

## 'Great Expectations'

### Context

**The Victorian era:** the period of Queen Victoria's reign, from 20 June 1837 until her death on 22 January 1901. Despite the fact that Britain was seen as a strong global power, this era saw a large amount of social inequality. There was also a lot of change during this era as it saw the advancement of technology and industry with the Industrial Revolution. Charles Dickens wanted to show how difficult growing up was in these times as well as reveal the differences in the lives of the rich and the poor.

**Social class:** in Victorian times, society was strictly layered, not only into rich and poor, or even upper, middle and lower class, but hundreds of 'grades'. People were expected to 'know their place', and the Church taught them to be content in their 'station'. There was a huge gap between the rich and poor; the poor were very poor and the rich did little to help the poor or alleviate their situation

**Social problems:** at the time, many people were becoming aware of the need to improve the condition in which the poor found themselves. Dickens was a great supporter of social reform, especially in education and prisons.

**Church and religion:** in Victorian times, Britain was overwhelmingly Christian. The Church dominated religion and the morals of the time. Dickens, however, disapproved of the power the Church had over people's lives.

**Charles Dickens:** Dickens was born in England in 1812. He died in 1870. His first big success was 'The Pickwick Papers'. This was in 1837, the year Victoria became

Britain's Queen. Dickens lived through the Industrial Revolution. When he was 12, his father was imprisoned for debt. While his father was in prison, Dickens was sent to work in a boot-blackening factory. Even when his father came out of prison, Dickens' mother made him continue working in the factory, for which he never forgave her.

**Nineteenth century literary traditions:** by 1860, although most people in Britain could read and write, books were well beyond the income of ordinary people. Because of this, Dickens' novels were serialised. 'Great Expectations' was published in 36 weekly parts in 'All Year Round', priced 2d (two pence in old money).

### Plot

- Pip, an orphan, lives with his unkind sister and her husband.
- Pip meets a convict (Magwitch) who commands him to bring him food.
- The convict is later captured by soldiers and imprisoned.
- Pip is introduced to a lady called Miss Havisham at Satis House.
- He spends time at her home and falls in love with Estella.
- Miss Havisham pays for Pip to become a blacksmith.
- Pip is unhappy and wishes to become a gentleman and marry Estella.
- Pip is left a large fortune by an unknown benefactor.
- Pip believes that the benefactor is Miss Havisham.
- Pip learns that his benefactor is Magwitch.
- He also learns about Miss Havisham's ill-fated wedding day.
- Pip returns 11 years later and finds Estella at Satis House.

### Key characters

<b>Pip</b>	The hero, protagonist and narrator of 'Great Expectations' who starts as an orphan and receives a large and unexpected fortune. (Victimised, lonely, naïve)
<b>Magwitch</b>	A fearsome criminal, Magwitch escapes from prison at the beginning of 'Great Expectations' and later becomes Pip's secret sponsor. (Rough, complicated, generous)
<b>Estella</b>	Miss Havisham's beautiful young niece, Estella is Pip's unachievable dream throughout the story. (Beautiful, arrogant, cold)
<b>Miss Havisham</b>	The old woman who lives in Satis House. As a young woman, Miss Havisham was deserted by her fiancé minutes before her wedding, and now she hates all men. (Bitter, angry, eccentric)

### Subject terminology

**Catalyst:** something that causes a reaction to happen quickly.

**Exposition:** a fully-fledged and detailed explanation.

**Grotesque:** a focus on the human body, and all the ways that it can be distorted or exaggerated; its aim is to make us feel both empathy and disgust at the same time.

**Bildungsroman:** a coming of age novel which focuses on the development of the protagonist from youth to adulthood.

**Patriarchal:** relating to a system/ society where men dominate.

**Protagonist:** the leading character in the novel.

**Narrative perspective:** the point of view from which the story is told. In the case of 'Great Expectations,' Pip is the narrator so Dickens has used a first person narrative.

**Serialisation:** when stories were released in a series of weekly instalments instead of as a whole novel; they were therefore serialised.

