

What is the significance of chapter one of 'great expectations'? essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



'Great Expectations' is well known for being a dark atmospheric novel, set in 19th century Victorian England. Dickens opens chapter one by introducing literary devices such as personification, emotive imagery, and repetition to his description. Themes of crime and social status are also involved, preparing the reader for the grimness of the novel. During the course of this book, Dickens is repeatedly referring back to various points of the first chapter, stressing the mood and description he is trying to convey. Chapter one is hence the foundation of the novel.

Dickens' craft in creating dynamic and convincing characters in his novels is reflected in 'Great Expectations' where he presents a compelling image of the central protagonist. Verbs are employed to a great extent in order to clearly highlight the description of the characters. Pip is portrayed in the first chapter as a 'small bundle of shivers'. This emphasises not only how cold, scared and insignificant he is, but his naivety and lack of confidence are also defined and thus the reader's sympathy is instinctively invoked for this character.

Dickens has shown Pip to be judgmental of the convict in the initial chapter, when he narrates, 'When the church came to itself - for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me...' It was Pip's belief that the convict could turn over a church, and by portraying this image, Dickens has further exaggerated Pip's naivety and awe of the convict. Progressing through the novel, Pip's expectations of London and his personal expectations are indicated to be poor. 'I lived in a state of chronic uneasiness'. Pip's feelings for the ungrateful and conceited way that he

treated Joe and Bidley, and the mature language he speaks prove to be the initial possibility of Pip becoming a gentleman. Through the character of Pip, Dickens shows how from infancy, the individual is oppressed, moulded and channelled into his adult identity.

The use of physical description and action coupled with narrator's judgement; the domineering and savage character of Magwitch, a persecuted convict with a deep inner self, in the first chapter is established by Dickens. Various parts of the environment are employed to clarify this savage quality. 'Growled', 'mud', 'water', 'stones', 'nettles' are all an element of the environment, indicating the convict's association with nature. Comments such as 'lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars;' are interesting, as there is no way Pip could have deciphered the cuts to be the fault of flints and briars.

This comment by Dickens enlightens the reader on the convict's means of travelling. It is subtly suggested the convict has crawled through a group of nettles, in the hope of not being seen, stressing fear. This may invoke the reader into a passing feeling of sympathy for the convict. The domineering feature in Magwitch is inaugurated when Pip 'looked most helplessly up' and Magwitch 'looked most powerfully down'. Dickens has portrayed an image of sheer size, further exaggerating the insignificance of Pip. However, language such as 'partickler' and 'pecooliar' used by Magwitch suggests his background, daily surroundings, and upbringing to be pretty much common. Dickens has the character of Magwitch unexpectedly return sometime later in the novel, to visit Pip in England. Dickens has now drawn up the character

of Magwitch to be full of compassion towards Pip. To risk your life to visit someone is a foolhardy but brave deed to do, portraying an extreme contrast to the first chapter where Magwitch relied on Pip. Dickens had completely turned the character of Magwitch around, to express love and passion for Pip.

The basis of trust between Magwitch and Pip was established in a subtle manner by the craft of Dickens at the start of the novel. 'You bring 'em to me'; Magwitch commands Pip who meekly acts as told. There were no restrictions on Pip if he desired to confide about the convict to Joe, but he held back. Magwitch, as animalistic as he seemed, had no restrictions on physically abusing Pip at knifepoint for a file and some food. Instead, he used verbal abuse in the form of overly exaggerated threats. These are used to such an extent that they could almost be seen as childish. A typical example is 'Say, Lord strike you dead if you don't!' Being a fully-grown adult, common sense alone would have indicated to Magwitch that no such action would ever take place.

This indicates Magwitch must have developed some kind of genuine feeling for Pip, and Pip in return indicates his feelings by being discreet about Magwitch, despite not even knowing his name. As a reader, it is made evident the established bond between the convict and Pip is sustained through the return of Magwitch. This is a crucial point in the novel as Pip learns the identity of his benefactor. The convict treats Pip with the greatest respect, perhaps because Pip became something he never was, which places him a class above the convict. He may have wanted Pip to become a

gentleman, to have the advantage Compeyson had. Dickens does not reveal the reason why Magwitch wanted to give Pip an opportunity to increase his position in status but it is made apparent that Magwitch dearly loves Pip. Pip, with mutual feelings speaks his final words to the convict, ' O Lord be merciful to him, a sinner'. Dickens concluded chapter fifty-six with this powerful line, indicating that despite being knowledgeable about Magwitch's history, Pip loves him.

