

Charles Dickens

Context

CHARLES DICKENS WAS BORN on February 7, 1812, in Portsea, England. His parents were middle-class, but they suffered financially as a result of living beyond their means. When Dickens was twelve years old, his family's dire straits forced him to quit school and work in a blacking factory, a place where shoe polish is made. Within weeks, his father was put in debtor's prison, where Dickens's mother and siblings eventually joined him. At this point, Dickens lived on his own and continued to work at the factory for several months. The horrific conditions in the factory haunted him for the rest of his life, as did the experience of temporary orphanhood. Apparently, Dickens never forgot the day when a more senior boy in the warehouse took it upon himself to instruct Dickens in how to do his work more efficiently. For Dickens, that instruction may have represented the first step toward his full integration into the misery and tedium of working-class life. The more senior boy's name was Bob Fagin. Dickens's residual resentment of him reached a fevered pitch in the characterization of the villain Fagin in *Oliver Twist*.

After inheriting some money, Dickens's father got out of prison and Charles returned to school. As a young adult, he worked as a law clerk and later as a journalist. His experience as a journalist kept him in close contact with the darker social conditions of the Industrial Revolution, and he grew disillusioned with the attempts of lawmakers to alleviate those conditions. A collection of semi-fictional sketches entitled *Sketches by Boz* earned him recognition as a writer. Dickens became famous and began to make money from his writing when he published his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, which was serialized in 1836 and published in book form the following year.

In 1837, the first installment of *Oliver Twist* appeared in the magazine *Bentley's Miscellany*, which Dickens was then editing. It was accompanied by illustrations by George Cruikshank, which still accompany many editions of the novel today. Even at this early date, some critics accused Dickens of writing too quickly and too prolifically, since he was paid by the word for his serialized novels. Yet the passion behind *Oliver Twist*, animated in part by Dickens's own childhood experiences and in part by his outrage at the living conditions of the poor that he had witnessed as a journalist, touched his contemporary readers. Greatly successful, the novel was a thinly veiled protest against the Poor Law of 1834, which dictated that all public charity must be channeled through workhouses.

In 1836, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, but after twenty years of marriage and ten children, he fell in love with Ellen Ternan, an actress many years his junior. Soon after, Dickens and his wife separated, ending a long series of marital difficulties. Dickens remained a prolific writer to the end of his life, and his novels—among them *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*—continued to earn critical and popular acclaim. He died of a stroke in 1870, at the age of 58, leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* unfinished.

The Poor Laws: *Oliver Twist*'s Social Commentary

Oliver Twist opens with a bitter invective directed at the nineteenth-century English Poor Laws. These laws were a distorted manifestation of the Victorian middle class's emphasis on the virtues of hard work. England in the 1830s was rapidly undergoing a transformation from an agricultural, rural economy to an urban, industrial nation. The growing middle class had achieved an economic influence equal to, if not greater than, that of the British aristocracy.

In the 1830s, the middle class clamored for a share of political power with the landed gentry, bringing about a restructuring of the voting system. Parliament passed the Reform

Act, which granted the right to vote to previously disenfranchised middle-class citizens. The middle class was eager to gain social legitimacy. This desire gave rise to the Evangelical religious movement and inspired sweeping economic and political change. In the extremely stratified English class structure, the highest social class belonged to the “gentleman,” an aristocrat who did not have to work for his living. The middle class was stigmatized for having to work, and so, to alleviate the stigma attached to middle-class wealth, the middle class promoted work as a moral virtue. But the resulting moral value attached to work, along with the middle class’s insecurity about its own social legitimacy, led English society to subject the poor to hatred and cruelty. Many members of the middle class were anxious to be differentiated from the lower classes, and one way to do so was to stigmatize the lower classes as lazy good-for-nothings. The middle class’s value system transformed earned wealth into a sign of moral virtue. Victorian society interpreted economic success as a sign that God favored the honest, moral virtue of the successful individual’s efforts, and, thus, interpreted the condition of poverty as a sign of the weakness of the poor individual.

The sentiment behind the Poor Law of 1834 reflected these beliefs. The law allowed the poor to receive public assistance only if they lived and worked in established workhouses. Beggars risked imprisonment. Debtors were sent to prison, often with their entire families, which virtually ensured that they could not repay their debts. Workhouses were deliberately made to be as miserable as possible in order to deter the poor from relying on public assistance. The philosophy was that the miserable conditions would prevent able-bodied paupers from being lazy and idle bums.

In the eyes of middle-class English society, those who could not support themselves were considered immoral and evil. Therefore, such individuals should enjoy no comforts or luxuries in their reliance on public assistance. In order to create the misery needed to deter immoral idleness, families were split apart upon entering the workhouse. Husbands were permitted no contact with their wives, lest they breed more paupers. Mothers were separated from children, lest they impart their immoral ways to their children. Brothers were separated from their sisters because the middle-class patrons of workhouses feared the lower class’s “natural” inclination toward incest. In short, the state undertook to become the surrogate parents of workhouse children, whether or not they were orphans. Meals served to workhouse residents were deliberately inadequate, so as to encourage the residents to find work and support themselves.

