

Pip's unrealistic expectations in Dickens' Great Expectations

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of the most important and common tools that authors use to illustrate the themes of their works is a character that undergoes several major changes throughout the story. In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens introduces the reader to many intriguing and memorable characters, including the eccentric recluse, Miss Havisham, the shrewd and careful lawyer, Mr. Jaggers, and the benevolent convict, Abel Magwitch. However, without a doubt, *Great Expectations* is the story of Pip and his initial dreams and resulting disappointments that eventually lead to him becoming a genuinely good man. The significant changes that Pip's character goes through are very important to one of the novel's many themes. Dickens uses Pip's deterioration from an innocent boy into an arrogant gentleman and his redemption as a good-natured person to illustrate the idea that unrealistic hopes and expectations can lead to undesirable traits. In the beginning of the novel, Pip is characterized as a harmless, caring boy, who draws much sympathy from the reader even though he is at that point content with his common life. The reader most likely develops warm and sympathetic feelings toward Pip after only the first two pages of the novel, which introduce the fact that Pip's parents are "dead and buried" and that the orphan has never seen "any likeness of either of them" (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, New York, Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998, p. 1). Pip's confrontation with the convict presents his harmless, innocent nature. As Magwitch first seizes the young boy, Pip simply responds, "Oh! Don't cut my throat, sir, Ö Pray don't do it sir" (p. 2). Then, Pip is forced into submitting to the convict's demands, mainly due to his naive fear of Magwitch's fictitious companion who "has a secret way pecooliar to himself of getting at a boy,

and at his heart, and at his liver" (p. 4). Even though he aids the convict, the reader's sympathy for Pip soon increases, as his robbery of his own home weighs greatly on his conscience. For example, when Mrs. Joe leaves the Sunday dinner to retrieve the "savoury pork pie," which Magwitch had enjoyed heartily, Pip is tortured by the thought of his actions, while his mind screams, "Must they! Let them not hope to taste it!" (p. 27). He seems to sincerely regret his actions and the fact that he "had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong" (p. 40). Approximately one year after his encounter with the convict, Pip is still shown to be an innocent, caring boy. One night, when Pip and Joe are alone at the forge, Joe explains his various reasons for enduring Mrs. Joe's constant abuse. After their conversation, Pip realizes that he cares deeply for Joe and appreciates everything that the blacksmith does for him. Also, he develops "a new admiration of Joe from that night" and "a new sensation of feeling conscious that I was looking up to Joe in my heart" (p. 48). Unfortunately, as Pip develops unrealistic hopes and expectations for his life, these positive characteristics are replaced by undesirable ones. The expectations that cause Pip's character to become less likable are those that he develops after being introduced to Miss Havisham and Estella. During his first visit to the Satis House, Estella, who considers herself much too refined and well-bred to associate with a common boy, scorns Pip. On the other hand, Pip seems to fall in love with Estella during that first meeting. He even admits to Miss Havisham that he thinks her adopted daughter is not only "very proud" and "very insulting," but also "very pretty" and that he should "like to see her again" (p. 59). After just one afternoon at the Satis House, Pip develops a

desire to become more acceptable to Estella, in hopes that her callous attitude toward him would change. As a result, while walking back to the forge, Pip begins to feel ashamed of his life. His mind is filled with regretful thoughts such as “ that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way” (p. 63). Pip realizes that his personality and outlook on his life is changing as he states, “ That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me” (p. 70). When his visits to the Satis House cease and he is apprenticed to Joe, Pip becomes even more deeply ashamed of his position in society because he believes that it will ruin his hopes of Estella loving him. He constantly worries that Estella will see him at the “ unlucky hour” when he is at his “ grimest and commonest” (p. 107), but he endures his shame with an irrational hope, “ that perhaps Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune when my time was out” (p. 133). Then, when Mr. Jaggers informs Pip of the “ great expectations” that have been placed on him, Pip thinks, without a doubt, “ Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune on a grand scale” (p. 139). Also, he begins to believe that Miss Havisham has destined him to be married to Estella. Almost immediately, Pip's ego grows tremendously, and he becomes arrogant as he looks down on his “ common,” yet caring and loyal friends. For example, in a private conversation with Biddy, Pip tells his good friend that Joe “ is rather backward in some things. For instance in his learning and his manners” (p. 149). In addition, when Pip is finally ready to depart for London, he tells Joe that he “ wished to walk away all alone” because he privately fears the “ contrast there would be between me and Joe” (p. 159). As the arrogant and

