Context

Many of the events from Dickens’s early life are mirrored in Great Expectations, which, apart from David Copperfield, is his most autobiographical novel. Pip, the novel’s protagonist, lives in the marsh country, works at a job he hates, considers himself too good for his surroundings, and experiences material success in London at a very early age, exactly as Dickens himself did. In addition, one of the novel’s most appealing characters, Wemmick, is a law clerk, and the law, justice, and the courts are all important components of the story.

Great Expectations is set in early Victorian England, a time when great social changes were sweeping the nation. The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had transformed the social landscape, enabling capitalists and manufacturers to amass huge fortunes. Although social class was no longer entirely dependent on the circumstances of one’s birth, the divisions between rich and poor remained nearly as wide as ever. London, a teeming mass of humanity, lit by gas lamps at night and darkened by black clouds from smokestacks during the day, formed a sharp contrast with the nation’s sparsely populated rural areas. More and more people moved from the country to the city in search of greater economic opportunity. Throughout England, the manners of the upper class were very strict and conservative: gentlemen and ladies were expected to have thorough classical educations and to behave appropriately in innumerable social situations.

These conditions defined Dickens’s time, and they make themselves felt in almost every facet of Great Expectations. Pip’s sudden rise from country laborer to city gentleman forces him to move from one social extreme to another while dealing with the strict rules and expectations that governed Victorian England. Ironically, this novel about the desire for wealth and social advancement was written partially out of economic necessity. Dickens’s magazine, All the Year Round, had become extremely popular based on the success of works it had published in serial, such as his own A Tale of Two Cities and Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White. But it had experienced a decline in popularity after publishing a dull serial by Charles Lever called A Day’s Ride. Dickens conceived of Great Expectations as a means of restoring his publication’s fortunes. The book is still immensely popular a century and a half later.

In form, Great Expectations fits a pattern popular in nineteenth-century European fiction: the bildungsroman, or novel depicting growth and personal development, generally a transition from boyhood to manhood such as that experienced by Pip. The genre was popularized by Goethe with his book Wilhelm Meister (1794–1796) and became prevalent in England with such books as Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, and Dickens’s own David Copperfield. Each of these works, like Great Expectations, depicts a process of maturation and self-discovery through experience as a protagonistmoves from childhood to adulthood.

Plot Overview

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 provides a description of the first ending and explains

Why Dickens rewrote it.)

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 toconsider 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 (“The Convict”) – 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 mech-anism 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, Biddy first befriends Pip when they attend

School together. After Mrs. Joe is attacked and becomes an invalid, Biddy moves into Pip’s

Home to care for her. Throughout most of the novel, Biddy 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 Pumblechook – 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 Pumblechook.”)

A merchant obsessed with money, Pumblechook 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.

Analysis of Major Characters

Pip

As a bildungsroman, Great Expectations presents the growth and development of a single

Character, Philip Pirrip, better known to himself and to the world as Pip. As the focus of the

Bildungsroman, Pip is by far the most important character in Great Expectations: he is both

The protagonist, whose actions make up the main plot of the novel, and the narrator, whose

Thoughts and attitudes shape the reader’s perception of the story. As a result, developing an

Understanding of Pip’s character is perhaps the most important step in understanding Great

Expectations.

Because Pip is narrating his story many years after the events of the novel take place, there

Are really two Pips in Great Expectations: Pip the narrator and Pip the character—the voice

Telling the story and the person acting it out. Dickens takes great care to distinguish the two

Pips, imbuing the voice of Pip the narrator with perspective and maturity while alsoimparting how Pip the character feels about what is happening to him as it actually

Happens. This skillfully executed distinction is perhaps best observed early in the book,

When Pip the character is a child; here, Pip the narrator gently pokes fun at his younger self,

But also enables us to see and feel the story through his eyes.

As a character, Pip’s two most important traits are his immature, romantic idealism and his

Innately good conscience. On the one hand, Pip has a deep desire to improve himself and

Attain any possible advancement, whether educational, moral, or social. His longing to

Marry Estella and join the upper classes stems from the same idealistic desire as his longing

To learn to read and his fear of being punished for bad behavior: once he understands ideas

Like poverty, ignorance, and immorality, Pip does not want to be poor, ignorant, or

Immoral. Pip the narrator judges his own past actions extremely harshly, rarely giving

Himself credit for good deeds but angrily castigating himself for bad ones. As a character,

However, Pip’s idealism often leads him to perceive the world rather narrowly, and his

Tendency to oversimplify situations based on superficial values leads him to behave badly

Toward the people who care about him. When Pip becomes a gentleman, for example, he

Immediately begins to act as he thinks a gentleman is supposed to act, which leads him to

Treat Joe and Biddy snobbishly and coldly.

