Transportation to Australia

Although we aren't told the name of the country that the convict was sent to for life, it was very probably Australia. Have students find out why English criminals used to be sent to Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and for what type of crime.

## Chapters 23–27

### While reading

#### 35 Write: Herbert's view of Magwitch

Have students write a description of Magwitch's physical appearance as if they were Herbert.  
*Pip thinks that Magwitch will always look like a criminal in spite of the clothes that he may be wearing. Is this true? Does Herbert see another Magwitch?*

#### 36 Discuss: Miss Havisham

Have students discuss Miss Havisham's behaviour towards Pip. In Chapter 24 Pip learns that Miss Havisham's behaviour towards him had not been 'kind'.  
*Why had she led him on into thinking that she was his benefactor? What was she using Pip for? Would you forgive her? Do parents sometimes 'use' their children to reach what they couldn't reach in life?*

#### 37 Guess: Wemmick's note (page 88)

Have students guess why Wemmick has sent Pip that note.

### After reading

#### 38 Research: The convict's first name

Have students discuss Dickens's choice of the name 'Abel' for Magwitch by doing research on who Abel was. (The Bible: Genesis 4: 1–16)  
*Is Abel Magwitch a victim as was Abel in the Bible? Whose victim is he, Compeyson's or society's? Is Compeyson like Cain?*

#### 39 Discuss: Estella's mother

Have students discuss the appearance of Estella's mother at this stage in the story.  
*Was Dickens right or wrong in introducing this character so late in the story? Is it easy or difficult to believe that she's Estella's mother and that Magwitch is her father?*

#### 40 Write: Provis's diary

Divide students into three groups and have them write Provis's thoughts when (a) he met Herbert, (b) he heard that the police were looking for him (c) he was taken to the house by the river. Once they have finished have them read their entries aloud.

#### 41 Artwork: Provis's 'Wanted' Poster

Have students design the 'Wanted' Poster that the policemen in search of the convict may have stuck on London walls.

## Chapters 28–32

### While reading

#### 42 Guess: The writer of the note on page 96

Have students guess whether the note was written by Compeyson or by Orlick.

#### 43 Artwork: The little house by the lime kiln

Many of Dickens's novels have been turned into very good films thanks to their very good descriptions. Have students reread pages 96–97 and then draw the place.

#### 44 Role play: Herbert and Startop

Have students write down the conversation both men must have held when they found the note addressed to Pip. Then get them to act out the dialogue.

#### 45 Discuss: Pip and Provis

Have students discuss how much Pip has changed regarding Provis, as can be seen during the trial and in the death bed scene. The fact that Pip holds the former convict's hand during the trial should be brought into the discussion.  
*How does Pip treat the convict now? Is he ashamed of him as he used to be when the convict arrived at his place? What does the fact that Pip holds his hand during the trial prove to us?*

### After reading

#### 46 Discuss: Joe's help

Have students discuss why it is that Dickens makes Joe look after Pip when he gets so ill.  
*Does Joe look after Pip because there's nobody else to do so? Is it because he loves him dearly? Is it for Pip to realise what a good man Joe is? Is it for Pip to feel ashamed of his behaviour towards Joe in the past? Has Pip learnt to value Joe?*

#### 47 Discuss: Estella's change

Dickens knew well that suffering makes us grow up a lot. Have students enumerate all that happened to Estella recently.  
*Which lines make you think she's a changed woman?*

#### 48 Discuss: The other ending

Dickens originally ended the novel differently, but before correcting the final proofs from the printers he showed the ending to his friend, the novelist Bulwer Lytton. In this version, Pip told Biddy that he did not dream of Estella any more. Two years later, he met Estella, who told him she had married again after Drummle's death; her second husband was kinder to her. Lytton persuaded Dickens to change the ending to the present one, suggesting that Pip may marry Estella.  
*Do you think Dickens was right to take Lytton's advice?*

#### 49 Write: Invite students to write Chapter 33. What will happen to Pip and Estella?