Because of the great stigma attached to workhouse relief, many poor people chose to die in the streets rather than seek public aid. The workhouse was supposed to demonstrate the virtue of gainful employment to the poor. In order to receive public assistance, they had to pay in suffering and misery. Victorian values stressed the moral virtue of suffering and privation, and the workhouse residents were made to experience these virtues many times over.

Rather than improving what the middle class saw as the questionable morals of the able-bodied poor, the Poor Laws punished the most defenseless and helpless members of the lower class. The old, the sick, and the very young suffered more than the able-bodied benefited from these laws. Dickens meant to demonstrate this incongruity through the figure of Oliver Twist, an orphan born and raised in a workhouse for the first ten years of his life. His story demonstrates the hypocrisy of the petty middle-class bureaucrats, who treat a small child cruelly while voicing their belief in the Christian virtue of giving charity to the less fortunate.

Dickens was a lifelong champion of the poor. He himself suffered the harsh abuse visited upon the poor by the English legal system. In England in the 1830s, the poor truly had no voice, political or economic. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents the everyday existence of the lowest members of English society. He goes far beyond the experiences of the workhouse, extending his depiction of poverty to London’s squalid streets, dark alehouses,

and thieves' dens. He gives voice to those who had no voice, establishing a link between politics and literature with his social commentary.

Plot Overview

OLIVER TWIST IS BORN in a workhouse in 1830s England. His mother, whose name no one knows, is found on the street and dies just after Oliver's birth. Oliver spends the first nine years of his life in a badly run home for young orphans and then is transferred to a workhouse for adults. After the other boys bully Oliver into asking for more gruel at the end of a meal, Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle, offers five pounds to anyone who will take the boy away from the workhouse. Oliver narrowly escapes being apprenticed to a brutish chimney sweep and is eventually apprenticed to a local undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. When the undertaker's other apprentice, Noah Claypole, makes disparaging comments about Oliver's mother, Oliver attacks him and incurs the Sowerberrys' wrath. Desperate, Oliver runs away at dawn and travels toward London.

Outside London, Oliver, starved and exhausted, meets Jack Dawkins, a boy his own age. Jack offers him shelter in the London house of his benefactor, Fagin. It turns out that Fagin is a career criminal who trains orphan boys to pick pockets for him. After a few days of training, Oliver is sent on a pickpocketing mission with two other boys. When he sees them swipe a handkerchief from an elderly gentleman, Oliver is horrified and runs off. He is caught but narrowly escapes being convicted of the theft. Mr. Brownlow, the man whose handkerchief was stolen, takes the feverish Oliver to his home and nurses him back to health. Mr. Brownlow is struck by Oliver's resemblance to a portrait of a young woman that hangs in his house. Oliver thrives in Mr. Brownlow's home, but two young adults in Fagin's gang, Bill Sikes and his lover Nancy, capture Oliver and return him to Fagin.

Fagin sends Oliver to assist Sikes in a burglary. Oliver is shot by a servant of the house and, after Sikes escapes, is taken in by the women who live there, Mrs. Maylie and her beautiful adopted niece Rose. They grow fond of Oliver, and he spends an idyllic summer with them in the countryside. But Fagin and a mysterious man named Monks are set on recapturing Oliver. Meanwhile, it is revealed that Oliver's mother left behind a gold locket when she died. Monks obtains and destroys that locket. When the Maylies come to London, Nancy meets secretly with Rose and informs her of Fagin's designs, but a member of Fagin's gang overhears the conversation. When word of Nancy's disclosure reaches Sikes, he brutally murders Nancy and flees London. Pursued by his guilty conscience and an angry mob, he inadvertently hangs himself while trying to escape.

Mr. Brownlow, with whom the Maylies have reunited Oliver, confronts Monks and wrings the truth about Oliver's parentage from him. It is revealed that Monks is Oliver's half brother. Their father, Mr. Leeford, was unhappily married to a wealthy woman and had an affair with Oliver's mother, Agnes Fleming. Monks has been pursuing Oliver all along in the hopes of ensuring that his half-brother is deprived of his share of the family inheritance. Mr. Brownlow forces Monks to sign over Oliver's share to Oliver. Moreover, it is discovered that Rose is Agnes's younger sister, hence Oliver's aunt. Fagin is hung for his crimes. Finally, Mr. Brownlow adopts Oliver, and they and the Maylies retire to a blissful existence in the countryside.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

The Failure of Charity

Much of the first part of *Oliver Twist* challenges the organizations of charity run by the church and the government in Dickens's time. The system Dickens describes was put into place by the Poor Law of 1834, which stipulated that the poor could only receive

government assistance if they moved into government workhouses. Residents of those workhouses were essentially inmates whose rights were severely curtailed by a host of onerous regulations. Labor was required, families were almost always separated, and rations of food and clothing were meager. The workhouses operated on the principle that poverty was the consequence of laziness and that the dreadful conditions in the workhouse would inspire the poor to better their own circumstances. Yet the economic dislocation of the Industrial Revolution made it impossible for many to do so, and the workhouses did not provide any means for social or economic betterment. Furthermore, as Dickens points out, the officials who ran the workhouses blatantly violated the values they preached to the poor. Dickens describes with great sarcasm the greed, laziness, and arrogance of charitable workers like Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Mann. In general, charitable institutions only reproduced the awful conditions in which the poor would live anyway. As Dickens puts it, the poor choose between “being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.”

