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FICTION: GREAT EXPECTATION - CHARLES DICKENS

ABOUT AUTHOR:

Charles John Huffam Dickens (7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870) was an English writer and social critic. He created some of the world's best-known fictional characters and is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. His works enjoyed unprecedented popularity during his lifetime, and by the 20th century, critics and scholars had recognised him as a literary genius. His novels and short stories are still widely read today.

Born in Portsmouth, Dickens left school to work in a factory when his father was incarcerated in a debtors' prison. Despite his lack of formal education, he edited a weekly journal for 20 years, wrote 15 novels, five novellas, hundreds of short stories and non-fiction articles, lectured and performed readings extensively, was an indefatigable letter writer, and campaigned vigorously for children's rights, education, and other social reforms.

In 1833 he began to publish his first literary creations under the pseudonym of Boz, without neglecting the work he did as a journalist and editor. By 1836 he married Catherine Thompson Hogarth, daughter of a newspaper editor, with whom he would have a total of ten children. In 1842, he used a trip with his wife by boat to the United States to write the book American travel notes, narrating his experiences and what he observed of the society in that trip, besides, based on this for some sections that he would write in Martin Chuzzlewit. With the intention of teaching his children the vision of the religion in which he believed he wrote approximately in the year 1849 The Life of Our Lord, narrating the life of Jesus exposed in a critical way the points in which he considers lazy of the other Judeo-Christian religions.

The short stories and his novels published by short delivery were becoming increasingly known, increasing popularity and income, which led him to fulfill one of his wishes: to be the owner of a cabin that used to travel, which apparently was related to one of **Shakespeare's** plays. Between 1837 and 1843 he published The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, The Antiques Shop, Notes of America and Christmas Song, which would be

his last texts that would have an unplanned structure. In order to increase the knowledge of talented authors who went unnoticed, he founded the Household Words magazine in 1849, in which he published his two most acclaimed works: Bleak House and Hard times. In this year he would also publish David Copperfield, which was his best-selling novel and the first in which a writer uses the word “detective”.

SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Pip, a young orphan living with his sister and her husband in the marshes of Kent, sits in a cemetery one evening looking at his parents’ tombstones. Suddenly, an escaped convict springs up from behind a tombstone, grabs Pip, and orders him to bring him food and a file for his leg irons. Pip obeys, but the fearsome convict is soon captured anyway. The convict protects Pip by claiming to have stolen the items himself.

One day Pip is taken by his Uncle Pumblechook to play at Satis House, the home of the wealthy dowager Miss Havisham, who is extremely eccentric: she wears an old wedding dress everywhere she goes and keeps all the clocks in her house stopped at the same time. During his visit, he meets a beautiful young girl named Estella, who treats him coldly and contemptuously. Nevertheless, he falls in love with her and dreams of becoming a wealthy gentleman so that he might be worthy of her. He even hopes that Miss Havisham intends to make him a gentleman and marry him to Estella, but his hopes are dashed when, after months of regular visits to Satis House, Miss Havisham decides to help him become a common laborer in his family’s business.

With Miss Havisham’s guidance, Pip is apprenticed to his brother-in-law, Joe, who is the village blacksmith. Pip works in the forge unhappily, struggling to better his education with the help of the plain, kind Biddy and encountering Joe’s malicious day laborer, Orlick. One night, after an altercation with Orlick, Pip’s sister, known as Mrs. Joe, is viciously attacked and becomes a mute invalid. From her signals, Pip suspects that Orlick was responsible for the attack.

One day a lawyer named Jaggers appears with strange news: a secret benefactor has given Pip a large fortune, and Pip must come to London immediately to begin his education as a gentleman. Pip happily assumes that his previous hopes have come true—that Miss Havisham is his secret benefactor and that the old woman intends for him to marry Estella.