# Why is the genre of a bildungsroman novel significant?

Pip is both the narrator of 'Great Expectations' and its chief protagonist. His perspective both determines what we see and how we see it. The novel follows Pip from the age of about eight to his mid-thirties and qualifies as a **bildungsroman**. 'Great Expectations' is divided into **three parts corresponding to the phases of Pip's life**. The first stage covers his **childhood**, during which he is 'brought up by hand' by his older sister, his parents having died. The second covers his apprenticeship in London, from **his mid-teens to his coming of age**, at which time he also comes into his mysterious inheritance, of which he has such great expectations (hence the novel's name). The third part of the novel shows Pip getting a better grip on who he is and who he wants to be, from **his mid-twenties to his mid-thirties**. It also covers how those 'great expectations' are - and are not - fulfilled. As Pip is our narrator, the reader lives Pip's life with him, and we see:

- the way contact with rich people makes him dissatisfied;
- how coming into money makes him shallow and selfish, and unhappy;
- how trying to find love with a beautiful, yet cruel, girl makes him unhappy - the plain, good girl would have been better;
- how disappointments change his character for the better;
- how Pip is happier when he settles down to a decent living through hard work - this is one of the main messages of the novel.

## Key themes

## Techniques

## Examples

**SOCIAL CLASS:** there was a big divide between the upper classes and lower classes in the Victorian era. Dickens did not like the effects of social class. Pip sees that many of the people of 'high' social class have significant character flaws, and that people from other social classes are 'better' human beings. On the other hand, violent and surly lower working class people are to be feared and distrusted. Dickens' message is that the middle class values of godliness, hard work, temperance and the gentleness of a 'gentleman' are - with sufficient income - the way to happiness. This message would appeal to his middle class/upper working class readership.

**CRIME AND THE LAW:** Dickens had a social conscience and was deeply critical of the existing system of law and justice (remember that his father was imprisoned for debt.) Issues relating to crime and the law run throughout 'Great Expectations'. For example: the story starts with Pip meeting a 'fearful' criminal in a cemetery, who makes him steal a file and food. Dickens' shocking conclusion is that, in Victorian England, some criminals were good men trapped by an unfair system, that punishment missed the guilty, that lawyers were rotters, and that prison was an inhuman place - in short, that England's system of justice was wholly unjust.

**AMBITION AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT:** in 1859, Samuel Smiles published his book 'Self-Help', which told people that if they worked hard they could improve their station in life. The 19th century was the age of the 'self-made man'. Most of Dickens' readers would have wanted to better themselves, and the author holds up a number of models of upper class life for Pip (and therefore the reader) to consider: Miss Havisham, Pip and Magwitch. Dickens' message is that 'character' is not about money or manners, but what is in your heart. The true heroes are Biddy and Joe. Dickens felt illusions make you unhappy, and ambition does not bring success. What matters to Dickens is not what you achieve, but what kind of person you are.

**LOVE AND DECEPTION:** Dickens explores love and loyalty in 'Great Expectations'. He makes it clear that they underlie happiness (when things go well) and misery (when things go wrong). For example, Pip's unrequited love for Estella throughout the novel only brings misery for Pip. Miss Havisham's life is ruined when she is jilted on her wedding day.

**Simile:** describing something by comparing it to something else (it must use 'like' or 'as').

'So she sat, corpse-like, as we played at cards.'

**Metaphor:** describing something by saying it is something else.

'He put down his head, blew a cloud of smoke out of his nose, and vanished with a kick-up.'

**Imagery:** a technique in which the author appeals to the senses i.e. seeing, hearing, touching.

'It was a rimy morning, and very damp. I had seen the damp lying on the outside of my little window, as if some goblin had been crying there all night.'

**Personification:** describing an inanimate object as having human feelings.

'One black ox, with a white cravat on - who even had to my awakened conscience something of a clerical air - fixed me so obstinately with his eyes, and moved his blunt head round in such an accusatory manner.'

