

• TEACHER'S GUIDE Great Expectations

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in Portsea, England. His father, a government clerk, was jailed for debt when Charles was twelve, and the boy had to leave his family and work in a factory for some time. Although Dickens was able to return home, this period greatly affected his later outlook on life and appears in many forms in his novels. Leaving school at age fifteen, Dickens worked as a law clerk while developing his writing skills. By 1837 he had achieved great success with *The Pickwick Papers*, but he was also trapped in an unhappy marriage and had to work ceaselessly to support a growing family. His later life continued to be one of popular fame and private tragedy. Working long hours to produce chapters for serial publication and reading his own works to enthusiastic audiences in England and America, Dickens exhausted himself and probably hastened his death, which came in 1870 after he had suffered two major strokes.

MAJOR WORKS

Many novels by Dickens could be included in this category. Some of the most important, aside from those listed later under Related Reading, are

- *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) — In Dickens' first novel, Mr. Samuel Pickwick and his faithful servant Sam Weller romp through a series of adventures and misadventures in pre-industrial England.
- *A Christmas Carol* (1843) — The story of Ebenezer Scrooge's conversion is one of his most popular books and one of the greatest Christmas legends of all time.
- *Bleak House* (1843) — Perhaps Dickens' most monumental novel, this tale of murder and greed is a condemnation of the legal system of his era.
- *Hard Times* (1854) — Chief targets in this brief but biting novel are the lot of the English working class and the follies of an educational system that represses the spirit of its children.
- *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) — Two men of similar appearance but diverse background find their lives intertwined amid the turmoil of the French Revolution.

CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

Although the novels of Charles Dickens are often filled with unlikely incidents and implausible characters, they are serious explorations of the Victorian era's most important moral and social issues, explorations made more engaging by the vividness of the plotting and characterization. We may wonder whether people as extreme as Miss Havisham or Wemmick really existed, but we cannot doubt the reality of the conditions that produced their personalities and their problems.

Like all his novels, *Great Expectations* is filled with a cast of extraordinary characters. At the center is Pip, the most human and believable member of the crowd, a "round" character whose education in the true nature of human worth forms the core of the novel. Around him range a carnival of "flat" yet fascinating characters—Joe Gargery, Uncle Pumblechook, Estella, Jaggers—whose extremes of good and evil define the book's key issues in unmistakable terms.

The vigor of Dickens' characterization is matched by the exuberance of his language and his ability to mix the realistic and the grotesque into a world of unique symbols. From Pip's initial encounter with Abel Magwitch, with its topsy-turvy view of the world, to his final clear vision of who he is and who those around him really are, his imaginative genius propels *Great Expectations* and engages the reader to consider important personal questions under the guise of delightful entertainment.

RELATED READING

- *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *David Copperfield* (1850), two novels by Dickens, also concern the growth and development of young men who must learn to choose between true and false ideals.
- F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* reveals the hollowness at the heart of the 1920's glittering image of worldly success, as Jay Gatsby seeks to dazzle and win Daisy Buchanan.
- In J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* a modern young man sets out on his own inner quest to distinguish the real from the phony.
- William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is a macabre parallel to Miss Havisham's tale of lost love.

POSTREADING WRITING ACTIVITY

The theme of guilt is prominent in this novel. By analyzing the characters of Pip, Magwitch, and two other persons, discuss how guilt is shown in both actions and feelings. In your discussion, stress the character who is most real to you.

Answer on this sheet. Write notes or sentences as directed by your teacher.

CHAPTER 1

1. What do the following images describe? (a) dark flat wilderness (b) low leaden line (c) distant savage lair

Where is Pip when he describes these watery aspects? What startles him?

2. Give three important pieces of information about Pip's name and family.
3. Give the clues that the "fearful man" is a convict. What does he direct Pip to do?

CHAPTER 2

4. From Pip's viewpoint, explain the phrase "brought up by hand."

5. What does Pip take from the covered dish?

CHAPTER 3

6. Quote at least one simile that describes the damp or the wooden finger.

7. Explain the incident of mistaken identity.

CHAPTER 4

8. Explain Pip's comment: "But they wouldn't leave me alone."

9. Pip says, "I felt that I could bear no more," and he runs to the door. Why?

CHAPTER 5

10. How are the two convicts located? Why had the first convict remained in the marsh?

11. Does the first convict recognize Pip? How do you know?

CHAPTER 6

12. Explain this quote: "In a word, I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong."

CHAPTER 7

13. What does the message that Pip prints on his slate reveal about the relationship between Joe and Pip?

14. Quote four facts about Miss Havisham.