

LESSON 9. ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

The novel in transition: Fusing Sentimentality & Social Criticism in Charles Dickens's Fiction

AIM OF THIS UNIT:

The unit offers an introduction to Victorian novelist Charles Dickens's art and life.

COMPULSORY READING:

Charles Dickens. *Great Expectations*

KEY WORDS & TOPICS:

Bildungsroman, social problem novel, sentimental novel, Bildungsroman, serial fiction

THE CREATIVE GENIUS OF CHARLES DICKENS



Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was an immensely popular writer of his times and he likely remains one of the most widely read classics today. The reason of his success was that he efficiently combined a variety of genres which addressed a large and varied audience. His influence can be measured by the fact that his name became a household term: *Dickensian* refers to phenomena reminiscent of Dickens' writings, such as poor social conditions or comically repulsive characters.

In his **social problem novels** (also called “**condition of England novels**”) he criticised social injustice, the unequal distribution of power, wealth, and prestige in Victorian England, the inhuman, degrading living conditions of the London poor. He often wove topical events into his narrative. His **urban fiction** focuses on the dark underside of city life, leads us workhouses, debtors' prisons, slums, the Victorian Underworld. His representation of street urchins, prostitutes, and petty criminals spoke to the emotions of readers, and borrowed its heart-breaking tropes – most prominently the figure of the unjustly suffering innocent orphan, a “child Christ figure” – from **sentimental literature**.

His criticism of child labour is fuelled by **autobiographical inspiration**. The traumatic experience of being forced to work in a blacking warehouse¹ because of his father's debts was sublimated in his novels about abandoned, abused child heroes in what we can consider as

¹ While his father was imprisoned for his debts, young Charles worked ten hours a day in the rotting basement of a factory overrun by rats, pasting labels on pots of boot blacking for six shillings a week.

therapeutical writing. The lost, helpless, persecuted child hero, a nameless orphan character is an Everyman figure, easy to identify with for all readers. The **Bildungsroman** structure, the story of the psychic, moral development and social rise of his hero is often complemented with a **Künstlerroman** plot, the story of the maturation into a socially responsible, self-reflective creative artist. Dickens also excelled in recycling **motifs from fairy tales** (unexpected, miraculous turns of events, role of chance, opposition of radically evil and good figures), **picaresque novels** (a rogue hero's adventures, journeys in multi-layered society, struggle with misleading appearances, and happy restoration of status quo due to final recognitions), and **political journalism** (social criticism via humorous caricaturisation of typical human character flaws and social malfunctions like nepotism, corruption, hypocrisy.)

His novels were published **serialised** in weekly or monthly instalments. The episodic structure – whereby each chapter ended in **cliff-hangers**² – generated suspense, excitement, and maintained the interest of readers. Perhaps Dickens was the first author to have a genuine **fandom**. Legend has it that anxious readers stormed the wharf in New York in 1841 when the ship bringing the journals with the final episode arrived to the port, so curious were they to learn about the misfortunes of Little Nell, one of Dickens' beloved heroes in *Old Curiosity Shop*. The author was even willing to respond to audience reactions and modified his plot and his characters to satisfy readers' desires. (see improvement of disabled Miss Mowcher's character in *David Copperfield*, and two endings of *Great Expectations*)

☹ Dickens has often been criticised for the lack of psychological depth, the incredible coincidences randomly resolving the conflicts of his plotlines, his sentimentalisation of the sufferings of the poor, powerless, and pure (especially innocent children), and his moral Darwinism that turned looks into personality markers (evil characters were depicted as ugly, the good as beautiful).

☺ Yet his discussion of sentiments – the celebration of the gift of self-sacrificial altruism and the martyrdom of the kind-hearted innocent – can also be interpreted as ironic commentary on the hypocrisy and narcissistic self-congratulation of his contemporary readers' compassion craze. The political criticism of his social realism is indubitable: he reminds us that the Cult of the Child was the product of an era that remorselessly abused children³, and calls attention to the paradoxical simultaneity of the idealisation of bourgeois children and the demonization/dehumanisation of the poor. Dickens' social sensibility, sense of realism, and political, critical views also came from the experiences of his early career as a Parliamentary Reporter and journalist. *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People* (1836-7) gathered in a single volume his journalistic writing published under the penname Boz, [illustrated by George Cruikshank](#). The 56 sketches offered a colourful depiction of London life.