The Folly of Individualism

With the rise of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution, individualism was very much in vogue as a philosophy. Victorian capitalists believed that society would run most smoothly if individuals looked out for their own interests. Ironically, the clearest pronouncement of this philosophy comes not from a legitimate businessman but from Fagin, who operates in the illicit businesses of theft and prostitution. He tells Noah Claypole that “a regard for number one holds us all together, and must do so, unless we would all go to pieces in company.” In other words, the group’s interests are best maintained if every individual looks out for “number one,” or himself. The folly of this philosophy is demonstrated at the end of the novel, when Nancy turns against Monks, Charley Bates turns against Sikes, and Monks turns against Mrs. Corney. Fagin’s unstable family, held together only by the self-interest of its members, is juxtaposed to the little society formed by Oliver, Brownlow, Rose Maylie, and their many friends. This second group is bound together not by concerns of self-interest but by “strong affection and humanity of heart,” the selfless devotion to each other that Dickens sees as the prerequisite for “perfect happiness.”

Purity in a Corrupt City

Throughout the novel, Dickens confronts the question of whether the terrible environments he depicts have the power to “blacken [the soul] and change its hue for ever.” By examining the fates of most of the characters, we can assume that his answer is that they do not. Certainly, characters like Sikes and Fagin seem to have sustained permanent damage to their moral sensibilities. Yet even Sikes has a conscience, which manifests itself in the apparition of Nancy’s eyes that haunts him after he murders her. Charley Bates maintains enough of a sense of decency to try to capture Sikes. Of course, Oliver is above any corruption, though the novel removes him from unhealthy environments relatively early in his life. Most telling of all is Nancy, who, though she considers herself “lost almost beyond redemption,” ends up making the ultimate sacrifice for a child she hardly knows. In contrast, Monks, perhaps the novel’s most inhuman villain, was brought up amid wealth and comfort.

The Countryside Idealized

All the injustices and privations suffered by the poor in *Oliver Twist* occur in cities—either the great city of London or the provincial city where Oliver is born. When the Maylies take Oliver to the countryside, he discovers a “new existence.” Dickens asserts that even people who have spent their entire lives in “close and noisy places” are likely, in the last moments of their lives, to find comfort in half--imagined memories “of sky, and hill and plain.” Moreover, country scenes have the potential to “purify our thoughts” and erase some of the

vices that develop in the city. Hence, in the country, “the poor people [are] so neat and clean,” living a life that is free of the squalor that torments their urban counterparts. Oliver and his new family settle in a small village at the novel’s end, as if a happy ending would not be possible in the city. Dickens’s portrait of rural life in *Oliver Twist* is more approving yet far less realistic than his portrait of urban life. This fact does not contradict, but rather supports, the general estimation of Dickens as a great urban writer. It is precisely Dickens’s distance from the countryside that allows him to idealize it.

Motifs

Disguised or Mistaken Identities

The plot of *Oliver Twist* revolves around the various false identities that other characters impose upon Oliver, often for the sake of advancing their own interests. Mr. Bumble and the other workhouse officials insist on portraying Oliver as something he is not—an ungrateful, immoral pauper. Monks does his best to conceal Oliver’s real identity so that Monks himself can claim Oliver’s rightful inheritance. Characters also disguise their own identities when it serves them well to do so. Nancy pretends to be Oliver’s middle-class sister in order to get him back to Fagin, while Monks changes his name and poses as a common criminal rather than the heir he really is. Scenes depicting the manipulation of clothing indicate how it plays an important part in the construction of various characters’ identities. Nancy dons new clothing to pass as a middle-class girl, and Fagin strips Oliver of all his upper-class credibility when he takes from him the suit of clothes purchased by Brownlow. The novel’s resolution revolves around the revelation of the real identities of Oliver, Rose, and Monks. Only when every character’s identity is known with certainty does the story achieve real closure.

