

***Great Expectations* 1861 (Charles Dickens)**

Plot Summary

The First Stage of Pip's Expectations

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* opens as seven-year-old Philip Pirrip, known as "Pip," visits the graves of his parents down in the marshes near his home on Christmas Eve. Here he encounters a threatening escaped convict, who frightens Pip and makes him promise to steal food and a file for him. Pip steals some food from his brother-in law, the blacksmith Joe Gargery, and his cruel sister "Mrs. Joe," with whom he lives, and takes it to the convict the next day. The convict is soon caught and returned to the "Hulks," the prison ships from which he had escaped.

Pip is invited to visit the wealthy Miss Havisham, and to play with her adopted daughter, Estella. Miss Havisham lives in the gloomy Satis House, and Pip discovers her to be an extremely eccentric woman. Having been abandoned on her wedding day many years earlier, Miss Havisham has never changed out of her wedding dress since that time, and nothing in the house, including the rotting wedding cake covered with spider webs, has been touched since she discovered that her fiancé had left her and had cheated her out of a great deal of money. Miss Havisham has raised Estella to be a cold and heartless woman who will avenge her adopted mother by breaking the hearts of men.

Pip continues to visit Satis House to play with Estella, and he begins to fall in love with her, despite the fact that she is rude and condescending to him. Because of Miss Havisham's interest in him, Pip's family and friends speculate on his future prospects, and Pip attempts to improve those prospects by asking his friend, the orphaned Biddy, to tutor him. Eventually, Miss Havisham gives Pip some money, tells him his services are no longer needed, and that it is time for him to be apprenticed to his brother-in-law, Joe. Pip is disappointed.

One day Pip learns that someone has broken into his home and that his sister, Mrs. Joe, has been injured with a great blow to the back of the head. Biddy moves in to help take care of her and the household and continues to tutor Pip, with whom she is falling in love. Biddy believes that it was Orlick, a contemptuous employee of Joe's, who injured Mrs. Joe. Biddy also fears that Orlick is falling in love with her. Pip continues to work for Joe, visiting Miss Havisham every year on his birthday, and constantly regretting his desire for a more comfortable lifestyle and his infatuation with Estella.

Some time later a stranger visits Pip and informs him that an anonymous benefactor would like to transform him into a gentleman. The stranger, a lawyer named Jaggers, will administer Pip's new income and suggests that Pip move to London and take a man named Matthew Pocket as his tutor, who happens to be a relative of Miss Havisham. Pip assumes that Miss Havisham is his mysterious

benefactor. Pip buys himself some new clothes and bidding his family farewell, slips out of town on his own, embarrassed to be seen in his new outfit with Joe.

The Second Stage of Pip's Expectations

In London, Pip lodges with Pocket's son Herbert. Pip also becomes friends with John Wemmick, Jaggers' clerk, and learns that Jaggers is a famous lawyer who is noted for his work in defending prisoners and thieves who face execution. Wemmick takes Pip home to dinner one night, and Pip is intrigued by his house, which resembles a tiny castle, complete with drawbridge and moat, where Wemmick lives with his elderly and stone-deaf father, whom he calls "the Aged P." Pip is also invited to dine at Jaggers' house, where he meets Jaggers' sullen housekeeper, Molly.

Joe comes to London to bring a message to Pip, who is embarrassed to have Joe visit him. The message is from Miss Havisham, who invites Pip to come to see Estella, who is visiting her mother. Going to Satis House at once, Pip is surprised to find that Orlick is now Miss Havisham's watchman, and he tells Jaggers that the man should be dismissed. Not long after this, Pip learns that his sister has died, and he returns home for her funeral. While he is there, he promises Biddy that he will visit Joe often in the future, but Biddy expresses her doubt that he actually will do so.

The Third Stage of Pip's Expectations

One day Pip is visited by a stranger, and soon recognizes him to be the convict to whom he had brought food years ago. The convict, Abel Magwitch, has made a fortune as a sheep farmer in New South Wales, Australia, and he has prided himself on having used his money to make a gentleman out of the little boy who had helped him long ago. Pip is shocked and embarrassed to learn that it is the convict who has given him his "great expectations" and not Miss Havisham.