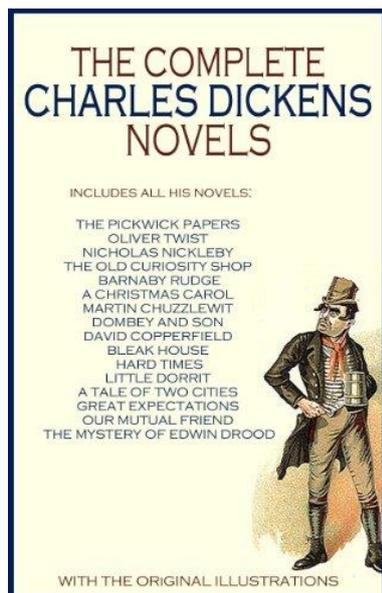


EXPLORE VISUAL EXTRAS

[Click here to watch a BBC animation about the Life of Charles Dickens.](#)

² A cliffhanger is a type of narrative or a plot device in which the end is curiously abrupt. The main characters are left in a difficult situation, without offering any resolution of conflicts.

³ In Dickens' time 'a fearful multitude' of an estimated 30000 naked, filthy, lawless, untutored, delinquent, brute, little city savages, street-children roamed London's streets. Their marginalized, dehumanised status was reflected in their common address as 'ownerless dogs', 'street urchins', 'gutter snipe', 'Hottentots' or 'street Arabs' (Cunningham 1991: 104, Andrews 1994: 29)



THE COMPLETE
CHARLES DICKENS
NOVELS

INCLUDES ALL HIS NOVELS:

- THE PICKWICK PAPERS
- OLIVER TWIST
- NICHOLAS NICKLEBY
- THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP
- BARNABY RUDGE
- A CHRISTMAS CAROL
- MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT
- DOMBEY AND SON
- DAVID COPPERFIELD
- BLEAK HOUSE
- HARD TIMES
- LITTLE DORRIT
- A TALE OF TWO CITIES
- GREAT EXPECTATIONS
- OUR MUTUAL FRIEND
- THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD

WITH THE ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS



LISTEN 

[Click here to listen to a Christmas Carol.](#)

[Click here to read about Christmas music in A Christmas Carol at the Dickens Society's Website](#)

[Click here to watch a trailer of Christmas Carol](#)



The serial publication of his first novel *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) marked the beginning of Dickens's literary success. Within a few years' time he became an international literary celebrity famed for his humour, social satire, and keen character observation. The novel is a sequence of loosely related **comic adventures** of the Pickwickian who make journeys by coach and get in all sorts of troubles in the English countryside, while they seek to explore the curious phenomena of life. Besides the introduction of memorable characters, the book provides a comic depiction of rural life before the Industrial Revolution.

Dickens was a prolific writer who published fifteen novels along with several short stories, novellas, essays, and plays. Just to mention a few, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) is a **social satire** about a young man trying to support his mother and sister, and featured memorable villains such as a malevolent businessman uncle, rakes manipulating women, and a wicked head of an abusive boys' boarding school where the protagonist temporarily served as a tutor.

Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-4) is a **picaresque** novel that traces an ironical study of the effects of greed, hypocrisy, and corruption on a character.

A Christmas Carol (1843) is a **potboiler**⁴, a **Gothic ghost story with a didactic moral message** that centres on Scrooge, a misanthrope who turns into a loving man under the influence of visits from ghosts of Christmases past. It calls attention to the importance of empathy and solidarity, to paying attention to the people living around us. At the time when he wrote the novella Dickens was concerned with the desperate situation of street children who turned to delinquency for the sake of survival. He supported the **Ragged Schools** movement that assumed that free education could improve the life of these youngsters.

He wrote two **historical novels**. *A Tale of two Cities* (1859) set in London and Paris is an intriguing story of love, courage,

and self-sacrifice during the French Revolution. *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) focuses on individuals caught up in the mindless violence of the mob during the Gordon Riots (1780).

