

CHRISTIAN GUIDES  
TO THE CLASSICS



DICKENS'S  
**GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

LELAND RYKEN

*Dickens's "Great Expectations"*

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## CHAPTER 1

# Terror in the Churchyard

Preliminary note about format. Dickens published *Great Expectations* with chapters that bear numbers only, without titles. The descriptive chapter titles in this guide have been added to help us identify and remember what makes each chapter distinctive.

### Plot Summary

Seven-year-old Pip is lingering in a churchyard (British term for a cemetery adjacent to a church) on a late winter afternoon. His parents and five siblings lie buried before him. In this spooky setting, "a fearful man" leaps from behind a tombstone and grabs Pip. The fearful man turns out to be an escaped convict, and his cross-examining of Pip yields him the information that Pip lives in the home of the local blacksmith. The convict turns Pip upside down and threatens him with death if he does not appear the next morning with a file and food. Thus terrorized, Pip "ran home without stopping."

### Commentary

The opening page and chapter of a novel are the crucial test that every successful novelist must pass. The storyteller needs to put something in front of readers to draw them into the story and arouse enough interest to make them want to keep reading. Dickens has obviously cast his lot with the evocation of terror as his "hook" into the story. Everything that happens in this famous opening chapter evokes terror.

A good preliminary exercise for every episode in a story is to analyze what there is about the story material or technique that arouses our interest. Novelist E. M. Forster gives classic expression to this principle: a story "can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next." Dickens has an unflinching knack for making us want to know what happens next.

Dickens is a master realist, basing his material on close observation of real life. Paradoxically, though, he makes continuous use of fairy tale material.

The first terror is the setting: winter, late afternoon, a churchyard, biting weather, an escaped convict capturing a helpless seven-year-old, a hangman's gibbet silhouetted against the sky. The process of interrogation that the convict imposes on Pip intensifies the terror. So do the threats that the convict unleashes, such as the threat to tear out Pip's heart and liver. The physical posture of Pip heightens the effect, as we see Pip shivering while sitting on a tombstone, being turned upside down so the bread in his pocket will fall out, and running home as the cattle lift their heads to stare at him.

But of course this is also our introduction to the first-person narrator and protagonist of the story. He is the archetypal child, first of all, and his way of thinking is naïve and childish. Second, he is an orphan, in important ways alone in the world, looking down at the graves of seven family members on the first page of the novel. Additionally, we catch an early glimpse of Pip's current family situation, with his sister as a sinister mother figure and the local blacksmith as a substitute father.

### For Reflection or Discussion

Chapter 1 can be summarized under the formula "design for terror"; what things make up the terror? What feelings are evoked? What details show Dickens's skill at creating atmosphere?

This chapter uses conventions of the opening of ghost stories: a figure of terror springs from behind a grave at twilight on a winter afternoon as the wind howls and a hangman's gibbet is silhouetted against the sky.

This novel is thoroughly rooted in the England of Dickens's day—so much so that it ranks as regional writing (writing that contains numerous references to a specific geographic region). One can go to a cemetery in Cooling in Kent and find the row of family graves that Dickens claims as the model for his description on the first page of this novel.

## CHAPTER 2

# Terror at Home

### Plot Summary

This chapter narrates what happened at home on the evening after Pip had been terrorized in the churchyard. Terror in the churchyard at the hands of a convict is now succeeded by a scene of abuse at the hands of Pip's sister, who functions in Pip's life as a surrogate mother. Most of the chapter is devoted to filling out the picture of Pip's home situation, through a pattern known as a foil (based on "to set off"). The unpleasantness of Pip's sister and the compassionate nature of Joe Gargery (who married Pip's sister and fills the role of father to him) stand out, highlighted by being contrasted to each other.

The second half of the chapter shifts from an emphasis on characterization (of Joe and his wife) to plot. We learn that the time is Christmas Eve and additionally that there has been an escape from the convict ship that is regularly docked in the marshes on the edge of town. This, of course, ties into the man who captured Pip in the churchyard and to whom Pip feels obliged to provide a file and food the next morning. Pip endures a sleepless night, ridden with anxiety about his morning mission. The chapter ends with Pip leaving the house and running "for the misty marshes."