On the other hand, Pip is at heart a very generous and sympathetic young man, a fact that

Can be witnessed in his numerous acts of kindness throughout the book (helping Magwitch,

Secretly buying Herbert’s way into business, etc.) and his essential love for all those who

Love him. Pip’s main line of development in the novel may be seen as the process of

Learning to place his innate sense of kindness and conscience above his immature idealism.

Not long after meeting Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip’s desire for advancement largely

Overshadows his basic goodness. After receiving his mysterious fortune, his idealistic

Wishes seem to have been justified, and he gives himself over to a gentlemanly life of

Idleness. But the discovery that the wretched Magwitch, not the wealthy Miss Havisham, is

His secret benefactor shatters Pip’s oversimplified sense of his world’s hierarchy. The fact

That he comes to admire Magwitch while losing Estella to the brutish nobleman Drummle

Ultimately forces him to realize that one’s social position is not the most important quality

One possesses, and that his behavior as a gentleman has caused him to hurt the people who

Care about him most. Once he has learned these lessons, Pip matures into the man who

Narrates the novel, completing the bildungsroman.

Estella

Often cited as Dickens’s first convincing female character, Estella is a supremely ironic

Creation, one who darkly undermines the notion of romantic love and serves as a bitter

Criticism against the class system in which she is mired. Raised from the age of three by

Miss Havisham to torment men and “break their hearts,” Estella wins Pip’s deepest love by

Practicing deliberate cruelty. Unlike the warm, winsome, kind heroine of a traditional love

Story, Estella is cold, cynical, and manipulative. Though she represents Pip’s first longed-

For ideal of life among the upper classes, Estella is actually even lower-born than Pip; as

Pip learns near the end of the novel, she is the daughter of Magwitch, the coarse convict,

And thus springs from the very lowest level of society.Ironically, life among the upper classes does not represent salvation for Estella. Instead,

She is victimized twice by her adopted class. Rather than being raised by Magwitch, a man

Of great inner nobility, she is raised by Miss Havisham, who destroys her ability to express

Emotion and interact normally with the world. And rather than marrying the kindhearted

Commoner Pip, Estella marries the cruel nobleman Drummle, who treats her harshly and

Makes her life miserable for many years. In this way, Dickens uses Estella’s life to

Reinforce the idea that one’s happiness and well-being are not deeply connected to one’s

Social position: had Estella been poor, she might have been substantially better off.

Despite her cold behavior and the damaging influences in her life, Dickens nevertheless

Ensures that Estella is still a sympathetic character. By giving the reader a sense of her inner

Struggle to discover and act on her own feelings rather than on the imposed motives of her

Upbringing, Dickens gives the reader a glimpse of Estella’s inner life, which helps to

Explain what Pip might love about her. Estella does not seem able to stop herself from

Hurting Pip, but she also seems not to want to hurt him; she repeatedly warns him that she

Has “no heart” and seems to urge him as strongly as she can to find happiness by leaving

Her behind. Finally, Estella’s long, painful marriage to Drummle causes her to develop

Along the same lines as Pip—that is, she learns, through experience, to rely on and trust her

Inner feelings. In the final scene of the novel, she has become her own woman for the first

Time in the book. As she says to Pip, “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching. . .

. I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape.”

Miss Havisham

The mad, vengeful Miss Havisham, a wealthy dowager who lives in a rotting mansion and

Wears an old wedding dress every day of her life, is not exactly a believable character, but

She is certainly one of the most memorable creations in the book. Miss Havisham’s life is

Defined by a single tragic event: her jilting by Compeyson on what was to have been their

Wedding day. From that moment forth, Miss Havisham is determined never to move

Beyond her heartbreak. She stops all the clocks in Satis House at twenty minutes to nine,

The moment when she first learned that Compeyson was gone, and she wears only one shoe,

Because when she learned of his betrayal, she had not yet put on the other shoe. With a kind

Of manic, obsessive cruelty, Miss Havisham adopts Estella and raises her as a weapon to

Achieve her own revenge on men. Miss Havisham is an example of single-minded

Vengeance pursued destructively: both Miss Havisham and the people in her life suffer

Greatly because of her quest for revenge. Miss Havisham is completely unable to see that

Her actions are hurtful to Pip and Estella. She is redeemed at the end of the novel when she

Realizes that she has caused Pip’s heart to be broken in the same manner as her own; rather

Than achieving any kind of personal revenge, she has only caused more pain. Miss

Havisham immediately begs Pip for forgiveness, reinforcing the novel’s theme that bad

Behavior can be redeemed by contrition and sympathy.

Themes

Ambition and Self-ImprovementThe 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 infavor 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.