In London, Pip befriends a young gentleman named Herbert Pocket and Jaggers's law clerk, Wemmick. He expresses disdain for his former friends and loved ones, especially Joe, but he continues to pine after Estella. He furthers his education by studying with the tutor Matthew Pocket, Herbert's father. Herbert himself helps Pip learn how to act like a gentleman. When Pip turns twenty-one and begins to receive an income from his fortune, he will secretly help Herbert buy his way into the business he has chosen for himself. But for now, Herbert and Pip lead a fairly undisciplined life in London, enjoying themselves and running up debts. Orlick reappears in Pip's life, employed as Miss Havisham's porter, but is promptly fired by Jaggers after Pip reveals Orlick's unsavory past. Mrs. Joe dies, and Pip goes home for the funeral, feeling tremendous grief and remorse. Several years go by, until one night a familiar figure barges into Pip's room—the convict, Magwitch, who stuns Pip by announcing that he, not Miss Havisham, is the source of Pip's fortune. He tells Pip that he was so moved by Pip's boyhood kindness that he dedicated his life to making Pip a gentleman, and he made a fortune in Australia for that very purpose.

Pip is appalled, but he feels morally bound to help Magwitch escape London, as the convict is pursued both by the police and by Compeyson, his former partner in crime. A complicated mystery begins to fall into place when Pip discovers that Compeyson was the man who abandoned Miss Havisham at the altar and that Estella is Magwitch's daughter. Miss Havisham has raised her to break men's hearts, as revenge for the pain her own broken heart caused her. Pip was merely a boy for the young Estella to practice on; Miss Havisham delighted in Estella's ability to toy with his affections.

As the weeks pass, Pip sees the good in Magwitch and begins to care for him deeply. Before Magwitch's escape attempt, Estella marries an upper-class lout named Bentley Drummle. Pip makes a visit to Satis House, where Miss Havisham begs his forgiveness for the way she has treated him in the past, and he forgives her. Later that day, when she bends over the fireplace, her clothing catches fire and she goes up in flames. She survives but becomes an invalid. In her final days, she will continue to repent for her misdeeds and to plead for Pip's forgiveness.

The time comes for Pip and his friends to spirit Magwitch away from London. Just before the escape attempt, Pip is called to a shadowy meeting in the marshes, where he encounters the vengeful, evil Orlick. Orlick is on the verge of killing Pip when Herbert arrives with a group of

friends and saves Pip's life. Pip and Herbert hurry back to effect Magwitch's escape. They try to sneak Magwitch down the river on a rowboat, but they are discovered by the police, who Compeyson tipped off. Magwitch and Compeyson fight in the river, and Compeyson is drowned. Magwitch is sentenced to death, and Pip loses his fortune. Magwitch feels that his sentence is God's forgiveness and dies at peace. Pip falls ill; Joe comes to London to care for him, and they are reconciled. Joe gives him the news from home: Orlick, after robbing Pumblechook, is now in jail; Miss Havisham has died and left most of her fortune to the Pockets; Biddy has taught Joe how to read and write. After Joe leaves, Pip decides to rush home after him and marry Biddy, but when he arrives there he discovers that she and Joe have already married.

Pip decides to go abroad with Herbert to work in the mercantile trade. Returning many years later, he encounters Estella in the ruined garden at Satis House. Drummle, her husband, treated her badly, but he is now dead. Pip finds that Estella's coldness and cruelty have been replaced by a sad kindness, and the two leave the garden hand in hand, Pip believing that they will never part again. (Note: Dickens's original ending to *Great Expectations* differed from the one described in this summary. The final Summary and Analysis section of this SparkNote provide.

CHARACTER LIST

PIP

The protagonist and narrator of *Great Expectations*, Pip begins the story as a young orphan boy being raised by his sister and brother-in-law in the marsh country of Kent, in the southeast of England. Pip is passionate, romantic, and somewhat unrealistic at heart, and he tends to expect more for himself than is reasonable. Pip also has a powerful conscience, and he deeply wants to improve himself, both morally and socially.

ESTELLA

Miss Havisham's beautiful young ward, Estella is Pip's unattainable dream throughout the novel. He loves her passionately, but, though she sometimes seems to consider him a friend, she is usually cold, cruel, and uninterested in him. As they grow up together, she repeatedly warns him that she has no heart.

MISS HAVISHAM

Miss Havisham is the wealthy, eccentric old woman who lives in a manor called Satis House near Pip's village. She is manic and often seems insane, flitting around her house in a faded wedding dress, keeping a decaying feast on her table, and surrounding herself with clocks stopped at twenty minutes to nine. As a young woman, Miss Havisham was jilted by her fiancé minutes before her wedding, and now she has a vendetta against all men. She deliberately raises Estella to be the tool of her revenge, training her beautiful ward to break men's hearts.