Pip depended wholesomely upon his benefactor to make himself more educated, as it gave him the opportunity to go to London and earn a living. To this extent, the appearance of the convict became central to Pip's great expectations. Dickens held the identity of the benefactor in suspense for the majority of the book, drawing to the reader to think it was Miss Havisham. By having Magwitch as the benefactor, Dickens has surprised the reader by confirming Magwitch's love for Pip, but kept open the possibility Magwitch wanted to indicate he could give someone the opportunity Compeyson had. It may be that it was Magwitch's motive to equal himself with Compeyson, and Magwitch being Pip's benefactor has unravelled his plot to do this.

Dickens, like other social reforms, believed education to be the key of self - improvement, which was thought to be found in the city. At the time of Dickens' novel writing, 1812-1870, there was an industrial revolution, which involved a movement of people away from the countryside to work in the city. The countryside is a contrast to a bustling city with opportunities, and Dickens has used Pip to represent what the revolution may have been like. In ' Great Expectations', Dickens develops the characters in the city but to a

great extent ignores the nobility of those whose fortunes had been earned through business.

In this way, by linking the theme of social class to the idea of sheer hard work, Dickens subtly hints the novel's underlying theme of ambition and self-improvement. In the novel, Dickens has shown Pip to have many disappointments, as his expectations are not fulfilled. All that in Pip's mind should be glamorous and genteel is corrupted and tainted. From a young age, Pip profoundly expressed his views upon his own shortcomings. Dickens made this apparent when Estella remarked 'What coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!' Pip took Estella's comments to heart and kicked his 'thick' boots into a wall with dismay. This action of Pip's indicates his infatuated feelings for Estella; he aspires to be loved by Estella and does not want her to see him at his 'commonest and grimmest' in case she will 'exult over and despise him'. Pip's love for Estella is thus portraying him into possessing snobbish habits.

The idea of Pip being common is furthermore reflected when Dickens has been able to indicate how the actions at Satis House have an exaggerated effect on Pip's desire to be uncommon. 'Who let you in?' In Pip's mind, this would emphasise how much he stands out, not being able to fit in with the people at Satis House. By doing this, Dickens has supported the reader's idea of Pip's intense desire to improve in status. Pip's lack of confidence is portrayed when Pip feels he must try to excel himself in correcting his 'labouring' appearance. The picture painted of Pip is of someone thinking that

only the outside appearance counts, and with this in consideration, we can see snobbish attitudes arising in Pip.

It portrays Pip's forever low self-esteem, and in this way, there will be a circle of self-improvement where Pip feels he must improve but cannot because of his frame of mind and way of thinking. In chapter thirty-nine, the identity of Pip's benefactor is revealed; the convict that Pip first met in the churchyard when he was a child. Pip feels ruined by the taint of the convict when he learns that it is not the wealthy, upper class Miss Havisham who is his benefactor. The ambitions he had concerning elevating his social status turn out to be false, and Pip realises how awful and selfish his actions have been as he grew older and gained a fortune from an unknown benefactor. In this sense, Dickens has moulded the character of Pip from innocence through to snobbery and an understanding of genuine love, virtue, goodness, and truth.

However grand Pip's life may have turned out, the opening of 'Great Expectations' describes an 'infant' who is an orphan, unable to say his name. Dickens has drawn up a character that has never seen his mother or father, leaving the reader helpless but to offer immediate sympathies. 'I had no hope of deliverance through my all-powerful sister, who repulsed me at every turn' Pip was brought up through the terror of his only living relative, his sister. We rapidly learn that Pip's family is an abusive one and hence more sympathy is involuntarily given to him. The description given to the way Pip's sister, Mrs Joe, cuts bread uses words such as 'jammed' and 'hard and fast'. These guttural, monosyllabic words enforce the intimidating,

masculine impression of Mrs Joe on the reader. It is ironic how after torturing her little brother, Mrs Joe suffers abuse herself, becomes disabled and consequently dies.

Pip is shown to be shy with most people, but is even more so with Estella, and resents her insults of him. Moreover, none of the women in 'Great Expectations' reveal any true tenderness for Pip, and his deprivation of an affectionate maternal figure in life, combined with his lack of a tough, masculine character at home render Pip as a weak man. The lack of parents reflects upon Pip, who does not have a complete family so never has a chance of growing up in a family atmosphere. He would never experience a true bond with his mother and father, an element he longs for. Pip receives a letter informing him of Mrs Joe's death. 'That place without her, was something my mind seemed unable to compass'. Pip's life on the marshes with Joe and his sister is now lost as Mrs Joe was Pip's last living relative. Pip had started to realise his status but with Mrs Joe's death, it had now changed. Estella makes Pip aware he has no solid identity; however, Dickens uses the effect irony again when we as a reader discover that the wealthy Miss Havisham only adopted Estella, whose next of kin are both living criminals. Pip had thought of Magwitch as a father figure when in reality he was the father of the girl he loved.