Bleak House (1852-53) evolves and incorporates **Gothic** imagery, scenery and plot to tell a **tragic, romantic** tale about the inheritance and absurdities of English law in the 1850s. *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) is a **satirical murder mystery** on the malicious influence money has on personality development. (His other murder mystery novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) remains unfinished.)

Dombey and Son (1846-48) revisits the theme of financial success as a token of a happiness in a bittersweet story about a wealthy business man who dreams to have a son to continue his business. The original title *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail, and for Exportation* identifies the text as **finance fiction**, but the novel touches upon **social**

⁴ A potboiler is a popular piece written for profit and entertainment.

problem novel themes too, such as arranged marriages, child cruelty, betrayal, deceit, and interpersonal relations between different social classes.

Hard Times (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and the *Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) combines tropes from **the sentimental novel, the psychological novel, and social realism** as tragic and moving tales portray characters' growth through hardship, disappointments, toil and troubles and reflect on the shortcomings of government and society.

Oliver Twist (1837-39), *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and *Great Expectations* (1860-61) are **Bildungsromans** (possibly **Künstlerromans**) narrating the **coming of age stories** of purehearted poor orphans who must overcome obstacles, fight villains, defeat social prejudice, and learn from their own mistakes to reach their happy ending as fine young gentlemen.





THINK

EXERCISE

Read this introductory passage from the *Tale of Two Cities* and think about how Dickens's words reflect on the Victorian era.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

OLIVER TWIST (1837-9)

Intertextual References: *Oliver Twist*' subtitle, *a Parish Boy's Progress* (1837-9) resonates with *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's 17th century religious allegory about Everyman's striving for goodness throughout his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The theme of struggling with the lure of earthly delights is tackled in a more secular context on William Hogarth's 18th century painting series depicting *A Rake's Progress*. The idea of progress is a governing principle of the Darwinian theory of evolution, and of the bourgeois worldview grounded in the belief in the infinite improvability of self and society alike.

Genre: The temptation/ pilgrimage/ conversion/ reconciliation plotline ties in with the conventional narrative structure of the **Bildungsroman**.

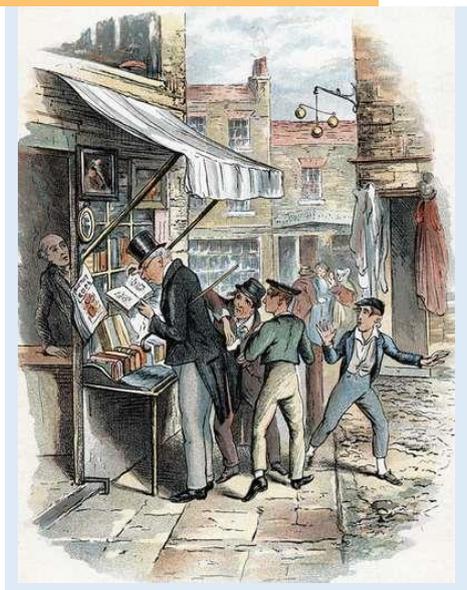
As an exposure novel, the book problematizes **social ills** (oppression, poverty, neglect, abuse) in a realistic tone fused with grotesque sarcasm, dark humour, and sentimentality. Because of dealing with crime, murder, and explicit, graphic depiction of violence, the novel was classed as a sensation novel, or a **Newgate Novel** (named after Newgate Prison).

Throughout the description of the life of the London poor in orphanages, workhouses, and suburban slums Dickens efficiently combined **melodrama** with **caricature** and **absurdity**.

The sentimentalisation of the innocent child's suffering is a popular trope in Victorian fiction akin with many of Andersen's **fairy tale** themes (see Little Match Girl)

Plot: The story follows the adventures of Oliver Twist, a poor but pure hearted orphan boy. Misfortunes force him to leave the baby farm (orphanage) where he is sheltered to toil at a workhouse then a funeral home (because of his desperate looks, he is hired as a mourner at children's funerals) to eventually join a gang of juvenile pickpockets in London. In the end, he is miraculously rescued and can join his long lost, wealthy family.