**Listing:** when the writer includes several words/ phrases/ ideas, one after the other.

'A man... who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled.'

**Repetition:** when a word/ phrase is noticeably repeated throughout a sentence/ paragraph/ whole text.

'The shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn... the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged.'

**Semantic field:** a set of words that are related in meaning.

'She looked at Sarah Pocket with triumph in her weird eyes, and so I left my fairy godmother, with both her hands on her crutch stick, standing in the midst of the dimly lighted room beside the rotten bridecake that was hidden in cobwebs.'

**Motif:** a repeated image that helps to convey a theme .

'Saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her... she had been in flames... every vestige of her vest was burnt.'

### HT3 'Great Expectations' - Vocabulary List

Word	Definition	In a sentence	Synonyms
1. Impoverished	To be made poor/ deprived.	<i>The impoverished village was falling apart as the houses were glum and dishevelled.</i>	
2. Neglected	To suffer from not being cared for or looked after.	<i>The neglected child wailed in the graveyard whilst the rain poured down.</i>	
3. Solitary	To be lonely/ alone.	<i>Pip is a solitary figure when he is on the marshes at the beginning of the novel.</i>	
4. Defenceless	Without defence or protection; totally vulnerable	<i>The attack on the defenceless child was shocking to read about.</i>	
5. Petrifying	When something is so frightening that you are unable to move.	<i>When Pip meets the man in the marsh, it is a petrifying experience for him.</i>	
6. Intimidating	To have a frightening or threatening effect on something or someone.	<i>Pip's encounter with the man in the marsh was very intimidating.</i>	
7. Formidable	When you make people fearful of you through being powerful or intense.	<i>Mrs Joe is a formidable character, as shown in the way that she chooses to raise Pip.</i>	
8. Ferocious	Fierce, violent and uncontrolled; savage.	<i>He had a ferocious desire for revenge.</i>	
9. Manipulative	Having a lot of unfair/ immoral control over a person or situation.	<i>Miss Havisham is manipulative in the way that she mistreats Pip and exploits his love for Estella.</i>	
10. Eccentric	Unconventional and slightly strange behaviour, character or appearance.	<i>Her eccentric clothing drew everybody's attention.</i>	
11. Bitter	Feeling or showing anger, hurt, or resentment because of bad experiences.	<i>Miss Havisham is bitter due to her experience of being jilted at the altar.</i>	

<b>12. Supercilious</b>	Behaving as though you think yourself superior to others.	<i>Estella has a supercilious attitude towards Pip when she calls him 'boy'.</i>	
<b>13. Stern</b>	Strict and severe.	<i>Mrs Joe is particularly stern with Pip as she 'brought him up by hand'.</i>	
<b>14. Forbidding</b>	Unfriendly or threatening in appearance.	<i>Estella had a forbidding manner about her and made Pip feel intimidated in her presence.</i>	
<b>15. Victimise</b>	To single someone out for cruel or unjust treatment.	<i>Miss Havisham encourages Estella to victimise Pip by mocking and taunting him.</i>	
<b>16. Vengeful</b>	Seeking to harm someone in return for a harmful act.	<i>Miss Havisham is seen to be vengeful by hurting Pip as a consequence of her own failed love.</i>	
<b>17. Wary</b>	Feeling or showing caution about possible dangers or problems.	<i>When Pip meets Magwitch, he is extremely wary about what the convict might do to him.</i>	
<b>18. Ashamed</b>	To feel embarrassed or guilty about something you have done, something in your character or something in your background.	<i>Pip was ashamed of his humble beginnings, and yearned to make a better life for himself.</i>	
<b>19. Unsettled</b>	To feel nervous, worried and unable to relax.	<i>Pip was unsettled by the thought of leaving home, even though he wanted to become a gentleman.</i>	
<b>20. Dissatisfied</b>	To feel displeased with something; to feel that something is not as good as it should be.	<i>Dickens presents Pip a dissatisfied character, yearning for what he does not have and unable to appreciate what he does have.</i>	