Motifs

Doubles

One of the most remarkable aspects of Dickens’s work is its structural intricacy and

Remarkable balance. Dickens’s plots involve complicated coincidences, extraordinarily

Tangled webs of human relationships, and highly dramatic developments in which setting,

Atmosphere, event, and character are all seamlessly fused.

In Great Expectations, perhaps the most visible sign of Dickens’s commitment to intricate

Dramatic symmetry—apart from the knot of character relationships, of course—is the

Fascinating motif of doubles that runs throughout the book. From the earliest scenes of the

Novel to the last, nearly every element of Great Expectations is mirrored or doubled at

Some other point in the book. There are two convicts on the marsh (Magwitch and

Compeyson), two invalids (Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham), two young women who interest

Pip (Biddy and Estella), and so on. There are two secret benefactors: Magwitch, who gives

Pip his fortune, and Pip, who mirrors Magwitch’s action by secretly buying Herbert’s way

Into the mercantile business. Finally, there are two adults who seek to mold children after

Their own purposes: Magwitch, who wishes to “own” a gentleman and decides to make Pip

One, and Miss Havisham, who raises Estella to break men’s hearts in revenge for her own

Broken heart. Interestingly, both of these actions are motivated by Compeyson: Magwitch

Resents but is nonetheless covetous of Compeyson’s social status and education, which

Motivates his desire to make Pip a gentleman, and Miss Havisham’s heart was brokenwhen Compeyson left her at the altar, which motivates her desire to achieve revenge

Through Estella. The relationship between Miss Havisham and Compeyson—a well-born

Woman and a common man—further mirrors the relationship between Estella and Pip.

This doubling of elements has no real bearing on the novel’s main themes, but, like the

Connection of weather and action, it adds to the sense that everything in Pip’s world is

Connected. Throughout Dickens’s works, this kind of dramatic symmetry is simply part of

The fabric of his novelistic universe.

Comparison of Characters to Inanimate Objects

Throughout Great Expectations, the narrator uses images of inanimate objects to describe

The physical appearance of characters—particularly minor characters, or characters with

Whom the narrator is not intimate. For example, Mrs. Joe looks as if she scrubs her face

With a nutmeg grater, while the inscrutable features of Mr. Wemmick are repeatedly

Compared to a letter-box. This motif, which Dickens uses throughout his novels, may

Suggest a failure of empathy on the narrator’s part, or it may suggest that the character’s

Position in life is pressuring them to resemble a thing more than a human being. The latter

Interpretation would mean that the motif in general is part of a social critique, in that it

Implies that an institution such as the class system or the criminal justice system

Dehumanizes certain people.

Symbols

Satis House

In Satis House, Dickens creates a magnificent Gothic setting whose various elements

Symbolize Pip’s romantic perception of the upper class and many other themes of the book.

On her decaying body, Miss Havisham’s wedding dress becomes an ironic symbol of death

And degeneration. The wedding dress and the wedding feast symbolize Miss Havisham’s

Past, and the stopped clocks throughout the house symbolize her determined attempt to

Freeze time by refusing to change anything from the way it was when she was jilted on her

Wedding day. The brewery next to the house symbolizes the connection between

Commerce and wealth: Miss Havisham’s fortune is not the product of an aristocratic birth

But of a recent success in industrial capitalism. Finally, the crumbling, dilapidated stones of

The house, as well as the darkness and dust that pervade it, symbolize the general decadence

Of the lives of its inhabitants and of the upper class as a whole.

The Mists on the Marshes

The setting almost always symbolizes a theme in Great Expectations and always sets a

Tone that is perfectly matched to the novel’s dramatic action. The misty marshes near Pip’s

Childhood home in Kent, one of the most evocative of the book’s settings, are used several

Times to symbolize danger and uncertainty. As a child, Pip brings Magwitch a file and food

In these mists; later, he is kidnapped by Orlick and nearly murdered in them. Whenever Pip

Goes into the mists, something dangerous is likely to happen. Significantly, Pip must go

Through the mists when he travels to London shortly after receiving his fortune, alerting thereader that this apparently positive development in his life may have dangerous consequences.

Bentley Drummle

Although he is a minor character in the novel, Bentley Drummle provides an important contrast with Pip and represents the arbitrary nature of class distinctions. In his mind, Pip has connected the ideas of moral, social, and educational advancement so that each depends on the others. The coarse and cruel Drummle, a member of the upper class, provides Pip with proof that social advancement has no inherent connection to intelligence or moral worth. Drummle is a lout who has inherited immense wealth, while Pip’s friend and brother-in-law Joe is a good man who works hard for the little he earns. Drummle’s negative example helps Pip to see the inner worth of characters such as Magwitch and Joe, and eventually to discard his immature fantasies about wealth and class in favor of a new understanding that is both more compassionate and more realistic.