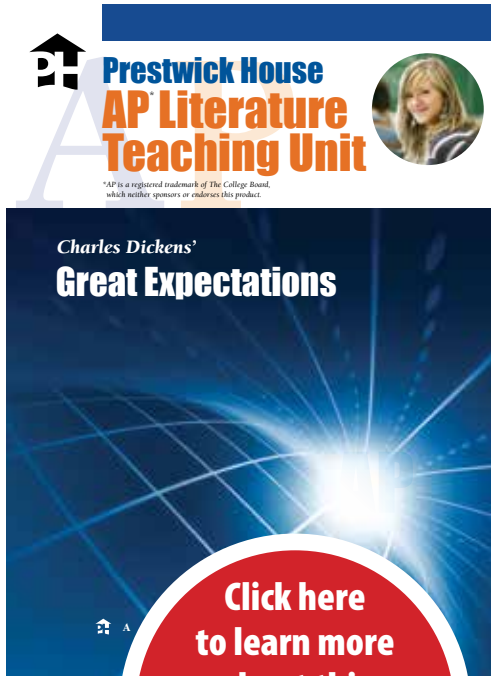




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Teaching Unit

# Great Expectations

by Charles Dickens

Written by Douglas Grudzina



# Prestwick House

Item No. 300411

# Great Expectations

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. analyze the characters of Pip, Miss Havisham, Estella, and Magwitch and their relationships to each other.
2. investigate the various notions of the Victorian gentleman.
3. explain the impact of a first person protagonist narrator on the story.
4. discuss the techniques Dickens uses to convey character and character relationships to his reader.
5. discuss Dickens's use of humor, pathos, and occasionally bathos.
6. analyze the importance of literary elements like irony and foreshadowing on the development of the plot.
7. analyze how Dickens creates suspense, especially at the end of serialized sections of the book.
8. identify and explain Dickens's social themes as expressed in this book.
9. examine characters and character relationships from a variety of literary positions.
10. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
11. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
12. offer a close reading of *Great Expectations* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

## Lecture Notes

### CHARLES DICKENS AND HIS TIMES

Born in 1812, Charles Dickens was forty-eight in 1860 when he wrote *Great Expectations*. He had separated from his wife Catherine in 1858, and was haunted by rumors of infidelity that he staunchly denied. A year before the separation, however, he had met an 18-year-old actress named Ellen Ternan with whom he was infatuated. It was revealed sixty-five years after Dickens's death that he and Ellen had maintained a secret relationship from their meeting until his death in 1870. The exact nature of this relationship is still debated, but many historians suggest that if Dickens's passion for Ellen was unrequited, she may in fact have been the basis for Pip's unattainable love, Estella.

### THE CORN LAWS

Between 1815 – 1846, Parliament had enacted a series of laws strictly regulating the import of foreign corn (a general name used for all grains) until domestic (British) corn reached a particular price.

The laws exceedingly favored the wealthy landowners who were profiting from the artificially high cost of corn produced on their land (and from the subsequent increase in the value of their land). However, the laws were disastrous for the poor, especially the urban poor, who found themselves barely able to afford bread and other grain products. By ripple effect, as the poor and working classes found the greater proportion of their wages going to food, they had less money for other goods. Manufacturing suffered, and factory owners found themselves laying off workers. These newly unemployed workers were less able to buy food, or other goods, and the British economy spiraled toward depression until 1846 when the Corn Laws were finally repealed.

### SOCIAL CLASS AND THE GENTLEMAN

The nineteenth century in England was a time of rapid, often confusing, and occasionally violent social change. While wealth had traditionally been measured by land ownership, the eighteenth century had begun a trend toward a cash-based economy, and the industrial revolution created a middle class that was in many ways more economically powerful than their landowning superiors.

As the economic power of the middle class grew, so too did its demand for political power. With the increase in political influence then came the demand for social acceptance. The concept of the gentleman had to evolve and became, by mid-century, a confusing ideal for the Victorians themselves.

On the one hand, a gentleman was a gentleman by right of birth. Still, the highly moral Victorians were quick to point out that birth alone could not make a gentleman. There had to be something in the man's character that contributed to his status.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What indications are there throughout the book of Pip's kindness and compassion?
2. List four coincidences in the novel, which must be accepted by the reader in order for the story to be believed.
3. Is Estella a static or a dynamic character? Explain your answer with support and illustrations from the text.
4. Discuss the role of each of the male influences or father figures in Pip's life: Joe, Jaggers, Matthew Pocket, Abel Magwitch.
5. Some critics believe that the women featured in Dickens' works are either evil, comical, or the epitome of his ideal of romantic love. Into which of these categories do you think the following characters might fall: Estella, Mrs. Joe, Mrs. Pocket, Miss Havisham, Bidley?
6. Support or refute the following statement by citing incidents from the story: Money is necessary for a person to live a happy life but does not, in itself, guarantee happiness.
7. Reread the endings of the chapters in the book. Which ones are most likely endings of weekly installments? Explain each choice.
8. Discuss Dickens's use of light and dark as symbols in the story. Find an example of this symbol in each of the three parts of the book.
9. What do you think is Dickens's definition of a proper gentleman?
10. Why do you think the following couples decide to marry? What do these marriages suggest that Dickens felt about marriage?
  - Herbert and Clara
  - Wemmick and Miss Skiffins
  - Bidley and Joe
  - Drummle and Estella
11. Research the justice and penal systems of nineteenth-century Britain.
12. How was the social class system structured in nineteenth-century Britain? How easy was it to move from one social class to another? What would be required for such a move?

# Great Expectations

## Part I

### Chapter I

#### Vocabulary

**beacon** – a signal or guidance device like a lighthouse  
**bleak** – exposed and barren; desolate; gloomy  
**derived** – taken from, received, or obtained from a source  
**elude** – evade or escape from by cunning or strength  
**explicit** – fully expressed; leaving nothing implied  
**inscription** – wording, dates, etc., carved or engraved on a coin, stone, book, etc.  
**lair** – den of a wild animal  
**leaden** – made of lead; gray or heavy like lead  
**pollards** – trees cut back so that the lower branches are removed and the crown or upper branches form a decorative ball  
**ravenous** – extremely hungry  
**stout** – bulky; strong; sturdy  
**vivid** – creating a strong or clear impression on the senses

1. How does Dickens begin his story?

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2. What narrative point of view has Dickens chosen for this novel?

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3. What can the reader expect in a story told from this point of view?

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3. What do we learn about Mr. Wopsle?

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4. How are Biddy and Pip alike?

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5. Why did Joe not learn to read as a child? What made him marry Pip's sister?

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6. Compare Joe's dialect with the convict's in Chapter I.

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7. What might Dickens be suggesting by having Joe and the convict use such similar dialects?

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8. What does Dickens accomplish at the end of this chapter?

“... what with my feelings and what with soap-suds, I could at first see no stars from the chaise-cart. But they twinkled out one by one, without throwing any light on the questions why on earth I was going to play at Miss Havisham's and what on earth I was expected to play at.”

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