### Commentary

The first phase of a well-made plot is exposition—the dispensing of background information that readers need to know before the plot conflict can begin. In *Great Expectations* this exposition lasts

An important feature of every story, but of a novel especially, is that the storyteller creates a whole world of the imagination that we enter as we read. The opening pages of a novel constitute our entry into that world. We need to operate on the premise that everything that the author includes is an important part of the world that gets set in motion as the story unfolds. Accordingly, noting the features of the imagined world is an important part of our analytic task.

for seven chapters. This chapter gives us a "slice of life" in Pip's home situation. It is a mixed situation, with the harshness of Pip's sister contrasted to the innate good nature of Joe Gargery.

Humor is a Dickens hallmark, and we need to be alert to it. Even in the most oppressive of situations portrayed in this novel, there is often a note of humor. For example, Pip sits in terror at the supper table because he needs to save bread for the convict, yet the whole scene in which he "bolts his food" is handled in a comic manner. Often it is Dickens's way of expressing something (his "way with words") that produces the humor, as when Pip describes his sister's practice of shoving him in irritation with the statement: "I often served as a connubial missile."

As the scene continues to unfold, Dickens skillfully introduces a note of foreshadowing about the action that we know will take place in the churchyard the next morning. The criminal motif will be of central importance in the story, and we are given a lot of information about an unusual feature of Pip's hometown, namely, the continuous presence of convict ships in the marshes, where criminals are set to work. The chapter ends on a note of high suspense as Pip steals a file and food and heads out for the marshes.

### For Reflection or Discussion

What are the important features of Pip's home situation? Why do you think Dickens gave such a detailed picture of the domestic life in the Gargery household? What additional features of the world of the novel emerge in the chapter?

In the early chapters of *Great Expectations*, Dickens shows his genius at portraying childhood psychology. Much of it is humorous, as when on page one Pip concludes on the basis of the lettering on his parents' tombstones that his father was a "square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair," and his mother "freckled and sickly." But on a more somber note, we relive childhood fears as Dickens takes us inside the mind of the seven-year-old Pip.

One way in which storytellers make us want to keep reading is to create characters about whose destinies we are made to care. This applies preeminently to the protagonist and explains the leisurely pace of the novel in this chapter: Dickens wants us to get to know his protagonist and is in no hurry to return Pip to the marshes.

## CHAPTER 3

# In the Churchyard Again

### Plot Summary

The design for terror continues in this episode. The scene is as spooky as it had been in chapter 1. A thick mist blankets the scene. The cattle stare in a frightening manner. We expect the worst. But at least we think we know what will happen, until Dickens springs a new terror on us: the first person Pip meets is, indeed, a convict, but not the one Pip had met the afternoon before. But Pip presses on with his mission and eventually comes to the original convict, who devours the food as a dog eats. Our curiosity is aroused (but not satisfied) when the convict is greatly agitated by the news of another convict loose in the region. The chapter ends on a note of high drama (a forte of Dickens) with the convict "filing at his iron [chain] like a madman."

### Commentary

The first thing to do is relish the descriptive genius of Dickens. No one has ever excelled Dickens's ability to describe the physical details of a setting. We also need to understand that this novel is "vintage British" in the pictures of landscape and weather that Dickens gives us. The means by which a storyteller awakens and maintains our interest are many, and one method is the creation of scenes that are so impelling to our imagination that we want to keep reading.

Balancing this attention to setting is the characterization of the original convict—the "fearful man," as he is called in chapter 1. We learn more

In his classic short essay entitled "On Stories," C. S. Lewis makes it clear that he greatly values the quality of atmosphere in a story. Dickens is a master at creating atmosphere. Another way of getting at this quality of good stories is to say that world making is one of the most important tasks of a storyteller.

and more about this figure—about his physical suffering on the cold marsh, his fear about being recaptured, and about his antagonism (not yet explained) toward the other escaped convict (an antagonism we only slightly detect, but that will explode just a few chapters later). A key moment occurs halfway through the chapter that would be easy to overlook entirely but that is actually one of the main events in the chapter. "Something clicked" in the throat of the convict, and Pip responds by feeling and expressing pity for the convict. Pip says, "I am glad you enjoy" the food. A bond has been established between Pip and the convict that will be a mainspring of the story's action.