Social criticism: The novel can be interpreted as an argument stated in fictional terms: an attack on the inhumanity of New Poor Law (1834) which halted government subsidies to the able-bodied poor unless they entered workhouses (that offered humble accommodation and employment to them). The realistic depiction of the London Underworld allowed for a

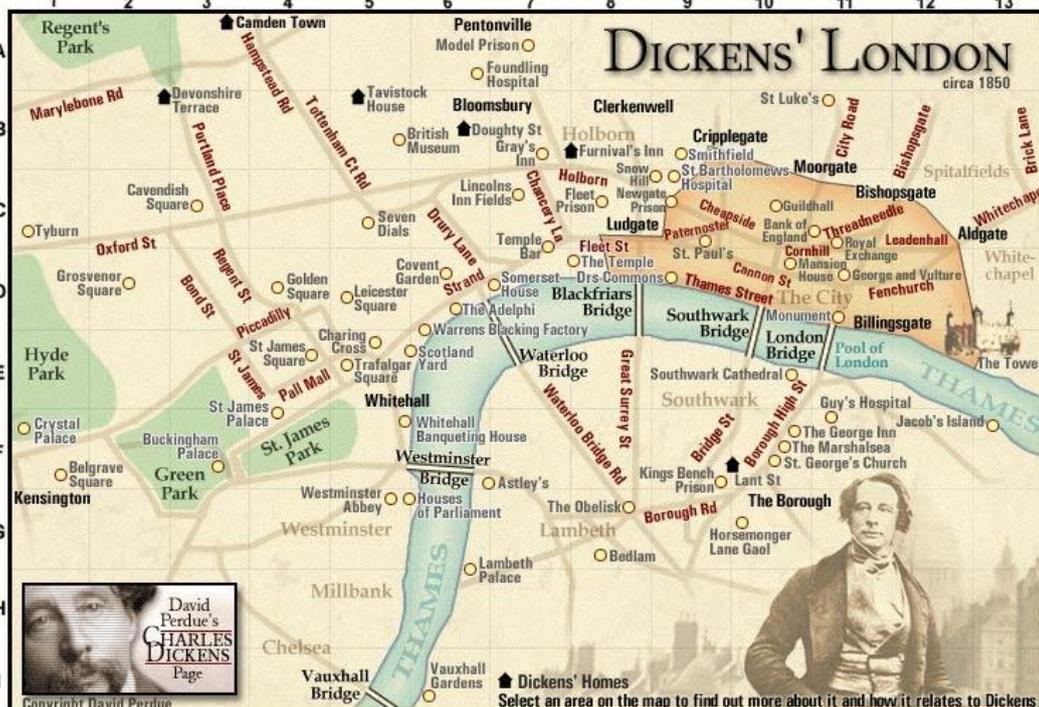


demythologisation of the glamorous portrayal of criminals (thieves, prostitutes, gamblers). The fallible humanity of these wrongdoers was highlighted without their demonisation or idealisation, while foregrounding the collective social responsibility in maintaining or putting an end to injustice. Dickens calls attention to the double standards in the evaluation of children conforming to their class belonging. While the offspring of the bourgeoisie are cherished, spoiled, and idealised as tokens of the hope in a better future, poor children were abused under miserable circumstances working in mines, factories, or the streets. Streetchildren as young as 5 or 6 could work as chimney sweeps, pickpockets, beggars, or prostitutes. Dickens' poor children symbolised innocence amidst corruption.

The Artful Dodger The innocently suffering Oliver Twist is often regarded as a fictional self-portrait of the author. Yet his streetwise sidekick friend, the grown-up-boychild, orphan *ingénue* Artful Dodger is just as exciting as a rational realist agent of social criticism and a romantic agent of inventive infantile imagination. This accomplished young pickpocket, the leader of Fagin's gang of juvenile criminals **challenges the two contrary Victorian child-stereotypes**. He is neither meek, molested angel nor beastly criminal prone to sin. He is dirty, unscrupulous, sly, treacherous, but also a helpful friend to the runaway workhouse Oliver in need. As James Kincaid points out, the Dodger is the harbinger of the modern naughty kid hero, **'the good-bad child,'** never malicious but mischievous, a 'loveable barbarian' who cannot be held responsible for his misdeeds as he is fundamentally good at heart and only deviated from his naturally empathic self by his social circumstances.