Magwitch tells him of his history, and how he became involved with another more gentlemanly criminal who got him into trouble, and yet was punished less severely when they were both caught. Pip and Herbert deduce that this criminal is Compeyson, the man who schemed with his partner, Arthur, to swindle Miss Havisham of her money. Arthur was supposed to marry Miss Havisham to get her money, but his conscience caused him to abandon her at the altar when he couldn't go through with the plan. Because Magwitch faces certain death if he is discovered in England, Pip and Herbert concoct a plan for helping him escape unnoticed.

Planning to leave the country with Magwitch, Pip pays Miss Havisham a call. The old lady admits that she allowed Pip to believe that she was his benefactress, and Pip asks her to help him with a plan he has to set Herbert up in business anonymously. Pip is shocked to learn that Estella plans to marry his doltish acquaintance Bentley Drummle. Dining one night with Jaggers, Pip learns

more about the housekeeper Molly's history. Having been accused of killing another woman involved with her husband and having threatened to murder her own daughter, Molly was successfully defended by Jaggers. Recognizing her face and hands, Pip realizes with astonishment that Molly is the mother of Estella.

Pip is summoned to Miss Havisham's again, where the old lady begs Pip to forgive her. After leaving her, Pip is disturbed and decides to return to the house to look in on her. He finds the poor old woman ablaze, having sat too close to the fire, and he is burned while trying to put out the flames. Later Pip learns of Miss Havisham's death, and that she has left money to Herbert, as he had requested. Returning to London, he learns the story of Magwitch's wife, and deduces that Magwitch was married to Molly, and therefore is Estella's father.

Summoned back to the marshes near his old home by a mysterious note, Pip narrowly escapes death when he is attacked by a vengeful Orlick and rescued just in time by some local villagers. He returns to London where he and Herbert carry out their plan to sneak Magwitch onto a steamer on the Thames. Their plans fail, however. They are attacked by another boat, and Magwitch is severely wounded. As the kind old Magwitch is dying, Pip tells him of his daughter Estella.

After being nursed out of a serious illness by the devoted Joe, Pip joins the business partnership he has established for Herbert in the East. After eleven years, he returns to England and visits Joe and Biddy, who have married and have a family. He also meets Estella, who has left her husband, on the property of the now demolished Satis House. This time, Pip says that "I saw no shadow of another parting from her."

In Dickens' original version, Pip and Estella part with the understanding that they will probably never see each other again, but in the revised version, Dickens' makes the ending more optimistic by implying that they will, indeed, have a future together someday.

Themes

1. Alienation and Loneliness

Beneath the Dickens' major theme of a great respect for wealth is an analysis of the fate of the outsider. At least four known orphans-Mrs. Joe, Magwitch, Estella, and Pip himself-have suffered loneliness, but each character reacts differently. Pip begins his story as a child standing in a gloomy cemetery at the grave site of his family, so pitifully alone that he can do no more than imagine his mother as the "wife of the above," which he can only interpret as directions to his mother's current address in heaven. Pip himself is often threatened with death by his sister and again by his convict, Magwitch. Even Orlick, the town lout, tries to kill an adult Pip. Joe Gargery is Pip's only friend on