### For Reflection or Discussion

What descriptive touches are particularly striking? How does the convict come alive in your imagination as the chapter unfolds? At what moments do you sense that something has just happened that possesses a hidden and as yet unknown significance?

## CHAPTER 4

# A Memorable Christmas Dinner

### Plot Summary

Stories are constructed on the principle of a back-and-forth rhythm between contrasting elements. The first six chapters of *Great Expectations* keep alternating between the sinister marsh and the

Great stories require that we reread them. On a first reading we are not fully aware of the eventual significance of certain details. This chapter is a prime example. It contains hints of things—clues laid down—that explode with significance when we reach later phases of the story. Two examples are the clicking in the convict's throat accompanied by Pip's gesture of compassion and the convict's intense and implicitly hostile feeling toward the other fugitive on the marsh.

The comedy of this episode is unmistakable, but there is a dark underside as well: Pip continues to be mistreated by the adults. And this brings us to an important feature of the novel as a whole: convict and child are strangely bonded in this story, and what they have in common is that they are both outsiders in their society and at some level victims of it.

The British have always excelled in producing idiosyncrasies of character, and Dickens is a master at portraying them. The four new characters introduced into the story in this chapter are prime specimens, especially Uncle Pumblechook and Mr. Wopsle.

Gargery house. Despite the obvious contrasts represented by this alternation, there are also things that remain constant across the chapters. The primary "constant" in these chapters is that adults terrorized the boy Pip.

The main action in this chapter is the account of Christmas dinner at the Gargery household. Four unforgettable local townspeople join the Gargery household for Christmas dinner. There is a double focus: the annual Christmas dinner rituals of a typical British household are reenacted before us, and we overhear the table conversation of this particular Christmas dinner. The element of terror stems from the fact that Pip knows all through the meal that in fulfilling his obligations to the convict he has (a) replaced the container of brandy with a bad-tasting mixture known at the time as Tar-water and (b) removed a much-anticipated pork pie from the pantry. The suspense becomes so unbearable for Pip that at the end of the chapter he makes a bolt from the table.

### Commentary

Two things hold the key to the enjoyment of this chapter. First, it is a comic masterpiece. Highlights include the physical description of Uncle Pumblechook, the idiosyncrasies of personality among the guests, the conversation around the table, the style with which Dickens expresses certain things, and the scene in which Uncle Pumblechook drinks the horrible-tasting Tar-water.

Second, Dickens is often said to be "the man who invented Christmas" in England. This is of course an exaggeration, but the fact remains that in his Christmas stories Dickens codified the spirit and practices of English Christmas-

keeping. Chapter 4 of *Great Expectations* ranks as a "primary text" for documenting what Christmas was like in Victorian England. We need to allow Christmas dinner in the Gargery house to come alive in our imagination.

### For Reflection or Discussion

What details constitute the humor of this chapter? What is the contrasting dark side of what happens around the dinner table? What makes a Victorian Christmas inviting as we reenact it in this chapter?

## CHAPTER 5

# Chase and Capture on the Marsh

### Plot Summary

The Christmas dinner scene had ended with Pip bolting for the door, where he had run right into a soldier holding handcuffs. The party of soldiers has appeared on the Gargery doorstep in search of a blacksmith who can fix the handcuffs as part of their search to capture the escaped convicts. Quickly the action shifts to a chase scene on the marsh. Joe and Pip join the excitement of the chase. The convicts are captured, but the plotline does not exactly run in the conventional path. When the soldiers come upon the convicts, they are engaged in a life-and-death hand fight. One of the convicts is in extreme fear of the other, but at this point it is for us a mystery. The original convict sees Pip in the group, and in an effort to save Pip from reprisal in regard to the stolen food, he

The archetype at work in this chapter is familiar to storytelling and to real life. It is variously known as the "flight and pursuit" motif and the "chase and capture" motif. Literary critics would also identify the fight between the two convicts as a "scene of violence."

claims to have stolen it. Joe responds with sympathy to the convict, saying that he and Pip would not want a convict to have "starved to death, . . . poor miserable fellow-creatur." As in an earlier scene, something "clicked in the man's throat again." On a first reading, the detail seems unimportant, but it expresses the convict's emotional response to Pip and Joe's generosity and compassion. Later, the convict acts on his emotional reaction by becoming Pip's anonymous benefactor.

