

# Great expectations by charles dickens | summary and analysis



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Charles Dickens wrote his enduringly popular novel, *Great Expectations*, between December 1860 and September 1861. As was usual for this most prolific of novelists, the book was first published in serial form, and the instalments would be as eagerly awaited as the 'soap operas' of today. This novel, however, contains an interesting and informative retrospective by the author on aspects of his life, hidden from even those closest to him, which he had first addressed in the painfully autobiographical *David Copperfield* some ten years earlier (a difficult decade for Dickens in his personal life) and to some extent alters the perception of himself which Dickens had there vicariously presented.

The intricate plot of *Great Expectations* surrounds the life of an orphaned boy, Pip, who is brought up 'by hand' by his rather cruel sister and her kindly husband, Joe, the local blacksmith, to whom Pip turns for the only affection available. He sees Joe less as a father-figure than 'a larger species of child, and as no more than my equal' and this rather telling reference to 'equality' is to be one of the major themes of the book, i. e. Victorian class-consciousness and notions of what constitutes a 'gentleman'. (One of the reasons Dickens chose, in fact to write the book was to redress the imbalance he felt he had created in the earlier creation of the 'gentleman' Copperfield and his snobbery towards the lads with whom he was compelled to work in the factory to which he had been consigned; Dickens had suffered a similar fate as a child and never spoke of it though he never forgot it.).

Pip's encounter at the beginning of the novel, in the graveyard where his parents are buried and from the stones of which he gains his only sense of self, with the terrifying convict, Magwitch, whom he is compelled to help yet

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for whom he feels compassion, is quickly followed by his being called to 'play' by the enigmatically grotesque Miss Havisham, shrouded in her wedding gown and frozen in time as a result of her being jilted, and this juxtaposition has much importance as the plot progresses, clearly foreshadowing the later unravelling of the mystery of Pip's benefactor. It is at Miss Havisham's house that Pip meets and falls instantly in love with her ward, the beautiful and distant Estella, whose name, with its link to 'star', is emblematic of both these characteristics. Chiefly because of this fateful meeting and Estella's 'disdain' of his social class, Pip decides he 'want[s] to be a gentleman'. This, significantly, he confides only to Biddy whom Dickens makes clear he should have married but his obsession with Estella obscures his vision on this as so much else, until it is too late. The plot advances significantly when Pip is told, by the sudden arrival of the lawyer, Jaggers, that he is to be the recipient of funds from an unknown benefactor which will make his dream come true and so begins the London phase of his life where he meets the amiable Herbert Pocket and his feckless family, the amusing and shrewd clerk, Wemmick, and re-encounters Estella.

Pip is naturally encouraged by both circumstance and history to believe that it is Miss Havisham who is his benefactor but in fact, it is Magwitch, the convict, he helped as a child, who is making him into a gentleman, as he learns when Magwitch suddenly appears, and this dislocation of origins adds to Dickens' development of the central theme of gentility. In fact, the true gentleman of the book is Joe, as Pip ultimately realises.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens is attempting to write both a mystery story, influenced by his friend Wilkie Collins' success with the genre, and to <https://assignbuster.com/great-expectations-by-charles-dickens-summary-and-analysis/>

examine the nature of what makes a man the object of respect and admiration. By making Pip want to 'climb the ladder' he is investigating the way in which Victorian society operated: more on wealth and station than worth. He was, indeed, ambivalent even about the ending to the novel, wanting at first to have Pip emphatically destined *not* to marry Estella:

I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.

Clearly, here, Dickens intends that Pip and Estella should part and the only hopeful resolution is in her apparent change. Nevertheless, the astute author changed his mind because he wanted to please his audience rather than himself, and qualified the certainty of separation in the original by offering at least the possibility of their marriage in his revision:

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw the shadow of no parting from her.

The significance of the difference, notwithstanding the employment by the author of one of his favourite words, 'shadow', is that it is optimistically inconclusive but the disparity between the two endings clearly defines the author's own increasingly embittered view of life. True, the couple depart the 'ruined place', an emblem of the wreckage of their shared past, but the '

mists' remain to obscure the certainty of unbounded happiness present in the 'tranquil light'.

Part of the enduring appeal of *Great Expectations* is to be found in its author's power perpetually to please and the evidence is in this willingness to adapt his own directives to those of his audience. The vivacity of the characters, the twists and turns of the plot and the intensely personal style of the first person narrative all combine to make Dickens' 'mystery novel' a book which continues to engage fresh generations of readers.

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