ungrateful Pip continues to believe that Miss Havisham has chosen him to be the recipient of her money and, hopefully, of Estella's hand in marriage, he also continues to be ashamed of and look down on his past life. On one occasion, Pip receives word that Joe will be visiting London and would like to see him. However, Pip is not at all overjoyed to receive this news. In fact, he looks forward to Joe's visit "with considerable disturbance, some mortification, and a keen sense of incongruity," and he states that he "certainly would have paid money" in order to keep Joe away (p. 217). Pip is distraught over the prospect of others, especially Bentley Drummle, seeing him with the common blacksmith. After Joe's departure, Pip decides that he should return to the forge, but the next day, he resolves to stay at the Blue Boar Inn, rather than at his old home. His snobbish reasoning is simply, "I should be an inconvenience at Joe's; I was not expected, and my bed would not be ready" (p. 225). Then, Pip is so concerned with gaining Estella's favor that he visits Miss Havisham's home and returns to London while never stopping at the forge. The negative attitudes and traits that Pip develops as a result of his unrealistic expectations are portrayed in ways other than his view of his past life. In London, while living as a "gentleman," Pip has trouble managing his new way of life. Both he and Herbert "went on from bad to worse, in the way of increasing our debts, looking into our affairs, leaving margins, and the like exemplary transactions" (p. 287). Also, during a dinner with other gentlemen, Pip has an irrational confrontation with his nemesis, Drummle. After Drummle proposes a toast to Estella, who has allowed "the Spider" to attach himself to her, Pip loses control of his emotions and accuses him of lying. Drummle is then able to provide proof

that he has danced with Estella on several occasions, and Pip is forced to apologize for his outrageous actions. However, he and Drummle sit “snorting at one another for an hour” because Pip can “not endure the thought of her stooping to that hound” (p. 310). For many years, Pip had believed that he and Estella were destined to be married, but now his hopes and expectations are just beginning to fade. When Pip finally learns that Abel Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is his benefactor, his unrealistic expectations cease and his genuinely good nature begins to overcome the negative traits that he had developed. Also, he realizes that he was at fault for his nonrealistic hopes. During a visit to the Satis House, Pip is able to hold no harsh feelings toward Miss Havisham for the misfortunes of his life. He refuses her offer to financially compensate him for his unhappy life, and instead, he requests that she provide aid to Herbert's business situation. Then, he confesses that he can forgive her, stating, “There have been many sore mistakes; and my life has been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much to be bitter with you” (p. 400). Later, Pip revisits Miss Havisham's room to check on her and finds that she had been too close to the fire, as her aged garments are ignited in flames. Pip immediately risks his own life to save the old woman. She receives serious burns and nerve damage, but she remains alive. Pip is also seriously burned and states, “I was astonished to see that both my hands were burnt, for I had no knowledge of it through the sense of feeling” (p. 404). Pip's positive characteristics are also evident in his treatment of his benefactor, the convict Magwitch. Initially after the revelation, Pip's reaction had been one of shock, disbelief, and even repugnance. However, he realizes and somewhat

appreciates that Magwitch had tried to greatly repay him for the practically insignificant favor that Pip had provided for the convict as a child. Over time, Pip's hard feelings toward his benefactor fade, and at one point he confesses that Magwitch "was softened—indefinably, for I could not have said how, and could never afterwards recall how when I tried, but certainly" (p. 379). As he had done while saving Miss Havisham, Pip puts himself through great personal risks and inconveniences to save Magwitch. He is unsuccessful in fleeing the country with Magwitch, but his caring and devotion for the kind convict are unwavering, even though he will not receive any money after Magwitch's death. Every day, Pip visits him in the infirmary in efforts to comfort Magwitch and to make the prisoner's last days as peaceful as possible. During one visit, Pip notices, "a smile crossed his face then, and he turned his eyes on me with a trustful look, as if he were confident that I had seen some small redeeming touch in him, even so long ago as when I was a little child" (p. 461). Pip believes that his visits are somewhat cheering to Magwitch, and he goes to the infirmary every day until the convict's tranquil death which is almost a blessing. Just as Pip's feelings toward Magwitch soften, so does his attitude toward his old life after the burden of his expectations is lifted. Soon after Magwitch dies, Pip becomes seriously ill. When he recovers, he learns that Joe had traveled to London to care for him. As he continues to nurse Pip back to good health, Joe remains formal and awkward around Pip, as he had acted while visiting Pip in London several years earlier. On the other hand, Pip begins to feel as if he had never left the forge. He realizes and appreciates that "there was no change whatever in Joe. Exactly what he had been in my eyes then, he was in my eyes still; just

as simply faithful, just as simply right" (p. 472). When Joe unexpectedly leaves London to return to the forge, Pip follows him as soon as he is physically able. At the forge, Pip no longer shows any feelings of shame or arrogance because he is now content and cheerful in his old surroundings. In fact, he even requests, " Now let me go up and look at my old room Ö And then when I have eaten and drunk with you, go with me as far as the finger post, dear Joe and Biddy, before we say good-bye" (p. 484). At the conclusion of *Great Expectations*, the reader most likely finds Pip's fate acceptable and enjoyable. Earlier in his life, he had changed from an innocent, caring boy into an arrogant young man as a result of his nonrealistic hopes and expectations. However, when those expectations come to an end, so do his undesirable traits, as he is shown to be a truly good-natured person. Therefore, it is fitting that, in both of Dickens' final episodes, Pip is happy and content with his life.