Hidden Family Relationships

The revelation of Oliver’s familial ties is among the novel’s most unlikely plot turns: Oliver is related to Brownlow, who was married to his father’s sister; to Rose, who is his aunt; and to Monks, who is his half-brother. The coincidences involved in these facts are quite unbelievable and represent the novel’s rejection of realism in favor of fantasy. Oliver is at first believed to be an orphan without parents or relatives, a position that would, in that time and place, almost certainly seal his doom. Yet, by the end of the novel, it is revealed that he has more relatives than just about anyone else in the novel. This reversal of his fortunes strongly resembles the fulfillment of a naïve child’s wish. It also suggests the mystical binding power of family relationships. Brownlow and Rose take to Oliver immediately, even though he is implicated in an attempted robbery of Rose’s house, while Monks recognizes Oliver the instant he sees him on the street. The influence of blood ties, it seems, can be felt even before anyone knows those ties exist.

Surrogate Families

Before Oliver finds his real family, a number of individuals serve him as substitute parents, mostly with very limited success. Mrs. Mann and Mr. Bumble are surrogate parents, albeit horribly negligent ones, for the vast numbers of orphans under their care. Mr. Sowerberry and his wife, while far from ideal, are much more serviceable parent figures to Oliver, and one can even imagine that Oliver might have grown up to be a productive citizen under their care. Interestingly, it is the mention of his real mother that leads to Oliver’s voluntary abandonment of the Sowerberrys. The most provocative of the novel’s mock family structures is the unit formed by Fagin and his young charges. Fagin provides for and trains his wards nearly as well as a father might, and he inspires enough loyalty in them that they stick around even after they are grown. But these quasi-familial relationships are built primarily around exploitation and not out of true concern or selfless interest. Oddly

enough, the only satisfactory surrogate parents Oliver finds are Brownlow and Rose, both of whom turn out to be actual relatives.

Oliver's Face

Oliver's face is singled out for special attention at multiple points in the novel. Mr. Sowerberry, Charley Bates, and Toby Crackit all comment on its particular appeal, and its resemblance to the portrait of Agnes Fleming provides the first clue to Oliver's identity. The power of Oliver's physiognomy, combined with the facts that Fagin is hideous and Rose is beautiful, suggests that in the world of the novel, external appearance usually gives a fair impression of a person's inner character.

Symbols

Characters' Names

The names of characters represent personal qualities. Oliver Twist himself is the most obvious example. The name "Twist," though given by accident, alludes to the outrageous reversals of fortune that he will experience. Rose Maylie's name echoes her association with flowers and springtime, youth and beauty. Toby Crackit's name is a lighthearted reference to his chosen profession of breaking into houses. Mr. Bumble's name connotes his bumbling arrogance; Mrs. Mann's, her lack of maternal instinct; and Mr. Grimwig's, his superficial grimness that can be removed as easily as a wig.

Bull's-eye

Bill Sikes's dog, Bull's-eye, has "faults of temper in common with his owner" and is a symbolic emblem of his owner's character. The dog's viciousness reflects and represents Sikes's own animal-like brutality. After Sikes murders Nancy, Bull's-eye comes to represent Sikes's guilt. The dog leaves bloody footprints on the floor of the room where the murder is committed. Not long after, Sikes becomes desperate to get rid of the dog, convinced that the dog's presence will give him away. Yet, just as Sikes cannot shake off his guilt, he cannot shake off Bull's-eye, who arrives at the house of Sikes's demise before Sikes himself does. Bull's-eye's name also conjures up the image of Nancy's eyes, which haunts Sikes until the bitter end and eventually causes him to hang himself accidentally.

London Bridge

Nancy's decision to meet Brownlow and Rose on London Bridge reveals the symbolic aspect of this bridge in *Oliver Twist*. Bridges exist to link two places that would otherwise be separated by an uncrossable chasm. The meeting on London Bridge represents the collision of two worlds unlikely ever to come into contact—the idyllic world of Brownlow and Rose, and the atmosphere of degradation in which Nancy lives. On the bridge, Nancy is given the chance to cross over to the better way of life that the others represent, but she rejects that opportunity, and by the time the three have all left the bridge, that possibility has vanished forever.

Great Expectations

Plot Overview

PIP, A YOUNG ORPHAN living with his sister and her husband in the marshes of Kent, sits in a cemetery one evening looking at his parents' tombstones. Suddenly, an escaped convict springs up from behind a tombstone, grabs Pip, and orders him to bring him food and a file for his leg irons. Pip obeys, but the fearsome convict is soon captured anyway. The convict protects Pip by claiming to have stolen the items himself.

One day Pip is taken by his Uncle Pumblechook to play at Satis House, the home of the wealthy dowager Miss Havisham, who is extremely eccentric: she wears an old wedding

dress everywhere she goes and keeps all the clocks in her house stopped at the same time. During his visit, he meets a beautiful young girl named Estella, who treats him coldly and contemptuously. Nevertheless, he falls in love with her and dreams of becoming a wealthy gentleman so that he might be worthy of her. He even hopes that Miss Havisham intends to make him a gentleman and marry him to Estella, but his hopes are dashed when, after months of regular visits to Satis House, Miss Havisham tells him that she will help him fill out the papers necessary for him to become a common laborer in his family's business. With Miss Havisham's guidance, Pip is apprenticed to his brother-in-law, Joe, who is the village blacksmith. Pip works in the forge unhappily, struggling to better his education with the help of the plain, kind Biddy and encountering Joe's malicious day laborer, Orlick. One night, after an altercation with Orlick, Pip's sister, known as Mrs. Joe, is viciously attacked and becomes a mute invalid. From her signals, Pip suspects that Orlick was responsible for the attack.

