

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Charles Dickens

Overview

Great Expectations, Dickens' thirteenth completed novel, was published, in magazine form, during 1860-1861. Entirely narrated in the first person, like *David Copperfield* (1849-50), this novel too is concerned with the development, luck, personal style, and historical setting of a person who is from the start a modest young lad, but whom fate carries to a higher status in life. The setting is the marshes of northern Kent, a dreary a dreary spot in the pestilential region, rife with mosquitoes and poverty. There is a vast cast of characters, a great deal of depiction of the toxic industrial life of the time, and an ending which testifies to Dickens' faith in the triumph of the good.

The serial publication of Dickens' vast social novels kept his contemporaries on their toes as they awaited their morning papers, and we too are putty in the hands of this master story teller who digs deeply into the social texture of his time, while directing our attentions, as the title suggests, to the uncertain fortunes of us all, when we set out to make successes of our lives in a world studded with obstacles.

Story

Pip, like Oliver Twist or the very disadvantaged son of Bob Cratchit whom Dickens introduces us to in *A Christmas Carol*, is out of that child repertoire which is amply displayed in the worlds of Dickens novels. Pip grows up uncared for on an unfriendly moor marsh, not too far from London in fact, but in reality in another world of poverty and isolation. He has in effect no friends, except for his caretakers, fairly rough and ready handyman, Joe Gargery, who likes Pip a lot in his manner, and Joe Gargery's wife, who hates Pip and wants him gone. We are used to expecting, and we are right, that the plot will around here need to be loosened up. It is!

An escaped convict has landed on the coast near Gargery's cottage; his mission is to visit the graves of his parents, which are in the neighborhood, and while he is there he accosts the young Pip, with the request for a knife and saw—he wants to cut off some shackles. Pip complies, establishing thus with the convict a bond that will reappear as the plot unfolds. That bond will initially form around Pip's will to follow the trade of Joe Gargery, the blacksmith.

It is at this point that Pip begins to discover the world outside him, which until now has been limited in size and significance, village life on what was still, first half of the nineteenth century, out of a south England that had deep roots in the most archaic English past. The *other*, this time, takes the form of a memorable spinster, who since the unhappiness of her own no-start marriage has worn only the gown that she had consecrated for her wedding day, and in a sick mindset devotes her time—for the next few years—to matching Pip and Estella, her adopted daughter, with one another. (To so doing, and yet doing more, the kind of *doing more* that in Dickens can be the part of his novel you remember best. Mrs. Haversham is not only matchmaking but also, at the same time, delighting in thwarting the relation of the two young people. Her psychological game-playing causes great stress to the love between Pip and Estella, and will have its consequences in their future story together.)

At this point, fortunately, Pip is informed that he has come into a large bequest of money, and one of the stipulations of the contract is that he must travel to London, get himself properly dressed, and become a gentleman. Assuming the support has come from Miss Haversham's direction, but not knowing for sure, Pip must assume that some scheme is underway, to arrange his future for him.

From that point on, as we can predict from a knowledge of Dickens' plots, we are going to need to fill in many blank spaces and unexplored genetic lines until we figure out who is who—quite as important as who loves who. Not surprisingly, we learn that Pip's great benefactor is the convict Magwitch, who has done heavy time in Australia, then made his way back rich to England from Egypt, and is now a gentleman benefactor. Even the coy and cunning Estella, who has been married, divorced, and broken many a heart, finds herself in love with Pip again, and the prospects for a lasting union between them are better than ever.

Themes

Moral Values A genuinely humble background, steeped in lasting moral values, can win out against negative forces, as Oliver eventually won out over vulgarity, crime, and bad manners.

Cruelty. Miss Havisham's hatred for men, after her unhappy abandonment at the altar, generates a lasting picture of cruelty. Memorable scenes, early in the novel, pit Miss Havisham's niece Estella against Pip, and reflect the viciousness of the attitudes Miss Havisham has passed on to her ward.

Generosity. Pip is kind to the convict Magwitch, when first he encounters the fugitive, trapped in leg irons, in the Kentish marshes. Magwitch repays that generosity years later, by anonymously funding Pip's large inheritance.

