

# Charles dickens great expectations research paper samples

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## **The element of nostalgia in the novel**

Great Expectations is a novel that is based on elements of nostalgia. The arch typical nostalgic character is the doomed Miss Havisham, who lives in the past and cannot get over the jilting of her suitor – she leaves her crumbling house just as it was all those years ago. Pip longs for his dead parents since he is treated badly by his sister although he finds comfort in the kindly character of Joe Gargery, his sister's husband. There is also an autobiographical sense of nostalgia coming from Dickens' himself, especially with the Kent surroundings forming such an important part of the novel. In a sense, Dickens wants to go back to his youthful days in the Kent countryside with the landmark churchyards and towns now long since gone. Nostalgia is thus an important part of the novel and a consistent leitmotif that runs through the work (Lettis, Morris, p 65).

## **The start of the story**

One of Dickens' most popular novels, Great Expectations is a gripping search for identity – the narrator's self-identity and that of his mysterious benefactor. The drama is played out initially in the Kent of Pip's childhood, before moving on, along with his fortunes, to the teeming metropolis that is London.

We first encounter young Pip on a raw Christmas Eve in the local churchyard. He has been born into a difficult world in the early years of the 19th century. The graves of both his parents lie in the churchyard along with those of his five little brothers; again a whiff of nostalgia and longing is caught here. Since his first years, Pip has been left to the tender mercies of his much

older surviving sister. Among the headstones, he is lost in childish absorption grappling with his family's fate. Overwhelmed by the harsh landscape and the world he dimly perceives beyond, it is all too much for the boy and he begins to cry.

Suddenly a monstrous figure springs out of the darkness and grabs Pip violently, threatening to cut his throat if he makes any noise, upending him to shake out his pockets for any scrap of bread. The convict manages to prise out of Pip the fact that he lives nearby with his sister and her husband, the local blacksmith Joe Gargery. The convict pricks up his ears at this information since he is dragging a shackle on one leg – after all he is an escaped convict and is in need of a shackle to free his chains. Again accompanied by the most lurid threats, the convict orders Pip to return in the morning with a file and food that he refers to as 'wittles'.

Shortly after the convict incident, Pip is summoned by the reclusive Miss Havisham who lives in a forbidding mansion nearby, to play with her adopted daughter Estella, a haughty little miss who instantly captures Pip's heart while cruelly mocking him for his coarseness. Pip is astonished to find Miss Havisham clothed in a decrepit wedding dress and surrounded by the debris of a long abandoned wedding feast (Rosenberg, p 145).

### **The Miss Havisham connection**

Pip later discovers that Miss Havisham was jilted at this exact stage of preparation on her wedding day many years before. She has maintained herself and the house exactly as it was at the dreadful moment she discovered that she would not be getting married. The clocks in her room

literally stopped there and have remained so ever since. Miss Havisham's broken heart has curdled her nature utterly and she makes no secret that she is raining Estella to wreak her terrible revenge on the male sex - starting with poor Pip. The visits to Miss Havisham become a regular feature of Pip's life - these are mired in terrible and at times harrowing nostalgia. But Estella's constant taunts soon have the effect of making Pip ashamed of his lowly circumstances at Joe's forge, and even of Joe, the most decent of men and Pip's unflagging supporter throughout.

It had always been intended that Pip would take his place at Joe's side in the forge and, as he grows older, Miss Havisham brings the visits to an end, with a generous gift; she pays for Pip to be apprenticed to Joe as blacksmith.

Thus, the tables have been turned full circle and Pip has to leave the past behind for an uncertain future in his own humble circumstances (Rosenberg, p 73).

## **The Kent countryside – a source for nostalgia and Dickens' youth**

Dickens wrote Great Expectations in 1860, towards the end of his life shortly after moving his family to Gad's Hill in Kent. Gad's Hill is only a short distance from the village of Cooling, a mere stroll for a habitual walker like Dickens. From there, the bleak Cooling marshes stretch north towards the Thames. In the Cooling church are 13 little gravestones of children belonging to one family. Dickens experts believe that this sad sight gave the author the inspiration for the opening scene of the book.

Like the young Pip, Dickens also lived at nearby Chatham between the ages of five and ten. The Kent connections are furthered by basing the market

town where Miss Havisham builds her ghastly half life on Rochester, which is also near Gad's Hill. Location is always a strong element in Dickens' novels and it is clear from his vividly etched descriptions that he knew his Kent landscape intimately. It is equally obvious that Dickens also knew the London of Jaggers and the underworld through which he strides imperiously better, perhaps than any man alive.