One day a lawyer named Jaggers appears with strange news: a secret benefactor has given Pip a large fortune, and Pip must come to London immediately to begin his education as a gentleman. Pip happily assumes that his previous hopes have come true—that Miss Havisham is his secret benefactor and that the old woman intends for him to marry Estella. In London, Pip befriends a young gentleman named Herbert Pocket and Jaggers's law clerk, Wemmick. He expresses disdain for his former friends and loved ones, especially Joe, but he continues to pine after Estella. He furthers his education by studying with the tutor Matthew Pocket, Herbert's father. Herbert himself helps Pip learn how to act like a gentleman. When Pip turns twenty-one and begins to receive an income from his fortune, he will secretly help Herbert buy his way into the business he has chosen for himself. But for now, Herbert and Pip lead a fairly undisciplined life in London, enjoying themselves and running up debts. Orlick reappears in Pip's life, employed as Miss Havisham's porter, but is promptly fired by Jaggers after Pip reveals Orlick's unsavory past. Mrs. Joe dies, and Pip goes home for the funeral, feeling tremendous grief and remorse. Several years go by, until one night a familiar figure barges into Pip's room—the convict, Magwitch, who stuns Pip by announcing that he, not Miss Havisham, is the source of Pip's fortune. He tells Pip that he was so moved by Pip's boyhood kindness that he dedicated his life to making Pip a gentleman, and he made a fortune in Australia for that very purpose.

Pip is appalled, but he feels morally bound to help Magwitch escape London, as the convict is pursued both by the police and by Compeyson, his former partner in crime. A complicated mystery begins to fall into place when Pip discovers that Compeyson was the man who abandoned Miss Havisham at the altar and that Estella is Magwitch's daughter. Miss Havisham has raised her to break men's hearts, as revenge for the pain her own broken heart caused her. Pip was merely a boy for the young Estella to practice on; Miss Havisham delighted in Estella's ability to toy with his affections.

As the weeks pass, Pip sees the good in Magwitch and begins to care for him deeply. Before Magwitch's escape attempt, Estella marries an upper-class lout named Bentley Drummle. Pip makes a visit to Satis House, where Miss Havisham begs his forgiveness for the way she has treated him in the past, and he forgives her. Later that day, when she bends over the fireplace, her clothing catches fire and she goes up in flames. She survives but becomes an invalid. In her final days, she will continue to repent for her misdeeds and to plead for Pip's forgiveness.

The time comes for Pip and his friends to spirit Magwitch away from London. Just before the escape attempt, Pip is called to a shadowy meeting in the marshes, where he encounters the vengeful, evil Orlick. Orlick is on the verge of killing Pip when Herbert arrives with a group of friends and saves Pip's life. Pip and Herbert hurry back to effect Magwitch's escape. They try to sneak Magwitch down the river on a rowboat, but they are discovered by the police, who Compeyson tipped off. Magwitch and Compeyson fight in the river, and Compeyson is drowned. Magwitch is sentenced to death, and Pip loses his

fortune. Magwitch feels that his sentence is God's forgiveness and dies at peace. Pip falls ill; Joe comes to London to care for him, and they are reconciled. Joe gives him the news from home: Orlick, after robbing Pumblechook, is now in jail; Miss Havisham has died and left most of her fortune to the Pockets; Biddy has taught Joe how to read and write. After Joe leaves, Pip decides to rush home after him and marry Biddy, but when he arrives there he discovers that she and Joe have already married.

Pip decides to go abroad with Herbert to work in the mercantile trade. Returning many years later, he encounters Estella in the ruined garden at Satis House. Drummle, her husband, treated her badly, but he is now dead. Pip finds that Estella's coldness and cruelty have been replaced by a sad kindness, and the two leave the garden hand in hand, Pip believing that they will never part again. (NOTE: Dickens's original ending to *Great Expectations* differed from the one described in this summary. The final Summary and Analysis section of this SparkNote provides a description of the first ending and explains why Dickens rewrote it.)

Analysis of Major Characters

Pip

As a bildungsroman, *Great Expectations* presents the growth and development of a single character, Philip Pirrip, better known to himself and to the world as Pip. As the focus of the bildungsroman, Pip is by far the most important character in *Great Expectations*: he is both the protagonist, whose actions make up the main plot of the novel, and the narrator, whose thoughts and attitudes shape the reader's perception of the story. As a result, developing an understanding of Pip's character is perhaps the most important step in understanding *Great Expectations*.