the marshes, and even after Pip is introduced to city life friends are few compared to the number of those who are coldly uncaring or dangerous. On the other hand, Estella's odd childhood, in the wrinkled hands of an old woman with a twisted mind, teaches her to reject all affection or friendships. Estella plays with Pip like a cat toys with a mouse, certainly not like an equal or playmate, for that is not Miss Havisham's intention. Likewise, as Magwitch confesses to Pip, his childhood on the streets of London was such a nightmare that he cannot even remember how he once learned his own name, and it is no wonder he has had to turn to a life of crime. Mrs. Joe is another character who is antisocial. She lives on the marshes among rough, working class men and has no friends but Joe and no female acquaintances whatever. Pip's guardian and Joe's wife, she is so rude, antagonistic, and violent that she drives away those who would otherwise love her. As Pip's sister, Mrs. Joe shares the same loss of their family, but her means of coping with loneliness is quite different from Pip's attempts to get along with people and to stay out of trouble. Indeed, Mrs. Joe causes most of the problems in her life and everyone else's at the forge. Aside from these obvious loners, each struggling to find his or her place in the world, Jaggers also stands alone, an upholder of the law but to an inhuman degree. He never lets down his guard, as though he were likely to be sued if he relaxed, misspoke, or reacted at all with emotion. No matter how openly Pip offers friendship, Jaggers maintains a distant attitude and instead admires the wealthy but evil Bentley Drummle for knowing what he wants and getting it. While Pip has the greatest number of friends of these alienated characters, even he is strangely hesitant to leave London to rejoin Joe and Biddy or to accept Herbert Pocket's offer of a position in his firm. Only when Pip has exhausted his expectations and has no other direction to turn does he realize that he is quite lucky to have two good friends who love him for himself and can forget about his social status. By doing this, Pip is the one character who works his way out of alienation and loneliness into a socially active life that is enriched by love shared with friends. Although this hard-earned knowledge was not one of his original "expectations," Pip finds that this is far greater wealth than any benefactor's inheritance.

2. Identity: Search for Self

As a child, Pip is small for his age and quite weak, physically and temperamentally. An orphan living with his sister in near poverty, he dreams of great wealth. Meanwhile, finding ways to avoid abuse from his sister becomes his daily lesson. He submits to the insults of Mrs. Joe, Uncle Pumblechook, Mr. Wopsle, Estella and Miss Havisham's relatives. Pip is terrified of Miss Havisham when she first orders him to play a game as she watches him and he realizes that he is too miserable to play at anything. Later, he is anxious and delighted to

escape that life and go to the city where he can establish a new identity as a gentleman in his own right. Indeed, from his first day in London he is addressed as "Mr. Pip" and treated well. He finds, however, that he has little to back up that esteem except money that he has not earned and only squanders on expensive clothes, decorations for his apartment, and a servant boy he calls "The Avenger." What is Pip avenging but the poverty to which he was born? Yet when Joe comes to London, Pip is ashamed of him, embarrassed that Joe now calls him "Sir" yet distressed by Joe's lowbrow speech and country clothes. Pip is also mortified by Magwitch. Even after learning that the convict is responsible for Pip's rise in status and his great allowance, Pip does not want to be seen with the old man because Magwitch does not fit into Pip's new identity. That Magwitch has risked his life to come back to England to see Pip does not influence Pip's decision to get rid of Magwitch as soon as possible. Pip frequently returns to the village to visit Miss Havisham and Estella, and to enjoy a gentleman's treatment from the shopkeeper Trabb and Trabb's boy who once sneered at Pip. However, Pip neither returns to the humble forge to visit Joe nor sends any message to him. In time, Pip is ashamed of that and apologizes to both Magwitch and Joe. Also, he forgives Miss Havisham for her early cruelty with a kiss on her deathbed. But this cannot happen until he has endured greater suffering and pangs of conscience than he ever knew as a weakling boy on the marsh. Miss Havisham also rises above her reputation as a tightfisted and heartless old woman by granting Pip's request for money to set up Herbert Pocket in a business, and by begging Pip's forgiveness before she dies. Once cruel, she ends by suffering from the realization that she has wasted her life on hatred and vengeance, yet it is too late for her to enjoy her change of heart. Pip adds this to his lessons on gaining respect and peace in his own life. Another good model comes from Wemmick, who adores his old father and shares care of the Aged Parent with Pip on at least one occasion when, ironically, Pip is avoiding contact with Magwitch. Nevertheless, Pip attends Magwitch in his last days as tenderly as Wemmick tends his own father and as lovingly as Joe nurses Pip back from death. When Pip finally returns to the marsh to propose marriage to Biddy and to thank Joe, he finds them already married. Pip asks Joe's forgiveness before he joins Herbert Pocket, Jr. to earn his way in the world and to repay Joe for covering some of his bills. Pip finally takes charge of his future and enjoys the love of his family and friends, realizing that they are his most precious wealth. Having been first a pauper, then a man of the leisure class, and finally a middle-class worker, Pip is finally certain of his place in the world by knowing true contentment and self worth.