ABEL MAGWITCH

A fearsome criminal, Magwitch escapes from prison at the beginning of *Great Expectations* and terrorizes Pip in the cemetery. Pip's kindness, however, makes a deep impression on him, and he subsequently devotes himself to making a fortune and using it to elevate Pip into a higher social class. Behind the scenes, he becomes Pip's secret benefactor, funding Pip's education and opulent lifestyle in London through the lawyer Jaggers.

JOE GARGERY

Pip's brother-in-law, the village blacksmith, Joe stays with his overbearing, abusive wife known as Mrs. Joe solely out of love for Pip. Joe's quiet goodness makes him one of the few completely sympathetic characters in *Great Expectations*. Although he is uneducated and unrefined, he consistently acts for the benefit of those he loves and suffers in silence when Pip treats him coldly.

JAGGERS

The powerful, foreboding lawyer hired by Magwitch to supervise Pip's elevation to the upper class. As one of the most important criminal lawyers in London, Jaggers is privy to some dirty business; he consorts with vicious criminals, and even they are terrified of him. But there is more to Jaggers than his impenetrable exterior. He often seems to care for Pip, and before the novel begins he helps Miss Havisham to adopt the orphaned Estella. Jaggers smells strongly of soap: he washes his hands obsessively as a psychological mechanism to keep the criminal taint from corrupting him.

HERBERT POCKET

Pip first meets Herbert Pocket in the garden of Satis House, when, as a pale young gentleman, Herbert challenges him to a fight. Years later, they meet again in London, and Herbert becomes Pip's best friend and key companion after Pip's elevation to the status of gentleman. Herbert nicknames Pip "Handel." He is the son of Matthew Pocket, Miss Havisham's cousin, and hopes to become a merchant so that he can afford to marry Clara Barley.

WEMMICK

Jaggers's clerk and Pip's friend, Wemmick is one of the strangest characters in *Great Expectations*. At work, he is hard, cynical, sarcastic, and obsessed with "portable property"; at home in Walworth, he is jovial, wry, and a tender caretaker of his "Aged Parent."

BIDDY

A simple, kindhearted country girl, Bidley first befriends Pip when they attend school together. After Mrs. Joe is attacked and becomes an invalid, Bidley moves into Pip's home to care for her. Throughout most of the novel, Bidley represents the opposite of Estella; she is plain, kind, moral, and of Pip's own social class.

DOLGE ORLICK

The day laborer in Joe's forge, Orlick is a slouching, oafish embodiment of evil. He is malicious and shrewd, hurting people simply because he enjoys it. He is responsible for the attack on Mrs. Joe, and he later almost succeeds in his attempt to murder Pip.

MRS. JOE

Pip's sister and Joe's wife, known only as "Mrs. Joe" throughout the novel. Mrs. Joe is a stern and overbearing figure to both Pip and Joe. She keeps a spotless household and frequently menaces her husband and her brother with her cane, which she calls "Tickler." She also forces them to drink a foul-tasting concoction called tar-water. Mrs. Joe is petty and ambitious; her fondest wish is to be something more than what she is, the wife of the village blacksmith.

UNCLE PUMBLEHOOK

Pip's pompous, arrogant uncle. (He is actually Joe's uncle and, therefore, Pip's "uncle-in-law," but Pip and his sister both call him "Uncle Pumblehook.") A merchant obsessed with money, Pumblehook is responsible for arranging Pip's first meeting with Miss Havisham. Throughout the rest of the novel, he will shamelessly take credit for Pip's rise in social status, even though he has nothing to do with it, since Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is Pip's secret benefactor.

COMPEYSON

A criminal and the former partner of Magwitch, Compeyson is an educated, gentlemanly outlaw who contrasts sharply with the coarse and uneducated Magwitch. Compeyson is responsible for Magwitch's capture at the end of the novel. He is also the man who jilted Miss Havisham on her wedding day.