Characters

Pip is a standard Dickens ingenu character, born in humble circumstances, without parental support, and early in like thrown into a complex, even malevolent, social environment. We feel from the start that Pip will win out in the end, just as we had supposed that Oliver Twist would win his way out of the funeral home into the nearby Mecca of London.

Miss Haversham is a neurotic, cynical, manipulative elderly lady who has remained frozen in the age of her own unsuccessful marriage. She loves her daughter and Pip, but that love involves active delight in the conflicts between the two young people.

Stella is a sexy minx, who from the beginning enjoys teasing, flirting with, then slapping the confused Pip. All the time, as it happens, they are building an eros between them, one which in the end will survive every kind of setback and blossom as what we hope will be love.

MAIN CHARACTERS

PIP (Open)

Character Pip, an orphan whom we first meet when he is seven, is the binding thread of the whole novel, with its labyrinthine developments, and baroque selection of characters. Pip's innocence—like that of Oliver Twist or David Copperfield—makes him a perfect vehicle for perception of his world. All is new to him, and his instincts are generous, so that he naturally falls into inter relations with his fellow citizens. Like other Dickens ingénues, the three lads just mentioned, Pip is the beneficiary of unexpected luck and support, just when things look darkest. The melodrama of Pip's life is craftily staged, but aimed at the heart.

Parallels Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Tom Sawyer* (1876) both chronicle the adventures of a young Missouri kid, as he grows more or less innocently up into the adult society surrounding him. *Huckleberry Finn*, in particular, is a novel of adventure and discovery—of the roughness of the world which awaits out there, the world in which Pip found the sordid dangers of gang and malevolence. Stephen Crane's *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893) is a far heavier inquiry into street crime and sordid outcomes, but still resembles the often harsh world that innocent Pip grows up into from youth. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) conducts us through the wacky and often painful growing up stages of a maverick kid, who makes his own problems as effectively as Pip, running into problems

society and other people make for him. William Golding, in the *Lord of the Flies* (1954), takes us into a feral shipwrecked society in which young war-refugee guys, isolated on a remote island, fight each other like dogs, removing the grace of childhood just as Pip's young childhood is stolen from him

Illustrative moments

Terrified We first meet Pip in the churchyard of the village where he is raised—in the marshes of Kent. In a highly dramatic scene Pip is assaulted by a beat up escaped convict, whose desperate manner terrifies the young man. Pip is amazed by this encounter, especially when the convict—who it turns out has just escaped from a nearby prison ship—makes difficult demands, to bring food and a file, for removing leg irons, and threatens the poor kid's life. Pip knows terror, from the start. He complies, stealing the demanded items, and tries to maintain silence over the encounter.

Innocence Pip's susceptibility to get himself into trouble—which will be a consequence of his innocence throughout life—is well illustrated by his search over the moors, in the company of Joe and the police—in an effort to find the two escaped convicts. Pip has been unable, because of the convict's threats on his life, to let any of his friends know that he knows the convicts are nearby on the moor. When Pip accompanies his buddies and the police, to hunt for the convicts, he has to be sure to button his lip, and to hope that the convicts, whom he has aided, do not identify him.

Resourceful Pip is throughout his life able to grow with circumstances that present themselves. Prompted by another orphan, Biddy, who worked in the rudimentary 'evening school' in his village, Pip was able to teach himself 'letters.' 'One night I was sitting in the chimney corner with my slate, expending great efforts on a letter to Joe,' Pip's brother-in-law. With these words he announces a skill acquisition which will put him out ahead of many of his local peers, and later belong to the Pip whom chance makes into a gentleman of fashion, becomes a gentleman of fashion. Joe, who is illiterate, is impressed, and Pip picks up courage from Joe's enthused (illiterate) response.

Abused Pip's open and gentle nature makes him a natural victim of the strange concerns of Miss Havisham, a wealthy spinster, who wants a young lad to play with her adopted daughter, Estella. Pip goes in all innocence into the bizarre world of this lady, who has worn her wedding dress for decades, after having been jilted at the altar by her fiancé, and who wants Pip to help her bring happiness into Estella's life. Pip struggles to understand the motives of this elderly lady, and then of her adopted daughter, who, following her mother's view of life, is unable to reciprocate emotion, and is cold toward Pip.

Discussion questions

What is the final tone of the relation of Pip to Estella? Are they meant for each other? Has each of them changed a lot since the early days when Estella took out her sadism on him?