The themes of 'Great Expectations' only run so smoothly because of Dickens' use of first person narrative. The clever usage of Pip, the central protagonist, gives the author an advantage of portraying the non-spoken, emotive feelings of the character with little restriction. Pip is a character in

the story that we can study, as his is the narrative voice of the novel.

Dickens, in 'Great Expectations', shows enormous skill in his control of the narrative. Without any great variation in Pip's own narrative style, a vast range of characters are introduced. This is largely achieved by allowing these characters to speak for themselves. Secondly, Pip is able to convey the viewpoint both of his younger self, from the simple child of the novel's opening to the young prig of the middle chapters, and of the mature narrator. He is merciless in exposing his faults, allowing them to appear by the honesty of his narration rather than passing judgement. Pip does pass judgement on others for good, but these judgements do not seem to the reader to be simple personal likes or dislikes; they are convincing, because they are borne out by the words and deeds of these characters.

In the opening of the book, Pip narrates, 'the small, bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry was Pip.' The author's usage of the narrator referring to himself as a second person here makes the reader stop and think, hence adding a further dimension to the scenario. Pip's self commentary mostly emphasises his negative qualities, his dishonesty and guilt. This is characteristic of Pip as a narrator throughout the novel. Despite his many admirable qualities, the strongest of which are compassion, loyalty, and conscience, Dickens chooses to constantly focus on Pip's failures and shortcomings. As the novel progresses, the theme of self-improvement, particularly economic and social self-improvement becomes more central.

Dickens convincingly depicts the oppressive sense with which guilt can lie on the young mind. His elders repeatedly tell Pip that he lacks gratitude for

them that “brought him up by hand” and that the young are ‘naturally vicious’. The child senses the injustice of such views but is denied an opportunity to dispute it, as is Joe, who correctly sees that defending Pip leads to his harsher treatment. When Magwitch forces Pip to steal from the forge, Pip believes he is guilty of a serious crime, but is unable to confide in Joe, as he wrongly fears that he will lose Joe’s love. Magwitch’s ‘confession’ to the theft and Pumblechook’s ridiculous ‘explanation’ of it further compound Pip’s dilemma. As Magwitch appears in the novel’s first pages, the reader understands what Pip only observes, the man is an escaped convict who has suffered great hardship.

Pip sees Magwitch only twice more, before his wholly unexpected return some sixteen years later, and yet Magwitch has been the unseen influence in Pip’s life. After receiving his mysterious fortune, his idealistic wishes seem to have been justified, and he gives himself over to a gentlemanly life of idleness. Pip, as the narrator, judges his own past actions extremely harshly, rarely giving himself credit for the good deeds but angrily castigating himself for the bad ones. Again, this only works so well because of the first person narration. Through this, Dickens can easily portray Pip’s character to perceive the world rather narrowly, and have a tendency to oversimplify situations based on a superficial standard of value, leading him to behave badly towards those who care about him.

Further on in the novel, Pip shows remorse about his snobbish attitude towards Joe and Biddy. He had forgotten his roots and become a snob, deciding to stay at the local pub rather than with Joe. When finally deciding

to reside with them, Pip speaks to Joe and reveals his change of heart when he entreats to Joe, ' For God's sake, give me your blackened hand!' Pip is clearly portraying himself as a gentleman who has not abandoned his roots and still values their friendship. Dickens is indicating for the first time, Pip is beginning to see through superficial appearances to the fine man beneath, whereas in his snobbish frame of mind, Pip had lost himself, his upbringing and his social class.

As Dickens examines issues of social class in Great Expectations, he also reveals an interest in crime. Crime and its punishment there on is directly related to the criminals social status. ' And when we're sentenced, aint it him that gets seven years and me fourteen'. A theme of prejudice is reflected here against Magwitch for simply coming from a comparatively unprivileged background than Compeyson, who appears to have faired better. Molly is another example of crime and punishment. Being exhibited as an animal, she was forced to show her disfigured scarred wrists that have power to kill, to the guests. A link to chapter one is suggested in the means of violence where Magwitch was strangling Pip. In this way, Dickens criticises the punishments given and the unfairness carried for the judicial systems when creating laws little favourable for the poor. At the same time, he points out Victorian hypocrisy of the rich and the lack of culture of the poor regarding the world of criminality.

Compeyson's appearance helped him in a case against Magwitch. ' To judge from appearances, you're out of luck'. In the trial, this was very evident.

