

Great Expectations

Novel Study

Grades 7-8

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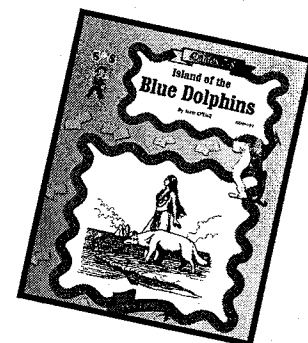
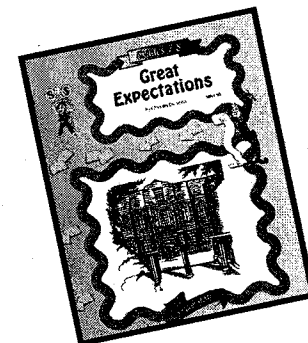
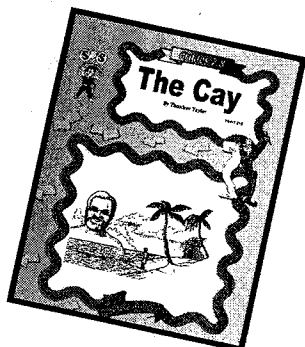
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| Banner in the Sky | 7-8 |
| The River | 7-8 |

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Objectives | 4 |
| Objectives of the Unit | 4 |
| Summary of the Story | 4 |
| The Life of Charles Dickens | 5 |
| The Major Works of Charles Dickens | 7 |
| Map of the British Isles | 8 |
| The Novel: | |
| Chapters 1 to 4 | 9 |
| Chapters 5 to 7 | 12 |
| Chapters 8 to 11 | 14 |
| Chapters 12 to 17 | 19 |
| Chapters 18 to 19 | 22 |
| Chapters 20 to 25 | 27 |
| Chapters 26 to 31 | 33 |
| Chapters 32 to 38 | 37 |
| Chapters 39 to 45 | 41 |
| Chapters 46 to 53 | 44 |
| Chapters 54 to 58 | 49 |
| Chapters 59 (both endings) | 53 |
| Activities to be done after the novel is read | 54 |
| Over heads: Structure of the Novel | 57 |
| Characterization | 58 |
| Some Aspects of Dicken's Style | 61 |
| Themes | 69 |
| Topics for Seminars and Oral Presentations | 71 |
| Crossword Puzzle | 72 |
| Selected Bibliography | 74 |
| Appendix: Answers to Quiz Questions..... | 75 |



OBJECTIVES

- 1. The student will read, comprehend, and hopefully appreciate a Victorian novel, Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens.
- 2. The student will research life in Victorian England.
- 3. The student will be actively engaged in writing about and in discussing the novel.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

This unit tries to be as comprehensive as possible, in order to allow teachers to make choices. There are many activities suggested in the unit. Any teacher attempting to use all of them will spend more than three months on this unit alone. Teachers should feel free to choose activities which suit their needs and to reject others.

After an introduction to the author and his works, this unit breaks down Great Expectations by chapter groupings. Each grouping contains a brief summary of the chapters which includes suggestions for teaching those chapters, followed by a list of student activities and a chapter quiz. The quiz is designed to show if students have read and understood the chapters; it is not intended to test higher level thinking skills. At the end of the unit are suggestions for writing and oral presentations.

SUMMARY OF THE STORY

Pip, a poor boy whose life appears destined to always be poor, is exposed to the rich but eccentric Miss Havisham and falls in love with her adopted daughter, Estella. Just as his hopes for marrying Estella seem to fade, Pip learns that he is to be a gentleman of "great expectations", that he has been named to inherit some substantial property.

Pip is taken from his home to be educated in London. With his fortune, comes a change in his character, and Pip becomes snobbish and hypocritical. But Pip is soon to learn the secret of his "expectations", and he learns much more than this. He learns the value of love, friendship and honour as he realizes that he can never expect to be what he isn't.



THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, a sea-port on the south coast of England. The world of Dickens's youth was quite different from today's world. Britain was involved with wars with the United States (1812-1814) and Napoleon of France. King George III, who had lost the American colonies more than a generation earlier, was in the last years of his reign, and the future Queen Victoria was yet to be born. The Industrial Revolution was sweeping Great Britain and people were moving from the farms to work in the factories in cities like London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Sheffield. Poverty was rampant and work-houses and debtors' prisons loomed on the horizon for the poor who lacked the means to survive. Petty crimes increased in number as desperate people tried to avoid starvation. The class system included both the extremely rich and the very poor.

Young Dickens was no stranger to poverty. His father was a poorly paid civil servant who was forced to move his family from place to place. In Portsmouth, Dickens developed a fascination with ships which would provide material for his later novels, including Great Expectations. Later, the family moved to Chatham, Kent, an area which would be the basis for the marsh country of Great Expectations. When Charles was about ten years old, the family moved to London, where they experienced great difficulty financially. Charles's father was sent to debtors' prison and Charles, the second oldest of eight children, was forced to find work in a factory, labeling pots of blacking, a substance used for restoring the shiny black color to fireplace grates. The poor working conditions, the debtors' prison, the spectre of the work-house, all of these left an indelible impression on the boy; later, Dickens would use this first-hand knowledge in such novels as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and, of course, Great Expectations. Miraculously, as if it had been written in one of his own novels, Dickens escaped from this world of poverty when his father suddenly came into an inheritance.

Dickens had two years of formal education from ages 12 to 14, but for the most part he was self-educated. In 1827, he became a clerk in a law office and later a newspaper reporter, covering both Parliament and the courts of justice. Again, these experiences provided him with valuable knowledge and technique to aid him as a novelist.

During his time as a court reporter, Dickens wrote a number of so-called *sketches*, exaggerated descriptions of people from all walks of life. These were illustrated by the artist, George Cruikshank, and were published in 1836 under the title Sketches By Boz. The book was so popular that Dickens added more *sketches* and published them under a new title, The Pickwick Papers. Thus began the distinguished career of Charles Dickens, novelist.



Pickwick Papers was an important work for several reasons. First of all it established Dickens's fame as a novelist who vividly portrayed characters and society. Secondly, it was published in serial format in a magazine; with each issue of the magazine a new installment appeared. Dickens was to continue to use this serial format very successfully for a number of his novels, including Great Expectations. This method of writing quickly became popular among Dickens's contemporaries.

More works followed as Dickens established his reputation as *the* man of letters of his age. Dickens undertook the editorship of two magazines while writing his novels in serial format. The use of this format influenced his writing as Dickens listened to his readers, much as today's T.V. soap opera writers pay attention to audience response. When he wrote The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens created an audience-pleaser in Little Nell, the girl who sold matches on the street corner. Little Nell was dying from the effects of poverty and the elements; his audience pleaded, "Don't let little Nell die!" Similarly, Dickens changed the ending of Great Expectations in an attempt to satisfy his audience.

Dickens's fame continued to grow and he began to give lecture tours. Twice, in 1842 and again in 1867, he visited Canada and the United States, but he did not like what he saw. Even the splendour of Niagara Falls failed to impress him.

In 1844, he began to show signs of physical fatigue, and moved with his family to Genoa, Italy. He returned to London to become editor of *The Daily News*, but he did not remain long. He returned to the continent, and died in 1870.

At the time of his death, he was writing The Mystery of Edwin Drood. The novel was published posthumously, but remained unfinished. During the 1980s, a play version of Edwin Drood was presented on Broadway and in various cities throughout the world; the audience was invited to vote for the ending which they would like to see, and the actors provided that ending. This play therefore had a very Dickensian character: the audience chose the ending, as the readers had chosen to change the original ending of Great Expectations over a hundred years earlier.

In character, Dickens was lavish; he did everything in overabundance. His activities included theatrical, social and philanthropic undertakings. He was *the* literary man of his time and was recognized as such during his life. Today, he is certainly considered to be one of the greatest novelists of all time, perhaps even the best.