### Commentary

The back-and-forth swing of the story continues, but the first third of the chapter is a blend of the two story lines that have been emerging. The party of soldiers belongs to the convict story, but as Joe repairs the handcuffs, everyone else perpetuates the Christmas spirit as they stand around drinking wine and chatting. Then the warmth and confined space of the house is replaced by the "cold and threatening weather" and "the dismal wilderness" that the pursuers enter as they track the convicts. The relative quietness of the domestic sphere gives way to shouts and physical exertion. There is even a scene of violence as the two convicts fight each other. In the concluding sentence, the extinguishing of torches as they are "flung hissing into the water" brings this mini-adventure story to a close.

### For Reflection or Discussion

What domestic touches serve as a balance to the dominant spirit of physical conflict and eventual violence of the action? If you are unfamiliar with the story as a whole, what details gesture toward some hidden significance? If you are familiar with

Yet another genre to which this story belongs is the adventure story. Ernest Baker, in his book *A History of the English Novel*, has written, "*Great Expectations* is a novel of adventure, the sort of adventure that might well happen to a person who got himself mixed up with questionable characters, in such a spot as this, close to the convictships, or in what really were in those days the wilds of London."

the subsequent action, what significance do you attribute to such events as the accusations that the two convicts exchange and the conversation between the convict and Joe at the end of the chapter?

## CHAPTER 6

# Return to Normalcy

### Plot Summary

In this brief chapter, Joe and Pip return home after the adventure of the convicts' capture on the marsh. The focus is on the loving relationship between Joe and Pip, with the hostility of Pip's sister toward him as a discordant counterthrust.

### Commentary

This chapter serves the function of standing as a foil or contrast to the action narrated in the preceding five chapters. Virtually everything in the preceding six chapters has been extraordinary—once-in-a-lifetime events in Pip's life. This chapter represents a return to normal living. To enhance the sense of relief from violence, Dickens adds his usual humorous touches, as when Pip describes himself as "staggering on the kitchen floor like a little drunkard" when Joe finally removes him from his back, or the various theories about how the convict could have gotten into the pantry (which of course he never did) to steal the food.

### For Reflection or Discussion

In what ways does this chapter give us a relief from the tension and chaos of the preceding five chapters?

Several archetypal character types are in full force in this chapter. Pip is the orphan boy, at the mercy of those who are willing to raise him. Pip's sister fills the fairy-story role of wicked stepmother in her mistreatment of her brother Pip and in her shrewish behavior toward her husband Joe. By contrast, Joe is the benevolent father figure who occasionally appears in literature.

## CHAPTER 7

# Pip's Childhood Education

### Plot Summary

The general shape of *Great Expectations* traces the protagonist's life from childhood to adulthood. Education in school is a regular part of that development, so Dickens gives us a version of school in this chapter. The approach to the subject is satiric, as Dickens treats the education that Pip receives from Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt in a spirit of ridicule. But we do not dwell on the inadequacy of Pip's education for very long; instead Dickens shifts the focus to the relationship between Pip and Joe, starting with Pip's attempt to share some of his newly acquired learning with Joe.

As the conversation between Pip and Joe unfolds, Joe gives a glimpse of the dysfunctional family in which he was raised, with a father "given to drink." That, in turn, morphs into Joe's disclosure that when he married Pip's sister he had insisted that he would also provide for Pip. Pip melts with emotion, and when Joe also broaches the subject of his wife's shrewish behavior toward him and Pip, it proves such a landmark event that Pip could "date a new admiration of Joe from that night." All of this tenderness comes to an abrupt halt when Mrs. Joe arrives home and announces "in her snappish way" that a "Miss Havisham up town" wants Pip to come "to go and play there." Pip is duly cleaned up and put into a suit and sent to "play" at Miss Havisham's.

