

Biographical Approach to Literature

Read the article about Charles Dickens. Then, read the synopsis of *Great Expectations* on the other side of this paper. Record the 3 most striking similarities in your notes.



*If Columbus found a new world,
Dickens created one—and peopled it with
men and women.*

—Arthur Quiller-Couch, Dickens's
Fellowship Dinner, 1931

Charles Dickens is known as one of the most successful and inventive English novelists of all time. During the course of his career as a writer, Dickens wrote over 5 million words and created over 2,000 characters. His writing is distinct—rich with humor, drama, and satire—and his characters are some of the most well known in the history of literature. Dickens was drawn to creating strikingly eccentric, or odd, characters, often from the lower economic classes of nineteenth-century England. These characters and their worlds delighted and moved readers and helped to make Dickens the most popular writer of his time. According to critic G.K. Chesterton:

His books are full of baffled villains stalking out or cowardly bullies kicked downstairs. But the villains and the cowards are such delightful people that the reader always hopes the villain will put his head through a side window and make a last remark; or that the bully will say one more thing, even from the bottom of the stairs.

In addition to writing short stories and novels, Dickens wrote essays and journalistic pieces, and edited a weekly periodical filled with fiction, poetry, and essays. First titled *Household Words*, the magazine was later retitled *All the Year Round*. Dickens contributed to this publication several serialized novels, including *Great Expectations*, and writings on political and social issues. Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, in Landport, Portsea, England. He was the second child and eldest son of eight children. Dickens's

father, who worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, was a spendthrift who often mismanaged the family money. In 1822 the family moved to London and soon found itself in financial crisis. The family was forced to live in poverty, and Dickens was no longer able to go to school. One of the most traumatic periods of his life began in February 1824, when his father was sent to debtors prison. Young Dickens, only twelve years old, was forced to go to work for several months pasting labels on bottles. This experience was painful and socially humiliating to him, and images of the factory haunted him for the rest of his life. These images provided a backdrop to much of his fiction, which often focused on class issues; the plight of the poor and oppressed; and lost, suffering children. As an adult, he championed social and political causes designed to help the poor, prisoners, and children.

Dickens became a reporter in 1832, and in 1833 he began publishing short stories and essays. In 1836 he married Catherine Hogarth. The couple had ten children, but their marriage was unhappy and ended in 1858.

Dickens's successful career as a novelist began in 1837 with the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*. Other novels include *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield*. He made readers laugh, cry, and confront social evils and institutions of his day. On his death in 1870, a *London Times* article praised Dickens for displaying “an extraordinary combination of intellectual and moral qualities.”

Great Expectations SYNOPSIS

Pip, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, is an orphan who is being raised by his ill tempered sister, Mrs. Joe, and her kind husband, Joe Gargery. One night, Pip meets up with an escaped convict who forces the boy to steal food and a metal file from the Gargerys' home. Soon after this incident, Pip is invited to play at Satis House, the wealthy estate of reclusive, eccentric Miss Havisham. Pip serves as a playmate to Miss Havisham's beautiful, arrogant adopted daughter, Estella, and immediately falls in love with the girl. His love is unrequited. Estella humiliates Pip by calling attention to his low social status.

One day Pip learns that a mysterious benefactor has provided him with an income that will allow him to live as a gentleman. Pip assumes that his benefactor is Miss Havisham and that she is trying to prepare him to marry Estella. Pip, full of pride and expectations, enters eagerly into his new life. He is so caught up in achieving social status that he does not maintain his relationship with good-natured Joe, who was his childhood friend and supporter.

Pip is horrified when he learns one day that his benefactor is not Miss Havisham, but Magwitch, the convict he helped when he was a boy. Magwitch, who had been exiled to Australia, has become wealthy, and has illegally returned to London to visit Pip. Pip is disillusioned but feels he must help Magwitch. To make matters worse, he learns that Estella is planning to marry Bentley Drummle, an arrogant man whom Pip does not like.

Pip tries to help Magwitch leave England but ultimately fails. Magwitch is captured and sent back to prison, where he dies. Pip becomes seriously ill and, after being nursed back to health by Joe, begins to reevaluate his life. He decides that his great expectations have led him away from what is truly good and important in life. He leaves England to pursue business in the East. When he returns eleven years later, he meets up with Estella, who has also learned lessons about life through her mistakes. Pip says that he can see no shadow of another parting from her, implying that the two will always remain connected in some way.