Although Compeyson had been the worst of the two in their crime, Magwitch

' noticed how heavily it all bore on me, and how light on him'. In this illusion of social class, one horrible, wealthy man is placed above a good-hearted one of limited means because of the false upper-class appearance. In chapter one, Magwitch depicts Compeyson to scare Pip, but ironically, Compeyson was actually there.

The settings of ' Great Expectations' have an important bearing on the storyline, echoing the characters personality and circumstance. From the bleak and stereotypical graveyard that gives the novel an initial tense feeling, and the humble blacksmiths that act as a platform for Pip's expectations, to much of the grander scenery in London, Dickens has portrayed his ability to make subtle comparisons and relationships between story and setting. The initial scene between Pip and Magwitch is sensational because of the strongly sensed undercurrent of violence and menace below the humorous, initially tranquil surface of the isolated, ' dark flat wilderness'. ' The river was just another horizontal line not nearly so broad or so black, and the sky was just a row of angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed.' Dickens has employed the use of pathetic fallacy here, comparing the dark, blurred surroundings to Pip's dark and blurred thoughts about the convict. The setting has objects and points, such as a ' gibbet' which are concentrated points of fear for Pip.

This illustrates Pip merging the convict and the gibbet from two individual points of fear into one terrifying illusion. The various settings of ' Great Expectations' always set the tone of the action and reinforce Pip's perception of his situation. Dickens' craft has left the settings reflecting Pip's moods and

hopes, which profoundly affects his state of thought. This is made apparent through Pip's experiences of suffering and torture, both physically and mentally at the hands of his sister. These experiences are reflective of the surroundings being rough, uncultured and amplified by his later experiences at Satis House. It is when Pip makes it clear that his hunger to become a noble and well-educated gentleman would not be established in Rochester, the need for a different, wealthier setting becomes apparent. The gleaming metropolis Pip had wished for in London was non-existent, disappointing him, however, it was not Pip's state of mind that was affected or represented, but the immediate surroundings.

' While I was scared by the immensity of London, I think I might have had some faint doubts whether it was not rather ugly, crooked, narrow, and dirty.' Pip had expected it to be the world, the beginning of a new future, and the start of a new life. However, Dickens paints a scene that does not meet up with Pip's anticipated expectations, portraying it to be dreary and dismal. Furthermore, Miss Havisham's state of mind and existence is well projected by the bizarreness of her surroundings, in particular the rotting wedding cake on the table on which she wishes her dead body to be placed and her relatives to feast upon her own flesh.

The tainted chambers in which she resides equal these insane ideas. Satis House is a perfect reflection of Miss Havisham's living death. The once luxurious house had been allowed to decay around her. Inside, all daylight is excluded. It is a place of darkness, of decay, of fungus and of spiders. Pip likens Miss Havisham's wedding-dress to grave-clothes and her veil to a

shroud. 'Are you not afraid of a woman who has not seen the light of day since before you were born?' Through Pip's narration, the reader has an insight into Miss Havisham's 'lair'. This setting compliments the eerie, withdrawn character of Miss Havisham. The vivid set presented by Dickens seems quite stereotypical of how the dwellings of a mentally infirm person may be, adding to the effectiveness of the description of Satis House.

In these melodramatic settings, Dickens occasionally creates an atmosphere of violence, stirring the reader's emotions effectively. Death by drowning is a horrible end, which Dickens reserves for some of his worst villains, (Bradley Headstone in 'Our Mutual Friend'). Dickens knows that there are always obstacles to be overcome in the fulfilment of 'Great Expectations' and that those obstacles must sometimes be overcome violently. Mrs Joe, in her refusal to see anything at all in Pip, was an obstacle to great expectations, and therefore she had to go. Pip, who childishly believes that achievement and status will be conferred upon him, without any effort on his part, cannot bring her to harm. Orlick puts into effect Pip's fantasy of vengeance. 'You done it; now you pays for it'. This is leading Pip into assuming her death is his responsibility 'I became aware of my sister- lying without sense or movement on the bare boards where she had been knocked down by a tremendous blow on the back of her head'. In this way, Dickens has acknowledged fantasies of violent revenge in 'Great Expectations'.

Dickens' novels are classics. His writings are of quality and substance, which we study from a literary point of view. The sheer depth of both plot and character in all of Dickens' novels have a great impact to the readers and

other authors. It is through the use of characterisation and imagery that Dickens is able to make his ideas most prominent in the minds of readers, signifying chapter one to be the core of the novel. In 'Great Expectations', his expert use of these authorial techniques allow Dickens to successfully criticise the prison system, the morals of society, and the social injustice of his time, making this novel to be one of the most greatest works of Victorian fiction.