Because Pip is narrating his story many years after the events of the novel take place, there are really two Pips in *Great Expectations*: Pip the narrator and Pip the character—the voice telling the story and the person acting it out. Dickens takes great care to distinguish the two Pips, imbuing the voice of Pip the narrator with perspective and maturity while also imparting how Pip the character feels about what is happening to him as it actually happens. This skillfully executed distinction is perhaps best observed early in the book, when Pip the character is a child; here, Pip the narrator gently pokes fun at his younger self, but also enables us to see and feel the story through his eyes.

As a character, Pip's two most important traits are his immature, romantic idealism and his innately good conscience. On the one hand, Pip has a deep desire to improve himself and attain any possible advancement, whether educational, moral, or social. His longing to marry Estella and join the upper classes stems from the same idealistic desire as his longing to learn to read and his fear of being punished for bad behavior: once he understands ideas like poverty, ignorance, and immorality, Pip does not want to be poor, ignorant, or immoral. Pip the narrator judges his own past actions extremely harshly, rarely giving himself credit for good deeds but angrily castigating himself for bad ones. As a character, however, Pip's idealism often leads him to perceive the world rather narrowly, and his tendency to oversimplify situations based on superficial values leads him to behave badly toward the people who care about him. When Pip becomes a gentleman, for example, he immediately begins to act as he thinks a gentleman is supposed to act, which leads him to treat Joe and Biddy snobbishly and coldly.

On the other hand, Pip is at heart a very generous and sympathetic young man, a fact that can be witnessed in his numerous acts of kindness throughout the book (helping Magwitch, secretly buying Herbert's way into business, etc.) and his essential love for all those who love him. Pip's main line of development in the novel may be seen as the process of learning to place his innate sense of kindness and conscience above his immature idealism.

Not long after meeting Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip's desire for advancement largely overshadows his basic goodness. After receiving his mysterious fortune, his idealistic wishes seem to have been justified, and he gives himself over to a gentlemanly life of idleness. But the discovery that the wretched Magwitch, not the wealthy Miss Havisham, is his secret benefactor shatters Pip's oversimplified sense of his world's hierarchy. The fact that he comes to admire Magwitch while losing Estella to the brutish nobleman Drummle ultimately forces him to realize that one's social position is not the most important quality one possesses, and that his behavior as a gentleman has caused him to hurt the people who care about him most. Once he has learned these lessons, Pip matures into the man who narrates the novel, completing the bildungsroman.

Estella

Often cited as Dickens's first convincing female character, Estella is a supremely ironic creation, one who darkly undermines the notion of romantic love and serves as a bitter criticism against the class system in which she is mired. Raised from the age of three by Miss Havisham to torment men and "break their hearts," Estella wins Pip's deepest love by practicing deliberate cruelty. Unlike the warm, winsome, kind heroine of a traditional love story, Estella is cold, cynical, and manipulative. Though she represents Pip's first longed-for ideal of life among the upper classes, Estella is actually even lower-born than Pip; as Pip learns near the end of the novel, she is the daughter of Magwitch, the coarse convict, and thus springs from the very lowest level of society.

Ironically, life among the upper classes does not represent salvation for Estella. Instead, she is victimized twice by her adopted class. Rather than being raised by Magwitch, a man of great inner nobility, she is raised by Miss Havisham, who destroys her ability to express emotion and interact normally with the world. And rather than marrying the kindhearted commoner Pip, Estella marries the cruel nobleman Drummle, who treats her harshly and makes her life miserable for many years. In this way, Dickens uses Estella's life to reinforce the idea that one's happiness and well-being are not deeply connected to one's social position: had Estella been poor, she might have been substantially better off.

Despite her cold behavior and the damaging influences in her life, Dickens nevertheless ensures that Estella is still a sympathetic character. By giving the reader a sense of her inner struggle to discover and act on her own feelings rather than on the imposed motives of her upbringing, Dickens gives the reader a glimpse of Estella's inner life, which helps to explain what Pip might love about her. Estella does not seem able to stop herself from hurting Pip, but she also seems not to want to hurt him; she repeatedly warns him that she has "no heart" and seems to urge him as strongly as she can to find happiness by leaving her behind. Finally, Estella's long, painful marriage to Drummle causes her to develop along the same lines as Pip—that is, she learns, through experience, to rely on and trust her inner feelings. In the final scene of the novel, she has become her own woman for the first time in the book. As she says to Pip, "Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching. . . . I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape."