Local colour: Many of Dickens's stories take place in London but the city is much more than a background, as an enchanted place – compared by the author to a magic lantern, the popular proto-cinematic entertainment form of the era – it gains a special symbolical character, even a personality of its own. The foggy London slums of the Victorian times might have already disappeared, but several sites are still identifiable. Dickens's son wrote a guidebook entitled Dickens's Dictionary of London in 1879.

[CLICK HERE for a map of Dickens' favourite locations at the Londonist website](#)



DAVID COPPERFIELD (1849-50)

The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He Never Meant to Publish on Any Account) (1849-50) was published in 19 monthly 1 shilling instalments, with 32 pages of text and 2 illustrations by Hablot Knight Browne "Phiz." Dickens called the novel "his favourite child". The **autobiographical (autofictional)** form is highlighted by the title's insistence on the subjective viewpoint of the narrator-focaliser-lifewriter. Ironically, David's unwillingness to have his memoirs published attests the veracity, the credibility of the narrative, granting the truth value of a found manuscript to the text. The autobiographical inspiration is commonly justified by the similarity of David Copperfield's and Charles Dickens's initials. The novel is a *Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman* that tracks the journey how a poor runaway orphan becomes a respectable man, husband, father, and writer. The theme is similar to that of *Oliver Twist*: the trial and triumph of innocence amidst corruption.

Dickens offers a realistic yet sarcastic depiction of **Victorian social realities**, including the

- + difficulties youngsters had to face in boarding schools (see Salem House ruled by ruthless headmaster Mr. Creakle),
- + unjust dehumanisation by prostitution (explains reasons for fall of fallen woman),
- + hypocrisy of materialistic society (see the falsity of the pomp and ceremony of Victorian burial practices, turning death into a business),
- + discrimination in education,
- + unfair treatment of working class,
- + villainy disguised as humility, masked ruthlessness (his morally disgusting villains are his best comic characters: Uriah Heep, Fagin, Bumble)



[CLICK HERE TO SEE ALL THE ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE NOVEL BY PHIZ](#)



GREAT EXPECTATIONS (1849-50)

Great Expectations (1860-1), Dickens's 13th novel was first published in *All the Year Round* in 1860-61 and issued in a book form in 1861. One of its author's greatest critical and popular successes, it chronicles the coming of age of the orphaned Pip, while addressing issues preoccupying Victorian contemporaries (**pitfalls of the bourgeois dream of social class mobility, the dangers of urbanisation, industrialisation, the assumption that wealth is a token of happiness, snobbish misjudging people by appearances**) as well as timeless human experiences and dilemmas (**the question of genuine human worth, moral values, sin, redemption, gratitude, suffering, love, seduction, revenge, disillusion**).

In line with the *Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman* plotline, the story centres on the coming of age of a simple country boy driven by the desire to be a gentleman, who must fight the corruptive influence, biases, and manipulations of city life to learn that there is more to life

than wealth. Dickens uses easily recognisable **stock characters** which reoccur in contemporary **sensation novels, sentimental novels, and realist novels** alike: the orphaned child, the escaped convict, the *femme fatale* madwoman, the malicious benefactor, the corrupted manipulator. Appealing to readers' emotions, evoking pity and/or horror, while raising social critical sensibilities, these figures embody vices presumed to be typical of the Victorian times. The novel also recycles tropes from **Gothic fiction**, recognisable in the figures of **doubles** (Estella/Miss Havisham: 2 *femmes fatales*, Pip/Herbert: 2 social climbers, Miss Havisham/Magwitch: 2 adults willing to shape children in their own image), the ominous atmosphere of the marshland, the unforgivable crime of Magwitch, and Pip's terror in the opening passage when he comes to realisation of his very existence, establishes his sense of self through fear (through being scared to death by the escaped convict).