3. *Victim and Victimization*

In the endless struggle for power, the winners are the ruthless, thinks Jaggers. He has yet to learn that such power is not equal to the strength of being true to one's convictions, as Pip learns. Even though Jaggers deals with victims and victimizers daily, he is less informed than Pip is as a victim himself. Mrs. Joe Gargery prides herself on having brought up Pip "by hand," meaning with no help but also with the idea that sparing the rod spoils the child. Yet Pip has not been spared numerous encounters with "The Tickler," his sister's cane. But if one who lives by the cane dies by it, so does Mrs. Joe suffer a violent beating before her death. Similarly, other victimizers become victims before their final chance to repent. Magwitch, once a thug on the streets of London, is stalked by his former accomplice. While his childhood in the underworld taught him to eat or be eaten, Magwitch risks all to return to England so that he can see for himself Pip's success and to settle his score with the villainous Compeyson. Also, Molly is "tamed" by Jaggers. A gypsy by birth, a criminal by necessity, and now bound to his household, she neither roams nor breaks the law anymore. But she is a powerless victim who never learns the fate of her daughter except that the child has been adopted into a wealthy household where she will receive the food and shelter Molly cannot provide. While Pip worries that Drummle will harm Estella, it is she who must endure a loveless marriage to outlive her cruel husband. A victim of Miss Havisham's icy character instead of enjoying the love of a mother, Estella is first the abused and then the abuser of both Pip and Miss Havisham. She then becomes the abused wife of the rotten Drummle. Yet, finally, at least in the original ending, Estella is a potentially better mother to her daughter than either her own mother or Miss Havisham ever were to her. Even in the revised ending, she breaks the abuse cycle by reconciling with Pip as his equal. And a lesser character, Trabb's boy, insults Pip and his first good suit of clothes. It is the only way that this poor fellow has of getting back at someone who has had better luck than he has had, for Trabb's boy was humiliated when his employer ordered him to be polite to the new young master Pip. In this way, Trabb's boy is both the victim of class distinction in his society and a victimizer of the upper class in the only way he can be. Through his unobserved and therefore unpunishable rudeness to Pip, he defends himself and strikes a blow at a social class that he has no hope of ever joining. Pip himself must realize that he has victimized people by treating them as lesser creatures. He realizes that he broke Joe's heart when he left the forge and again when he stayed out of contact for eleven years. He hurts Biddy by telling her that he could never love her, even though he returns intending to ask her to marry him after he has lost all of his money. Finding her already married to Joe is Pip's final lesson that power is not related to happiness and that one can only be a victim by permitting it. Trabb's boy is not Pip's only example. Jaggers is also feared by those who are not on his

side. Yet Pip doubts that Jaggers has much to enjoy when he goes home at the end of the day. For all of these characters, the pleasure of power as victimizer is short-lived and/or unsatisfying.