Miss Havisham

The mad, vengeful Miss Havisham, a wealthy dowager who lives in a rotting mansion and wears an old wedding dress every day of her life, is not exactly a believable character, but she is certainly one of the most memorable creations in the book. Miss Havisham's life is defined by a single tragic event: her jilting by Compeyson on what was to have been their wedding day. From that moment forth, Miss Havisham is determined never to move beyond her heartbreak. She stops all the clocks in Satis House at twenty minutes to nine, the moment when she first learned that Compeyson was gone, and she wears only one shoe, because when she learned of his betrayal, she had not yet put on the other shoe. With a kind of manic, obsessive cruelty, Miss Havisham adopts Estella and raises her as a

weapon to achieve her own revenge on men. Miss Havisham is an example of single-minded vengeance pursued destructively: both Miss Havisham and the people in her life suffer greatly because of her quest for revenge. Miss Havisham is completely unable to see that her actions are hurtful to Pip and Estella. She is redeemed at the end of the novel when she realizes that she has caused Pip's heart to be broken in the same manner as her own; rather than achieving any kind of personal revenge, she has only caused more pain. Miss Havisham immediately begs Pip for forgiveness, reinforcing the novel's theme that bad behavior can be redeemed by contrition and sympathy.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Ambition and Self-Improvement

The moral theme of *Great Expectations* is quite simple: affection, loyalty, and conscience are more important than social advancement, wealth, and class. Dickens establishes the theme and shows Pip learning this lesson, largely by exploring ideas of ambition and self-improvement—ideas that quickly become both the thematic center of the novel and the psychological mechanism that encourages much of Pip's development. At heart, Pip is an idealist; whenever he can conceive of something that is better than what he already has, he immediately desires to obtain the improvement. When he sees Satis House, he longs to be a wealthy gentleman; when he thinks of his moral shortcomings, he longs to be good; when he realizes that he cannot read, he longs to learn how. Pip's desire for self-improvement is the main source of the novel's title: because he believes in the possibility of advancement in life, he has "great expectations" about his future.

Ambition and self-improvement take three forms in *Great Expectations*—moral, social, and educational; these motivate Pip's best and his worst behavior throughout the novel. First, Pip desires moral self-improvement. He is extremely hard on himself when he acts immorally and feels powerful guilt that spurs him to act better in the future. When he leaves for London, for instance, he torments himself about having behaved so wretchedly toward Joe and Biddy. Second, Pip desires social self-improvement. In love with Estella, he longs to become a member of her social class, and, encouraged by Mrs. Joe and Pumblechook, he entertains fantasies of becoming a gentleman. The working out of this fantasy forms the basic plot of the novel; it provides Dickens the opportunity to gently satirize the class system of his era and to make a point about its capricious nature. Significantly, Pip's life as a gentleman is no more satisfying—and certainly no more moral—than his previous life as a blacksmith's apprentice. Third, Pip desires educational improvement. This desire is deeply connected to his social ambition and longing to marry Estella: a full education is a requirement of being a gentleman. As long as he is an ignorant country boy, he has no hope of social advancement. Pip understands this fact as a child, when he learns to read at Mr. Wopsle's aunt's school, and as a young man, when he takes lessons from Matthew Pocket. Ultimately, through the examples of Joe, Biddy, and Magwitch, Pip learns that social and educational improvement are irrelevant to one's real worth and that conscience and affection are to be valued above erudition and social standing.

Social Class

Throughout *Great Expectations*, Dickens explores the class system of Victorian England, ranging from the most wretched criminals (Magwitch) to the poor peasants of the marsh country (Joe and Biddy) to the middle class (Pumblechook) to the very rich (Miss Havisham). The theme of social class is central to the novel's plot and to the ultimate moral theme of the book—Pip's realization that wealth and class are less important than affection, loyalty, and inner worth. Pip achieves this realization when he is finally able to understand that, despite the esteem in which he holds Estella, one's social status is in no

way connected to one's real character. Drummle, for instance, is an upper-class lout, while Magwitch, a persecuted convict, has a deep inner worth.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the novel's treatment of social class is that the class system it portrays is based on the post-Industrial Revolution model of Victorian England. Dickens generally ignores the nobility and the hereditary aristocracy in favor of characters whose fortunes have been earned through commerce. Even Miss Havisham's family fortune was made through the brewery that is still connected to her manor. In this way, by connecting the theme of social class to the idea of work and self-advancement, Dickens subtly reinforces the novel's overarching theme of ambition and self-improvement.

Crime, Guilt, and Innocence

The theme of crime, guilt, and innocence is explored throughout the novel largely through the characters of the convicts and the criminal lawyer Jaggers. From the handcuffs Joe mends at the smithy to the gallows at the prison in London, the imagery of crime and criminal justice pervades the book, becoming an important symbol of Pip's inner struggle to reconcile his own inner moral conscience with the institutional justice system. In general, just as social class becomes a superficial standard of value that Pip must learn to look beyond in finding a better way to live his life, the external trappings of the criminal justice system (police, courts, jails, etc.) become a superficial standard of morality that Pip must learn to look beyond to trust his inner conscience. Magwitch, for instance, frightens Pip at first simply because he is a convict, and Pip feels guilty for helping him because he is afraid of the police. By the end of the book, however, Pip has discovered Magwitch's inner nobility, and is able to disregard his external status as a criminal. Prompted by his conscience, he helps Magwitch to evade the law and the police. As Pip has learned to trust his conscience and to value Magwitch's inner character, he has replaced an external standard of value with an internal one.