What kinds of encouragement does the young Pip have, to keep him going among beatings and sadistic relationships? Why is Joe Gargery so important to him throughout the novel?

What do you see as Dickens' own attitude toward Pip? Does he relate to him personally? Does he admire Pip's tenacity? Does he ever make fun of Pip?

ESTELLA (Disagreeable)

Character Estella, the adopted daughter of Miss Havisham, becomes through that lady Pip's first romantic attraction. While Estella will be less central to *Great Expectations* than is Pip, she will exercise a spell, on the entire novel, which far exceeds her prominence on the page. In fact her development, from cold young woman to experienced and twice married sophisticate, projects her image as deeply evolving, and central to the motifs of the novel; sentimentality, repression, hope. Without Estella, who remains the naïf to the end, the novel would remain touched with adolescence; Estella put the bite and sting into Dickens' tale, and through her constitutional introversion she keeps us aware of the personality traits which render her unmistakable.

Parallels Various literary characters intersect with Estella, though none coincide with this complex mixture of beset ingénue, and heartless little dominatrix; nor with the matured Estella, who never forgets

her love for Pip. One thinks, for starters, of a mystery hauntress like Keats' 'La belle dame sans merci,' 1884, who casts the cold spell of an Estella; or of Henry James' short story, 'The Turn of the Screw,' 1898, which gives a ghost story halo to the mutual fascination of two youngsters finding themselves, and one another. Truman Capote, in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, 1979, invents a cutup tomboy, Idabel Thompkins, who both plays with and defends the young protagonist Joel, in a fashion reminiscent of Estella. But none of these pairings works closely, for Dickens has invented in Estella a female who knows perfectly how to torture and to be tortured.

Illustrative moments

Haughty Stella is the adopted daughter of Miss Havisham, an 'eccentric' lady known to Pip's (the main character's) family. Estella is a beautiful but cold girl. When we first meet her she is (pretty unwillingly) complying with Miss Havisham's request that she should have a 'friend over to play.' Miss Havisham asks the two young people to 'play cards,' but Estella is totally contemptuous of her guest: 'with this boy! Why he is a common labouring-boy.' This tone of contempt will dominate all of Estella's early responses to Pip—and her view of human beings in general. She is for a long time her own closest friend, and is happiest in her own company.

Scornful Estella lives with a neurotic elderly lady, who has a 'sick fancy' that she wants to see others' play, while in fact she wants pain around her, to match her own frustrated pain. Estella's own character is sharply marked by this warped atmosphere in which she is brought up, and in which 'taking revenge on men' is the leitmotif. Thus we will find Estella moving with conscious cruelty from one man to another—although in the end it seems that Pip is the one person who is able to escape her almost total scorn. More interested in herself than in others, Estella is a hard sell when it comes to romance.

Seductive After the two adolescents have gotten to know each other, Estella initiates her learned behavior—flirtatious hostility—on the inexperienced young man. As she goes down a corridor with Pip 'she stopped all of a sudden, and facing round said in her taunting manner with her face quite close to mine: 'Well? ...'Am I pretty'...'Am I insulting?' She closes the page, on the torment of Pip, with 'you little coarse monster, what do you think of me now?' This kind of flirtation-seduction-rude rejection is classic behavior for Estella, who, it turns out, is only exercising the hostility to men which she has learned from Miss Havisham. Involved chiefly with herself, Estella is slow to find that men are not exactly what she has been told they are.

Elegant As might be expected, Estella was changeable in her moods. Sometimes she would tolerate Pip, when he came to play cards, sometimes she would be quite familiar with him, asking if he remembered the time when she had let him kiss her. After a while, with a change in the fortunes of both of the youngsters, Estella would alternately treat Pip as rubbish from her past, or as a fine developing person. Her beauty grew, in parallel with her knowledge of how to present herself, and she affected apologies for the way she had earlier behaved with Pip.

Discussion questions

At what point in Dickens' tale, do we realize that Estella is changing into a mature woman, who can relate directly to Pip?

What is driving Miss Havisham's bitter attitude toward society?

By the end of the novel, how does Estella feel about her childhood relation to Pip? Is she self-critical? Has she learned, from her introversion, finally to see herself as she is?