4. *Guilt and Innocence*

With the law as a backdrop for much of the action, Pip finds that guilt and innocence are much more complex than he first thought. Having helped a convict to escape weighs heavily on his young mind, and he is sure that greater powers will catch up to punish him in time. When they do, they are much different than Pip first supposed, for he must first deal with his own conscience outside of the English courts. Underlying all of the characters' actions and outcomes is this theme: the guilty are punished by a power higher than any king's. Everyone who acts unjustly in the novel is made to either suffer and repent or to die without forgiveness. Likewise, those few who have nothing to regret are begged for mercy. While Pip is owed an apology by Mrs. Joe, her cruelty to him is avenged by her pitiful and helpless last days. The same could be said of Miss Havisham, who dies powerless, alone, and begging Pip's forgiveness. And while Pip owes Joe his life and feels great guilt for the times he wished not to know Joe, he has often abused their friendship. Pip pays for his carelessness by suffering and nearly dying, and by falling from great wealth back into poverty. His early innocence is the innocence to which he must return for forgiveness, a prodigal son who remembers the simple truth. Estella is too late to reconcile with Miss Havisham, but she finally treats Pip as an equal in both endings to the novel. Estella has also learned the truth about power. While the law is not kind to Magwitch, he accepts it. The fairness of that is left to the reader to decide since Magwitch has had few chances to be anything in life but a convict. That he is Pip's own convict is his redeeming quality, and in turn Magwitch has saved Pip's humility by revealing that a criminal, not a lady, is providing the money to fulfill Pip's grand expectations of joining the upper class. Magwitch has earned that money by the sweat of his brow, working as a common sheep rancher in Australia and not by any criminal activity. He could have easily spent the money on himself instead of Pip. These truths are Pip's salvation from a worthless, lazy, and arrogant life like Drummle. Less obvious are those who have never learned what Pip has found. Uncle Pumblechook and Miss Havisham's relatives will continue to curse others' luck and their own lack of fortune. Guilty of not listening to his heart, Jaggers will live out his days by guarding his words and emotions. While hopelessly self-involved characters such as Drummle and Compeyson are condemned to die without acknowledging their own guilt, others such as Magwitch, Molly, and Estella will be forgiven for misdeeds that are either justifiable or beyond their ability to avoid. Told through Pip's voice, the story shows that the power of forgiveness is great, for it is by mercy to others that one is forgiven. The law of the land that Pip once feared has little to

do with real justice, for only by admitting his own guilt can he find happiness. As Pip concludes about himself by remembering Herbert Pocket, Jr., "I was one day enlightened by the reflection, that perhaps the inaptitude had never been in him at all, but had been in me." Or as Estella says to Pip upon meeting him again, "I am greatly changed. I wonder you know me."

Style

1. Point of View

The first-person narrator of Dickens' *Great Expectations* is an adult Pip who tells the story in his own voice and from his own memory. What is distinctive about that voice is that it can so intimately recall the many small details of a little boy's fear and misery, as well as the voices and dialects of others—from the rough country speech of Magwitch and Orlick to the deaf Aged Parent's loud repetitions or the mechanically predictable things Jaggers says. Yet other details seem to be forgotten. Pip tells almost nothing of his beatings from Mrs. Joe, but a great deal about his fear of them, using adult vocabulary and concepts in these reflections. The opening scene with little Pip in the cemetery recalls the tombstones as looking like "lozenges," soothing the throat of this mature narrator. This way, the adult Pip not only evaluates events as he remembers them but also adds a deeper insight than he would have had as a child. The story unfolds chronologically from Pip's earliest memories to his most recent experiences. And while some critics justify Dickens' revised ending, Pip's development is most believable for modern readers if he parts from Estella with the final realization that he could never have been happy with her and her man-hating legacy from Miss Havisham.

2. Bildungsroman

In *Great Expectations*, Pip must not only work out his problems but also sort out reality from his childhood dreams. Realistically, the only way that he can do this is by trial and error and learning from his mistakes. First comes his education, demonstrating that becoming a gentleman means more than having material wealth. Pip may read as many fine books as he can, but the most important lessons come not from them (he does not quote from them) but from his analysis of real people and events in his society. While Drummle is financially wealthier than Herbert Pocket or Startop, among Pip's London friends, Drummle has no redeeming qualities nor does he value his friends, which Pip learns is the most important thing in his own life. In his development, Pip discovers that Miss Havisham has not been his kindly benefactor as he had assumed. Even so, he is able to both save her life and help her to find a little left of her soul before she dies. By helping someone who only appears to be better off than he is, he finds honor in his own name, as humble as that may be. It is ironic that the criminal Magwitch had insisted, as a condition of Pip's allowance, that he keep his boyhood name "Pip" rather than "Phillip." He finds that the requirements of

maturity are taking responsibility for one's actions, and this is what Pip must do by the end of the novel. He admits that he has at times been ashamed of his country life and friends. Pip also reveals that while he once enjoyed being treated royally by Uncle Pumblechook and Tragg in town, he sees now that this was a false honor. The true nobility is in his homecoming, which is similar to the biblical prodigal son's return. Pip confesses to Joe and Biddy that he has been too proud to appreciate their unfailing love until he finally comes back to them with his new knowledge.