Motifs

Doubles

One of the most remarkable aspects of Dickens's work is its structural intricacy and remarkable balance. Dickens's plots involve complicated coincidences, extraordinarily tangled webs of human relationships, and highly dramatic developments in which setting, atmosphere, event, and character are all seamlessly fused.

In *Great Expectations*, perhaps the most visible sign of Dickens's commitment to intricate dramatic symmetry—apart from the knot of character relationships, of course—is the fascinating motif of doubles that runs throughout the book. From the earliest scenes of the novel to the last, nearly every element of *Great Expectations* is mirrored or doubled at some other point in the book. There are two convicts on the marsh (Magwitch and Compeyson), two invalids (Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham), two young women who interest Pip (Bidley and Estella), and so on. There are two secret benefactors: Magwitch, who gives Pip his fortune, and Pip, who mirrors Magwitch's action by secretly buying Herbert's way into the mercantile business. Finally, there are two adults who seek to mold children after their own purposes: Magwitch, who wishes to "own" a gentleman and decides to make Pip one, and Miss Havisham, who raises Estella to break men's hearts in revenge for her own broken heart. Interestingly, both of these actions are motivated by Compeyson: Magwitch resents but is nonetheless covetous of Compeyson's social status and education, which motivates his desire to make Pip a gentleman, and Miss Havisham's heart was broken when Compeyson left her at the altar, which motivates her desire to achieve revenge through Estella. The relationship between Miss Havisham and Compeyson—a well-born woman and a common man—further mirrors the relationship between Estella and Pip.

This doubling of elements has no real bearing on the novel's main themes, but, like the connection of weather and action, it adds to the sense that everything in Pip's world is connected. Throughout Dickens's works, this kind of dramatic symmetry is simply part of the fabric of his novelistic universe.

Comparison of Characters to Inanimate Objects

Throughout *Great Expectations*, the narrator uses images of inanimate objects to describe the physical appearance of characters—particularly minor characters, or characters with whom the narrator is not intimate. For example, Mrs. Joe looks as if she scrubs her face with a nutmeg grater, while the inscrutable features of Mr. Wemmick are repeatedly compared to a letter-box. This motif, which Dickens uses throughout his novels, may suggest a failure of empathy on the narrator's part, or it may suggest that the character's position in life is pressuring them to resemble a thing more than a human being. The latter interpretation would mean that the motif in general is part of a social critique, in that it implies that an institution such as the class system or the criminal justice system dehumanizes certain people.

Symbols

Satis House

In Satis House, Dickens creates a magnificent Gothic setting whose various elements symbolize Pip's romantic perception of the upper class and many other themes of the book. On her decaying body, Miss Havisham's wedding dress becomes an ironic symbol of death and degeneration. The wedding dress and the wedding feast symbolize Miss Havisham's past, and the stopped clocks throughout the house symbolize her determined attempt to freeze time by refusing to change anything from the way it was when she was jilted on her wedding day. The brewery next to the house symbolizes the connection between commerce and wealth: Miss Havisham's fortune is not the product of an aristocratic birth but of a recent success in industrial capitalism. Finally, the crumbling, dilapidated stones of the house, as well as the darkness and dust that pervade it, symbolize the general decadence of the lives of its inhabitants and of the upper class as a whole.

The Mists on the Marshes

The setting almost always symbolizes a theme in *Great Expectations* and always sets a tone that is perfectly matched to the novel's dramatic action. The misty marshes near Pip's childhood home in Kent, one of the most evocative of the book's settings, are used several times to symbolize danger and uncertainty. As a child, Pip brings Magwitch a file and food in these mists; later, he is kidnapped by Orlick and nearly murdered in them. Whenever Pip goes into the mists, something dangerous is likely to happen. Significantly, Pip must go through the mists when he travels to London shortly after receiving his fortune, alerting the reader that this apparently positive development in his life may have dangerous consequences.

Bentley Drummle

Although he is a minor character in the novel, Bentley Drummle provides an important contrast with Pip and represents the arbitrary nature of class distinctions. In his mind, Pip has connected the ideas of moral, social, and educational advancement so that each depends on the others. The coarse and cruel Drummle, a member of the upper class, provides Pip with proof that social advancement has no inherent connection to intelligence or moral worth. Drummle is a lout who has inherited immense wealth, while Pip's friend and brother-in-law Joe is a good man who works hard for the little he earns. Drummle's negative example helps Pip to see the inner worth of characters such as Magwitch and Joe,

and eventually to discard his immature fantasies about wealth and class in favor of a new understanding that is both more compassionate and more realistic.

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If interested in Dickens, you can browse the following websites:

Dickens on the web: http://www.fidnet.com/~dap1955/dickens/dickens_web.html

Funny animation by BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/bleakhouse/animation.shtml>

Charles Dickens made simple: <http://dickensfordummies.homestead.com/>

Discovering Dickens: <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/dickens/dickenstg.html>

Victorian England: <http://www.shelbycs.org/ms/media%20center/victorian%20england/index.htm>