As the title suggests, a central theme of the book is **the challenging of expectations, coming to term with disillusion, and the recognition of misjudgement**. The **series of misreadings** Pip struggles with are as follows:

- ✚ Misreading gravestone's letters on parents' tomb as personality markers
- ✚ Misreading convict as evil
- ✚ Misreading Miss Havisham as benefactor
- ✚ Misreading Estella as love of his life
- ✚ Misreading social ascension as token of satiety

Misconception and succeeding revision/ correction of one's faulty judgments has an interesting extradiegetic aspect: Dickens, persuaded by public opinion and writer friends' advice, changed the novel's ending to a happier one. The closure is still ambiguous but it holds a possibility for the lovers to unite.

The novel lends itself easily to a **psychoanalytical reading** and was presumably one of Sigmund Freud's favourite books.

- ✚ The *Bildungsroman* genre chronicles how throughout his socialisation, the hero learns to suppress his sexual and aggressive drives and desires to allow his superego triumph over his unconscious. The narrative voice involves the perspective of an innocent, wide-eyed child contrasted with that of his wiser, sadder adult self.
- ✚ Dickens excels in fictionalising the **trauma of orphanhood** and the conflicts of dysfunctional families. (Pip is brought up by his sister who is unable to express her emotions for him. Note that unloving female figures are symptomatically punished in Dickens' plot.)
- ✚ The story can be interpreted as the search for love, for social prestige, but also the **search for a Father figure**. Orphaned Pip seeks an elderly, caring, knowing paternal figure in Joe, Magwitch, and Jaggers alike. They all fail, hence Pip must grow up by becoming a father (to) himself.
- ✚ The opening passage of the book offers a psychoanalytical case study of the **traumatic self-constitution: Pip comes to sense of self through fear**.

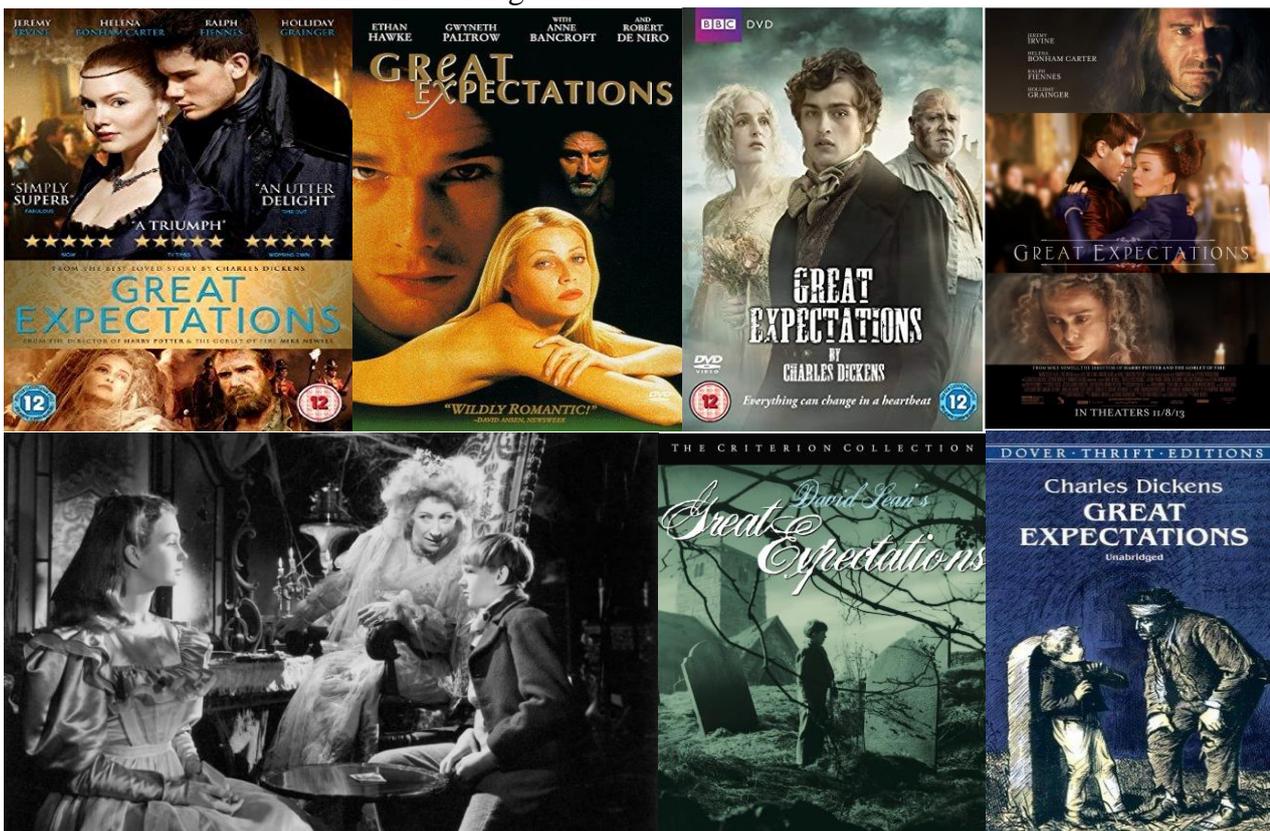
Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair

