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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Charles Dickens'

Great Expectations

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Great Expectations*

GREAT EXPECTATIONS IS A NOVEL relating the growing-up experience of Pip Pirrin, a young working class boy who lives in hopes of receiving a generous gift from an unknown benefactor. Pip plans to use his “great expectations” in order to raise himself from a life of labor and ignorance and become a gentleman. Dickens’s novel is a prime example of the **Bildungsroman** popular during the **Victorian period**. All novels rely on certain conventional elements, including:

Plot

Poor young orphan meets beautiful young girl and grows dissatisfied with his social class. Anonymous benefactor promises to make the orphan a gentleman. Life in the upper class spoils the boy who amasses vast debts and becomes a snob. A series of setbacks allows the now-young man to see the error of his ways, and he matures as a working member of the middle class.

Character

Pip is the main character in the novel. His psychological development as he grows from orphan boy to mature adult is central to the text. Pip can be considered a **dynamic character**, because he changes over the course of the novel as a result of his experiences. Other characters with whom Pip interacts include

- his sister Mrs. Joe
- the blacksmith Joe
- Miss Havisham
- Estella
- Mr. Jaggers
- Herbert Pocket
- the law clerk Wemmick
- Pip’s convict and would-be benefactor Magwitch

Psychoanalytical/Freudian Criticism Applied to *Great Expectations*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining the Function of Id, Superego, and Ego in the Bildungsroman

1. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
2. Assign one of the following sets of chapters to each pair or group.
3. Have students record instances of Pip's struggle to come to terms with his own fears and desires on the one hand and the rules of the world around him on the other hand:
 - Group 1: Pip's early childhood—Vol. I, chapters II and IV
 - Group 2: Pip's late adolescence and early adulthood—Vol. II, chapters VIII and X
 - Group 3: Pip's adulthood—Vol. III, chapters XIII, XIV, XIX
4. While taking notes, students should pay attention to the novel's narrative voice and note which experiences and emotions are presented from the viewpoint of young Pip and which experiences and emotions are presented from the retrospective viewpoint of the adult narrator.
5. Reconvene the class and have each small group report its findings.
6. Use the information presented by each group and the following questions to generate a classroom discussion about the development of Pip from early childhood through adolescence to adulthood and his attempt to come to terms with the psychological struggle between his id, superego, and ego.
 - Why does Pip steal food and a file for the convict in the marshes? What are his motivations for obeying the convict and for—indirectly—disobeying Mrs. Joe?
 - What is the connection between Pip's fear, his feelings of guilt, and the Freudian notion of the id and the superego?
 - Which characters represent notions of the superego during Pip's early childhood? His adolescence? His adulthood?
 - How does Pip's retrospective narrative voice evaluate his childhood actions? What lessons does Pip seem to have learned as an adult? How do these lessons coincide with the development of a healthy ego?
 - What does Pip's attitude toward money at different stages in his life reveal about his growth as a human being?

New Historicism Applied to *Great Expectations*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record their history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winners’) history, there is no way really to know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also participates in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Examining the Text for Clues to the Economic and Social Situation Resulting from the Industrial Revolution in England During the Nineteenth Century

1. Copy and distribute Fact Sheet: The Industrial Revolution in England.
2. Have students, individually, in pairs, or in small groups peruse the book and list any evidence of pre- and post-industrial revolution society in the novel. (Note: remind them that the novel spans several years from the time Pip is a young boy to his coming of age at 21, and beyond.)
3. Then have them answer the following questions:
 - How does Dickens portray the city of London? To what extent does Dickens portray a post-industrial London?
 - How does life in the marshes differ from life in London? To what extent does Dickens portray an idyllic, pre-industrial countryside?
 - Is Miss Havisham's money the result of commerce or industry?
 - What is the source of the fortune with which Magwitch hopes to create a gentleman?
 - What would become of a trade like blacksmithing as a result of the Industrial Revolution?
 - Why would Dickens have Herbert, and later Pip, enter commerce instead of industry?
 - What view of the Industrial Revolution does Dickens give his reader in ? Where is that view made most apparent?

Feminist Approach Applied to *Great Expectations*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



Activity One

Examining the Roles of Key Women in Pip's Life

1. Divide the class into four groups, or a number of groups divisible by four. Try to have male and female representation in every group.
2. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following:
 - Mrs. Joe
 - Miss Havisham
 - Estella
 - Biddy
3. Have each group peruse the novel for incidents of Pip's interaction with, description of, etc., its chosen (or assigned) character and complete the handout: *Great Expectations Feminism Activity One Worksheet*.
4. As the groups examine their characters' interactions with Pip, have them discuss the extent to which Dickens presents their character as a character in her own right or merely as a device to prompt Pip's growth or against which to measure Pip's development.
5. Allow each group to report its findings and decisions to the class.
6. As a whole class, discuss whether Dickens's female characters tend to be full-fledged characters, stereotypes, or literary conventions.

NOTE: It is not important for the class to come to a "correct" answer or even for the students to come to consensus. The importance here is for the students to examine the characters and Dickens's craft from this viewpoint.