BENTLEY DRUMMLE

An oafish, unpleasant young man who attends tutoring sessions with Pip at the Pockets' house, Drummle is a minor member of the nobility, and the sense of superiority this gives him makes him feel justified in acting cruelly and harshly toward everyone around him. Drummle eventually marries Estella, to Pip's chagrin; she is miserable in their marriage and reunites with Pip after Drummle dies some eleven years later.

MOLLY

Jaggers's housekeeper. In Chapter 48, Pip realizes that she is Estella's mother.

MR. WOPSLE

The church clerk in Pip's country town; Mr. Wopsle's aunt is the local schoolteacher. Sometime after Pip becomes a gentleman, Mr. Wopsle moves to London and becomes an actor.

STARTOP

A friend of Pip's and Herbert's. Startop is a delicate young man who, with Pip and Drummle, takes tutelage with Matthew Pocket. Later, Startop helps Pip and Herbert with Magwitch's escape.

MISS SKIFFINS

Wemmick's beloved, and eventual wife.

THEMES

THEMES ARE THE FUNDAMENTAL AND OFTEN UNIVERSAL IDEAS EXPLORED IN A LITERARY WORK.

AMBITION AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

The moral theme of *Great Expectations* is quite simple: affection, loyalty, and conscience are more important than social advancement, wealth, and class. Dickens establishes the theme and shows Pip learning this lesson, largely by exploring ideas of ambition and self-improvement ideas that quickly become both the thematic center of the novel and the psychological mechanism that encourages much of Pip's development. At heart, Pip is an idealist; whenever he can conceive of something that is better than what he already has, he immediately desires to obtain the improvement. When he sees Satis House, he longs to be a wealthy gentleman; when he thinks of his moral shortcomings, he longs to be good; when he realizes that he cannot read, he longs to learn how. Pip's desire for self-improvement is the main source of the novel's title: because he believes in the possibility of advancement in life, he has "great expectations" about his future.

Ambition and self-improvement take three forms in *Great Expectations*—moral, social, and educational; these motivate Pip's best and his worst behavior throughout the novel. First, Pip desires moral self-improvement. He is extremely hard on himself when he acts immorally and feels powerful guilt that spurs him to act better in the future. When he leaves for London, for instance, he torments himself about having behaved so wretchedly toward Joe and Biddy. Second, Pip desires social self-improvement. In love with Estella, he longs to become a member of her social class, and, encouraged by Mrs. Joe and Pumblechook, he entertains fantasies of becoming a gentleman. The working out of this fantasy forms the basic plot of the novel; it provides Dickens the opportunity to gently satirize the class system of his era and to make a point about its capricious

nature. Significantly, Pip's life as a gentleman is no more satisfying—and certainly no more moral than his previous life as a blacksmith's apprentice. Third, Pip desires educational improvement. This desire is deeply connected to his social ambition and longing to marry Estella: a full education is a requirement of being a gentleman. As long as he is an ignorant country boy, he has no hope of social advancement. Pip understands this fact as a child, when he learns to read at Mr. Wopsle's aunt's school, and as a young man, when he takes lessons from Matthew Pocket. Ultimately, through the examples of Joe, Biddy, and Magwitch, Pip learns that social and educational improvement are irrelevant to one's real worth and that conscience and affection are to be valued above erudition and social standing.

SOCIAL CLASS

Throughout *Great Expectations*, Dickens explores the class system of Victorian England, ranging from the most wretched criminals (Magwitch) to the poor peasants of the marsh country (Joe and Biddy) to the middle class (Pumblechook) to the very rich (Miss Havisham). The theme of social class is central to the novel's plot and to the ultimate moral theme of the book—Pip's realization that wealth and class are less important than affection, loyalty, and inner worth. Pip achieves this realization when he is finally able to understand that, despite the esteem in which he holds Estella, one's social status is in no way connected to one's real character. Drummle, for instance, is an upper-class lout, while Magwitch, a persecuted convict, has a deep inner worth. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the novel's treatment of social class is that the class system it portrays is based on the post-Industrial Revolution model of Victorian England. Dickens generally ignores the nobility and the hereditary aristocracy in favor of characters whose fortunes have been earned through commerce. Even Miss Havisham's family fortune was made through the brewery that is still connected to her manor. In this way, by connecting the theme of social class to the idea of work and self-advancement, Dickens subtly reinforces the novel's overarching theme of ambition and self-improvement.

