

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Great Expectations

by Charles Dickens

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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.

Great Expectations

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 and 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.

Great Expectations

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?

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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?

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

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

Chapter X

Vocabulary

ascertain – to make certain; to discover by experimentation or examination

cogitate – to think deeply and carefully about something

derision – the use of ridicule to show scorn

felicitous – appropriate

fortuitous – happening by chance; lucky

indiscriminate – random; not carefully selective or exclusive

ophthalmic – relating to the eye

refractory – resisting control

reverence – a feeling of profound respect

1. What steps does Pip take to improve himself?

2. How does Dickens suggest the character of the stranger in the pub?

3. What two things does the stranger do to suggest a connection with the convict from the beginning of the book?

Part II

Chapter XX

Vocabulary

confectioner – a person who makes or deals in candy
equipage – a horse-drawn carriage with its servants
guileless – candid, innocent, naive
infernal – relating to the world of the dead; fiendish; diabolical
oppressed – burdened or demoralized
perusal – careful examination
relinquish – to let go
scabbard – a sheath for a sword or dagger
supplicant – a person who pleads or prays

1. What does the following description of Mr. Jaggers' office tell the reader about its occupant?

“Mr. Jaggers's own high-backed chair was of deadly black horse hair, with rows of brass nails round it, like a coffin; ... The room was but small, and the clients seemed to have had a habit of backing up against the wall; the wall, especially opposite to Mr. Jaggers's chair, being greasy with shoulders.”

2. What is the primary purpose of this chapter?

3. Briefly describe Mr. Jaggers.

Chapter XXX

Vocabulary

abominate – hate; loathe
akimbo – in a position such that the hands are on the hips with the elbows bowed outward
allot – to assign a portion; allocate
contrition – repentance or remorse for a wrongdoing
despondency – hopelessness; gloom
endow – to provide with property or income; to equip with a talent or quality
engender – to produce or cause
feign – to act falsely, pretend with the intent to deceive
paroxysm – a sudden outburst of emotion or action; a convulsion or spasm
pretence – a false appearance or action with intent to deceive
quell – to subdue or control
victualling – gathering food and other provisions

1. How is Pip's character advanced during this chapter?

Chapter L

Vocabulary

merited – entitled to honor
spontaneously – impulsively
vaguely – not clearly expressed

1. How is Estella’s history further hinted at in this chapter?

2. At what inevitable conclusion does Pip arrive?