3. Setting

The distinctions between the city, the town, and the country are the most apparent shifts in Pip's story. Although all of them harbor dangerous elements, all of them also carry the forces of good. The difference is that the marsh folk are more obvious in their desires. Orlick is the example of a man without a soul, and Pip recognizes this from the beginning. It is no surprise when it is revealed that he was Mrs. Joe's savage attacker. The fact that he would also kill Pip points out Orlick's lack of distinction between those who deserve his vengeance and those who do not. He readily attacks anyone who gets in his way. However, in town Tragg's boy makes Pip the laughingstock of all who have more in life than he will ever have, thus showing humor and a knowledge of the world that Orlick does not have. Even so, Orlick believes he has power over others who may be better off than he is, which he tries to prove. By contrast, along London's sooty streets are those who know Jaggers. They both fear and respect him as someone with the education and social power to help them. He is as impersonal as the buildings around him, but if he cannot save their lives they are certain that they could not have been saved by anyone. That kind of blind trust is not found in the village-where even Tragg's boy dares to mock Pip-or on the marshes where brute strength may mean survival. Of the three, the city is least likely to recognize individuality, which Pip indicates by noticing the overall dirtiness and decay of it as soon as he arrives there. A person may hide on the marshes or outside of the city, whereas the city has too many eyes to cover up anyone or any deed for long. Even Pip must escape to the suburbs (Wemmick's) for a time to avoid those eyes.

4. Comic Relief

With so many serious things to think about and the ever-present dangers that appear, Pip is always glad to slip away to Wemmick's miniature castle, complete with a tiny moat and cannon, where all good things seem possible again in this stronghold against the evil of the outer world. One of the best features of the place is the stereotypical character of Wemmick's father, the laughable Aged Parent. Good-natured, deaf, dependent, and weakened by age, the old man is no threat to Pip or to anyone. Instead, he requires the protection of those who have power in the world, that is to say Wemmick and Pip.

Wemmick's devotion to his old father seems to Pip to be a wonderful thing, especially in a society that constantly seeks out the weak to take advantage of them. However, the fragility of the situation makes Wemmick's house seem all the more magical. As close as it is to the unforgiving city life of London, it is a world apart—something about which Wemmick constantly cautions Pip. It is not to be mentioned to Jaggers or to anyone outside of this rare and delightfully protected environment. Pip is rewarded for honoring Wemmick's trust and friendship by being allowed to cook and watch over the Aged Parent, as well as being honored as Wemmick's only wedding guest who is not kin. Pip soon becomes as fiercely protective as Wemmick is of this place where evil dare not enter.

CHARACTERISATION

Dickens sets his characters before his readers clearly and directly, paying particular attention to the external details of a character's appearance, especially the face, the clothes and physical mannerisms. Generally Dickens prefers to reveal a character through the way he looks, behaves, and particularly the way he speaks. He is marvellously alert to little physical mannerisms and ways of speaking, and we get to know Dickens's characters from their behaviour over a long period of time rather than by the author's telling us all about them on their first appearance. Dickens presents his characters with varying degrees of complexity, they are not given equal treatment of space. In *Great Expectations*, for example, we might say that Pip is a complicated or 'round' character because he is a mixture of good and bad qualities, while Mrs Pocket is a 'flat' character, whose single characteristic is a kind of snobbish incompetence. But even minor, apparently 'flat' characters may have an important functional role in the novel, as Mrs Pocket helps to illustrate one of Dickens's major themes, that of false gentility, and 'flat' characters may also be rather more complicated than a simple stereotyping formula might suggest. One of the most important aspects of Dickens's characterization is the way he shows characters developing as the story proceeds. He takes a dynamic view of human personality, in other words, and though some characters such as Joe, Drummle and Compeyson may not change very much, others do remarkably. The novel concentrates particularly on Pip's moral development, of course, but Magwitch and Estella both soften in their feelings before the novel ends, Miss Havisham repents of the wrongs she has done, and even Mrs Joe shows signs of reformation.