CRIME, GUILT, AND INNOCENCE

The theme of crime, guilt, and innocence is explored throughout the novel largely through the characters of the convicts and the criminal lawyer Jaggers. From the handcuffs Joe mends at the smithy to the gallows at the prison in London, the imagery of crime and criminal justice

pervades the book, becoming an important symbol of Pip's inner struggle to reconcile his own inner moral conscience with the institutional justice system. In general, just as social class becomes a superficial standard of value that Pip must learn to look beyond in finding a better way to live his life, the external trappings of the criminal justice system (police, courts, jails, etc.) become a superficial standard of morality that Pip must learn to look beyond to trust his inner conscience. Magwitch, for instance, frightens Pip at first simply because he is a convict, and Pip feels guilty for helping him because he is afraid of the police. By the end of the book, however, Pip has discovered Magwitch's inner nobility, and is able to disregard his external status as a criminal. Prompted by his conscience, he helps Magwitch to evade the law and the police. As Pip has learned to trust his conscience and to value Magwitch's inner character, he has replaced an external standard of value with an internal one.

SOPHISTICATION

In *Great Expectations*, Pip becomes obsessed with a desire to be sophisticated and takes damaging risks in order to do so. After his first encounter with Estella, Pip becomes acutely self-conscious that "I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse, that my boots were thick." Once he moves to London, Pip is exposed to a glamorous urban world "so crowded with people and so brilliantly lighted," and he quickly begins to "contract expensive habits." As a result of spending money on things like a personal servant and fancy clothes, Pip quickly falls into debt, and damages Herbert's finances as well as his own. Even more troubling, Pip tries to avoid anyone who might undermine his reputation as a sophisticated young gentleman. In the end, sophistication is revealed as a shallow and superficial value because it does not lead to Pip achieving anything, and only makes him lonely and miserable.

Education

Education functions as a force for social mobility and personal growth in the novel. Joe and Biddy both use their education to pursue new opportunities, showing how education can be a good thing. Pip receives an education that allows him to advance into a new social position, but Pip's education improves his mind without supporting the growth of his character. Biddy takes advantage to gather as much learning as she can, with Pip observing that she "learns everything I learn," and eventually becomes a schoolteacher. Biddy also teaches Joe to read and write. Pip's education does not actually provide him with practical skills or common sense, as revealed when

Pip and Herbert completely fail at managing their personal finances. Pip's emotional transformation once he learns the identity of his benefactor is what ultimately makes him into the man he wants to be, not anything he has learned in a classroom.

FAMILY

Although Pip and Estella both grow up as orphans, family is an important theme in the novel. Pip grows up with love and support from Joe, but fails to see the value of the unconditional love Joe gives him. He eventually reconciles with Joe after understanding his errors. Estella is exposed to damaging values from her adopted mother, Miss Havisham, and gradually learns from experience what it actually means to care about someone. For both characters, learning who to trust and how to have a loving relationship with family members is a major part of the growing-up process. As Estella explains at the end of the novel, "suffering has been stronger than all other teaching." Both Estella and Pip make mistakes and live with the consequences of their family histories, but their difficult family experiences also help to give them perspective on what is truly important in life.

PROTAGONIST

As the protagonist of the novel, Pip is driven by a single-minded desire: to become a gentleman in order to win Estella's heart. Pip's intelligence and ambition inform the action of other characters such as Magwitch and Miss Havisham, who both see him as a tool to achieve their own desires. Magwitch wants to see someone achieve the social progress that has been denied to him, and Miss Havisham wants to have revenge on men because of the way she has been mistreated. Pip changes a great deal over the course of the novel, becoming self-aware and conscious of the fact that people are most often a mixture of both flaws and good intentions. When Miss Havisham has been seriously injured, he "touched her lips with mine." On Magwitch's deathbed, he kisses Pip's hand. The empathy Pip eventually shows to both Miss Havisham and Magwitch, even though both of them have impeded his desires, shows that he has matured into a man capable of empathy and forgiveness.