from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

- ✚ The **quest for a name** is paradoxical as the story starts with Philip Pirrip naming himself as Pip, creating for himself an inalienable self-identity by courtesy of the performative act of **self-naming**. (The self-made man is a great role model of Victorian times/fiction.)

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

- ✚ For Pip's emerging consciousness his emotions and moral judgments are ambiguous. As a good boy obeying to the altruistic impulse of humaneness he is helping a hungry man lost in the marshes, but hence he also becomes a partner in crime, an accomplice, bringing a life-long anxiety of shame and remorse upon himself. The hero must struggle with these **contradictory emotions** throughout his maturation, realising the difficulty of harmonising the dream "to be good" and "to become a gentleman."
- ✚ The story is organised by **contradictory plotlines fuelled by desire and fear**. (The **Freudian pleasure principle and death drive** emerge as major motivations of all deeds of human actors.)
 1. Pressure of secret communion with convict
 2. Pressure to comply with social expectations
 3. Dream of breaking spell of Satis House, to become a gentleman, to marry Estella
 4. Nightmare of erotic frustration, broken faith, Miss Havisham as a witch, Estella as her trainee double
 5. Misrecognition of benefactor, of road to happiness
 6. Sympathy for/ fear of/ disgust by Magwitch
 7. Connection of Estella & Magwitch



As the numerous film adaptations attest, the novel enjoyed a lively creative aftermath.

Intertextual sources of inspiration: the novel efficiently **combines the following genres**:

- ✚ Novel of manners
- ✚ Mystery novel
- ✚ Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman
- ✚ Picaresque
- ✚ Realist novel of social change
- ✚ Fairy tale
- ✚ Gothic novel
- ✚ Pantomime tradition



EXERCISE

Read the quotes below and think about their significance in the novel.

*As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), **my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "Also Georgiana Wife of the Above," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine,—who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle,—I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.***

[CLICK HERE FOR AN AUDIOBOOK VERSION OF GREAT EXPECTATIONS AT LIT2GO](#)

LISTEN



“And when it come to character, warn’t it Compeyson as had been to the school, and warn’t it his schoolfellows as was in this position and in that, and warn’t it him as had been know’d by witnesses in such clubs and societies, and nowt to his disadvantage? And warn’t it me as had been tried afore, and as had been know’d up hill and down dale in Bridewells and Lock-Ups? And when it come to speech-making, warn’t it Compeyson as could speak to ‘em wi’ his face dropping every now and then into his white pocket-handkercher – ah! and wi’ verses in his speech, too – and warn’t it me as could only say, ‘Gentlemen, this man at my side is a most precious rascal’? And when the verdict come, warn’t it Compeyson as was recommended to mercy on account of good character and bad company, and giving up all the information he could agen me, and warn’t it me as got never a word but Guilty? . . . “

We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did. To the best of my belief, our case was in the last aspect a rather common one.

“Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape.”



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A QUIZ BY CLICKING HERE

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1jJLGdfJBwRASkbSki_xOojIGhUACU7zSzi87D_gXpn4/edit
& [HERE](#)

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