### Commentary

At this point in the story we are still in the opening phase of the plot known as exposition. To devote

Much of the humor in Dickens's work consists of how Dickens expresses his content, and not necessarily because the situation itself is humorous. When Pip shows Joe a piece of his writing filled with misspellings, "Joe received it as a miracle of erudition." Mrs. Joe's ill-tempered behavior is expressed by Joe in terms of how "your sister is given to government." Pip's being scrubbed and dressed in a clean suit is described thus: "When my ablutions were completed, I was put into clean linen of the stiffest character, like a young penitent into sackcloth."

fifty pages to exposition is an unusual strategy on the part of Dickens. We need to accept Dickens's game plan and understand that he wants to give us a full picture of life in "Hometown." The keynotes of this picture as it is extended into a seventh chapter are (a) the unsophisticated and intellectually impoverished situation in which Pip is raised (and from which he will become obsessed to escape), (b) the idealized character of Joe and of his nurturing behavior toward Pip, and (c) the emotional neediness of Pip (a wounded child if ever there was one).

### **For Reflection or Discussion**

What elements of comic relief are present early in the chapter? How is Pip portrayed as emotionally needy? What things make up the idealized portrayal of Joe? How does Dickens's comic spirit show itself in this chapter?

## **CHAPTER 8**

# **Pip's Initiation into Life at Miss Havisham's House**

### **Plot Summary**

This packed chapter is the longest chapter up to this point. The main action is Pip's first visit to Miss Havisham's house. In order to ensure his punctual arrival at the house of the mysterious Miss Havisham, Pip sleeps at the house of Uncle Pumblechook. When he stands before Miss Havisham's house at ten the next morning, he beholds a house "which was of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it." A sassy and in-

There are so many archetypes at work in this chapter that it is hard to imagine how such richness could converge in just one chapter. Miss Havisham is the reclusive spinster, as well as the spurned woman. Estella will eventually become the coquette or "tease," but at this early stage she is mainly the insulting girl. Pip is the child victim. Miss Havisham's house is the waste house—the deserted house with everything in disarray and decay. The adjacent garden is the deserted garden, with overtones of a lost garden of Eden.

The literary tradition of the gothic permeates the entire chapter. Gothic literature is a type of horror story, with the added element of the supernatural. Miss Havisham's house is a haunted house, with Estella as its guardian or gatekeeper and Miss Havisham as the resident ghost. The supernatural or phantom element appears at the end when Pip looks back at the house and incorrectly thinks that he sees "a figure hanging there by the neck."

sulting girl (later identified as Estella) ushers Pip into the room of Miss Havisham. It is a shocking place in every way, with everything in decay. It is in this chapter that we first learn the name of the house—Satis House (based on the Greek "enough"). There is no more famous literary house in British literature than Satis House.

Gradually a picture of Miss Havisham emerges. She is a psychotic, reclusive woman. The central fact of her life is that she was jilted on her wedding day. Ever since, she has worn white and in other ways wears clothing and jewelry suggestive of a wedding. She speaks to Pip of a broken heart and of needing diversion. That is where Pip factors in: he has been summoned to "play" for Miss Havisham. On this occasion the play consists of playing cards with Estella, who insults Pip as being "a common laboring-boy." Pip is ashamed of his common social standing and at the same time captivated by Estella.

After the card playing, Pip is led into a deserted garden adjacent to an abandoned brewery. Estella brings him food and drink. Pip feels so humiliated that he kicks the garden wall. He also recoils from the injustice of his mistreatment from Estella. Eventually Estella pushes Pip contemptuously through the locked gate at the front of the house. The final note is Pip's overwhelming sense of being "a common laboring-boy" with coarse hands and thick boots.

### Commentary

We do not fully grasp on a first reading that the visit to Miss Havisham's house is the inciting moment in the well-made plot of this story. Given the general context of Pip's life as it was built up in

our imagination for the first seven chapters, something is infused into the mix to get the plot conflicts started. Pip himself will "flag" the event in this way at the end of the following chapter: "That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me." The change to which Pip refers is the awakening desire within him to rise socially beyond his current life in the blacksmith's house.

But that quest is still to come. In this chapter we are dazzled by the strangeness of everything (and by Dickens's inventiveness in composing that strangeness). Four things stand out. First is the spookiness of the place. The second is the characterization of the psychotic Miss Havisham and the disclosure of some of her pathologies (seriously aberrant patterns of behavior). Third, Estella is also introduced into the cast of "lead players" in the novel. On a first reading, we do not fully realize this, unless we know the conventions of the love story. If we have read enough love stories, Estella's insulting behavior toward Pip is a sure sign that the action will turn into a love story.

