

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Dickens

ESTELLA (Great Expectations) (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 sophisticée, 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.

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.

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.

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?