

CliffsNotes.com® At a Glance for GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* tells the story of an English orphan who rises to wealth, deserts his true friends, and becomes humbled by his own arrogance. It also introduces one of the more colorful characters in literature: Miss Havisham. Charles Dickens set *Great Expectations* during the time that England was becoming a wealthy world power.

On the outskirts of London in the early 19th century, a young orphan named Pip lives with his adult sister and her husband, the blacksmith Joe Gargery. On Christmas Eve, Pip encounters an escaped convict, whom he secretly helps. Sometime later, Pip is summoned to the mansion of Miss Havisham, a clearly disturbed older woman; there he falls in love with her adopted daughter Estella. Estella does not return Pip's love, however, because she has been raised by Miss Havisham to hate all males in retribution for the fact that Miss Havisham was abandoned by her fiancé long ago.

A few years later, Pip is working as a blacksmith when the lawyer Jaggers arrives unexpectedly to announce that Pip has a rich benefactor; this rich benefactor wants Pip to go to London to learn how to be a gentleman. Pip assumes that the benefactor is Miss Havisham, and that she is grooming him to marry Estella. In London with his new friend Herbert Pocket, Pip is introduced to the finer things but lives beyond his means; also, he mistreats Joe, of whom he is now ashamed.

Written by: Charles Dickens

Type of Work: serial story turned novel

Genres: *bildungsroman*; Victorian Literature; social commentary

First Published: December 1860 - April 1861 in weekly installments to a magazine; July 1861 as a novel in 3 volumes; November 1862 as a whole novel

Setting: Early 1800s; London, England, and around the marshes of Kent

Main Characters: Pip; Joe Gargery; Magwitch; Mrs. Joe; Miss Havisham; Estella; Jaggers and Wemmick

Major Thematic Topics: good versus evil; moral redemption from sin; wealth and its equal power

to help or corrupt; personal responsibility; awareness and acceptance of consequences from one's choices; abandonment; guilt; shame; desire; secrecy; gratitude; ambition; obsession/emotional manipulation versus real love; class structure and social rules; snobbery; child exploitation; the corruption and problems of the educational and legal systems; the need for prison reform; religious attitudes of the time; the effect of the increasing trade and industrialization on people's lives; the Victorian work ethic (or lack thereof)

Motifs: sense of location; criminals; social expectations

Major Symbols: Miss Havisham's house; money

Movie Versions: *Great Expectations* (1946); *Great Expectations* (1999)

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Finally Pip discovers the identity of his benefactor: it is Abel Magwitch, the falsely-accused convict Pip helped when Pip was a boy. Magwitch earned his fortune in Australia. He is also the father of Estella, who has married the brutish Bentley Drummle. Miss Havisham dies. Pip is kidnapped by a former employee of Joe named Orlick but is saved by Herbert Pocket. They help Magwitch try to escape from England, where he is still wrongly wanted for murder, but Magwitch is caught and taken to jail, where he dies. Joe pays Pip's debts. At the novel's end, Pip and Estella reunite at the ruins of Miss Havisham's house.

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The three most important aspects of *Great Expectations*:

- *Great Expectations* is a *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. Other examples of this form include *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. *Great Expectations* is unusual in that its main character, Pip, is often hard to sympathize with because of his snobbery and the resulting bad behavior he exhibits toward some of the other characters, like Joe Gargery.
- Like much of Charles Dickens's work, *Great Expectations* was first published in a popular magazine, in regular installments of a few chapters each. Many of the novel's chapters end with a lack of dramatic resolution, which was intended to encourage readers to buy the next installment.
- Over the years since the novel's publication, many critics have objected to its happy ending, with its implication that Pip and Estella will marry; these critics have said that such a conclusion is inconsistent with the characters as we have come to know them. In fact, Dickens originally wrote an ending in which Pip and Estella meet and then part forever after a few conciliatory words.