### **The growing Pip – fame and fortune**

At the age of 18, Pip's life is turned upside down. A lawyer named Jaggers arrives from London and declares that an unknown benefactor has settled a fortune on him. He has, in short, great expectations. Pip is given no clue as to his benefactor, but he is sure that it is Miss Havisham who despite her unrelenting misanthropy has demonstrated an interest in him. Pip is also confident that she intends him to marry Estella. This conviction is strengthened by the fact that in London, to where he is immediately dispatched to prepare for his new life as a gentleman. The parallel with Dickens' life continues unabated here.

Jaggers acts as Pip's guardian in London. He is a man of fearsome reputation and manner who Pip knows handles Miss Havisham's affairs. This further reinforces his idea that it is Miss Havisham who is his benefactor. Pip is befriended by Jaggers' clerk Wemmick, and also by Herbert Pocket, the son of his tutor Matthew and a relative of Miss Havisham. He divides his time between his tutor's home on the Thames at Hammersmith and lodgings he shares with Herbert in Barnard's Inn of Chancery in Holborn. He quickly learns to become an educated young gentleman – and a snob to boot, a fact

that is painfully apparent when Joe pays him a brief visit. Pip lives an aimless life and runs into substantial debt, although his 21st birthday he gains a reasonable annual allowance. But his real fortune remains deferred, and its source remains a complete mystery to him. Like the author, Pip also has pity on the poor although his altruistic acts are few and far between.

### **Revealing the secret and a reversal of fortunes**

One rainy night, a seedy stranger arrives at Pip's door, and to Pip's horror reveals that he is the mysterious benefactor. It is the convict Magwitch who has spent the intervening years in Botany Bay, Australia, initially as a convict but latterly as an immensely prosperous farmer. Magwitch's dream of transforming Pip into a gentleman has sustained him all these years and he now wants to gaze on his handiwork. However Magwitch ends up being discovered in England to where he was supposed never to return thus cheating Pip of his fortune since this has to be forfeited to the Crown. Further details of the dark plot surrounding Pip are revealed when Compeyson, the other convict who ended up transported to Australia together with Magwitch, is revealed to be none other than the swindler who jilted Miss Havisham. Magwitch throws Compeyson into the river, and although the former survives, he is badly wounded and eventually dies.

Pip now ends up destitute, but it is the trustful Joe who comes to his rescue by paying for his debts. The novel then goes somewhat forward in time with Pip prospering modestly after having spent a decade in Egypt in partnership with Herbert Pocket. The closing scene is the apex of nostalgia, as having made his peace with Joe, he pays a last visit to Miss Havisham's house. He

had been there last shortly before the doomed escape bid with Magwitch. Back then, the old woman was remorseful for blighting Estella's life with her poisonous upbringing. Then, shortly after admitting her sorrow, Miss Havisham's wedding dress was set alight by an ember from the open fire, burning her to death. Pip managed to smother the fire but was burned himself in the process.

Now returning to the site of Miss Havisham's house, Pip finds the original building gone and the property derelict. To his astonishment, Estella is there too for the first time in all those years. She has been ruined financially by an unsuccessful marriage to a violent brute, and her suffering has altered her character much for the better. But what, if anything, the future has in store for Pip and Estella is left tantalizingly up in the air (Moynahan, p 127).

## **Dickens' and Pip's Kent**

There are several landmarks in the novel that have some connection with the Kent that Dickens knew and loved in Great Expectations. The principal landmark is St James' Church in Cooling Kent was the inspiration for the churchyard where we first met Pip lamenting the death of his parents and siblings. The forge that doubled as Joe's and eventually Pip's workplace and home was probably based at the blacksmith's in Chalk's village, Kent, a place that Dickens' is known to have visited. The civic building where Pip is bounded as an apprentice to Joe was modelled on the Guildhall in Rochester, Kent.

Perhaps the most important landmark in the whole novel is the sprawling and decaying house where Miss Havisham lived her broken dreams. This was

probably modelled on Restoration House in Rochester which gained its name as the place where King Charles II is reputed to have stayed on his way to reclaim the throne. The obsolete warships anchored in the Thames north of Kent served as floating prisons and they must have been quite numerous during Dickens' lifetime. It was from these hulks that Magwitch and Compeyson made their escape. The marshes of northern Kent were close to the home of the young Pip and his makeshift family. As a keen walker, Dickens knew them well and they provided a harsh backdrop to the early stages of the book (Rosenberg, 1984, p 67)

### **Conclusion:**

'Great Expectations' is a novel that is inextricably built on nostalgia. The grim settings of the marshland and churchyard set the tone for the book with the Miss Havisham episode demonstrating an extreme extent of living in the past. Pip is constantly returning to the scenes of his youth as he grows older and the parallels with Dickens' own life are there for all to see. Dickens was writing the novel with a lifetime of experience behind him, so it was obvious that he would insert some nostalgic autobiographical elements that took him back to his own past. The ending is also a study in nostalgia, demonstrating the power of the past on both Pip and Estella as they look to a better future as they walk out of the ruins of the house that was once their playground.

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