

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Dickens

PIP (Great Expectations) (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

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.

Innocent 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.

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

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?