Finally, Pip's characterization receives major new development in this chapter. Pip's responses to what is inflicted on him by others (including Uncle Pumblechook in Pip's "overnight" and breakfast in his house) form the background chorus to the strange events happening in the foreground. The big change that engulfs Pip is that his discontent is aroused. The rising action phase of plot that will now unfold is the story of Pip's quest to rise socially, partly to become worthy of winning the love of Estella.

### For Reflection or Discussion

The avenues toward exploring this chapter are numerous. One is to explore Dickens's inventive

All of the early stages of this novel contain hints of something that will eventually become a major part of the story but that on a first reading we overlook. When Estella resists the thought of playing cards with such "a common laboring-boy," Miss Havisham says under her breath, "You can break his heart." As the story unfolds, it turns out that this is exactly Miss Havisham's intention: she is the guardian of the orphaned Estella, through whom she sees a way to get revenge on males in the wake of her having been jilted on her wedding day.

imagination in producing such a bewildering array of strange and surrealistic places, people, and events. Additional questions to explore are the following: How does the chapter generate more sympathy for Pip as a victim? What universal experiences in real life are embodied in the figures of Miss Havisham and Estella? How does the chapter show affinities with the genre of the horror story?

## CHAPTER 9

### Debriefing Back Home

#### Plot Summary

Pip returns home, where he is drilled with questions from his sister and Uncle Pumblechook about what took place at Miss Havisham's house. For undisclosed reasons, Pip does not rehearse what actually happened but instead fabricates a fictional and sensational story that borders on the fantastic. After Mrs. Joe and Uncle Pumblechook have had their curiosity satisfied, Pip finds himself alone with Joe and feels that he has betrayed Joe when he admits that the fabricated account was a collection of lies.

#### Commentary

The most obvious way to relish this chapter is to accept Pip's fabricated story of what happened at Miss Havisham's house as a comic tour de force. Having enjoyed the humor and relished Dickens's inventiveness in creating the details of Pip's story, we can discern serious issues at play. The fact that Pip's wild story is instantly believed shows the intellectual impoverishment of the society in which

After the humor early in the chapter and the tenderness in the scene of Pip's confession to Joe, the last two paragraphs take us inside the consciousness of Pip. These paragraphs are crucial for understanding how Dickens wishes us to view the development of his protagonist and hero. As we listen to Pip's inner monologue, we share (1) his shame over his low social standing, (2) his exaggerated sense of the glamor of life for Estella and Miss Havisham, and (3) his self-awareness that the visit to Miss Havisham's house has completely revolutionized his aspirations in life.

Pip lives. We do not find it difficult to sympathize with the desire of a talented boy like Pip to achieve something better. Secondly, when Pip confesses his lies to Joe and feels that he has betrayed Joe, we see anew the mutual loyalty that exists between Joe and Pip.

### For Reflection or Discussion

What details make this chapter a small classic of humor? What serious dimensions of Pip's characterization are developed?

## CHAPTER 10

# The Mysterious Stranger

### Plot Summary

Since Pip's quest to rise socially has begun, he resolves to undertake the local version of formal education. He therefore decides to befriend a young girl named Biddy and learn from her "everything she knew." Biddy works at the school run by Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, and we get a brief and satiric picture of an "Educational scheme or Course" that was a recognizable feature of Victorian life.

The main action in the chapter occurs at a local pub frequented by Joe. Its name is the Three Jolly Bargemen. One evening as Joe and Pip are seated in the pub a stranger sits at their table, orders a round of rum, pays particular attention to Pip, and stirs his own glass with the file that Pip had given to the convict in the churchyard. Then he gives Pip "a handful of small change." Pip is naturally conscience-smitten about this reminder of his association with convicts.

Dickens is a satirist par excellence. It is so natural to him that he is capable of including satire for its entertainment value, even when it does not play a major role in the overall story. If an exaggerated picture of a local school that doesn't quite make the grade is good for a laugh, Dickens is inclined to include it. Of course it is Pip's ambition to rise socially that enables Dickens to put the passage "on the agenda."

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