

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO CHARLES DICKENS'S



GREAT  
EXPECTATIONS

“I only wish an accessible and insightful guide like this had been available to me as a teenager.”

SIR MAX HASTINGS

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by John Sutherland & Jolyon Connell*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Charles Dickens's*

---

# Great Expectations

---

*by  
John Sutherland & Jolyon Connell*

# Contents

Introduction	4		NOTES
A summary of the plot	6	<i>Bildungsroman</i>	12
What is <i>Great Expectations</i> about?	10	<i>Dickens's use of humour</i>	16
What makes the opening scenes so powerful?	20	<i>Education</i>	22
Is Pip a snob?	29	<i>The marshes</i>	26
Why does Pip feel so drawn to Satis House?	42	<i>Dickens and class</i>	32
How real is Pip's love for Estella?	48	<i>The original Miss Havisham</i>	44
What is the significance of Magwitch?	58	<i>Sex in Great Expectations</i>	50
How corrupt is the world Dickens shows us in <i>Great Expectations</i> ?	74	<i>The Criminal Code</i>	59
Is Orlick Pip's "double"?	83	<i>Ten facts about Great Expectations</i>	64
Is <i>Great Expectations</i> a misogynist novel?	90	<i>Dickens at work, by his eldest son, Charley</i>	68
How plausible is the ending of the novel?	103	<i>Pip's reliability as a narrator</i>	78
What view of life does <i>Great Expectations</i> leave us with?	107	<i>Biddy</i>	90
		<i>The importance of hands</i>	98
		<i>Pip's journey down the Thames</i>	100
		<i>Modern critics</i>	114
		<i>A short chronology</i>	120
		<i>Bibliography</i>	122

# Introduction

Few works of English literature have been more loved than *Great Expectations*. Originally published, in serial form, in the weekly newspaper, *All the Year Round*, which Charles Dickens owned and ran, it has always been one of the best-selling Victorian novels of our time. No Dickens work, with the exception of *A Christmas Carol*, has been adapted more for both film and television.

It has been as popular with critics as it has with the public. Early reviews were mixed, with the influential *Blackwood's* magazine finding it “feeble, fatigued, colourless”, and the American *Atlantic Monthly* lamenting that “some of the old hilarity and play of fancy has gone...” But later critics have been more or less unanimous in their praise. In 1937 George Bernard Shaw called the novel Dickens’s “most compactly perfect book”. John Lucas describes it as “the most perfect and the most beautiful of all Dickens’s novels”, Angus Wilson as “the most completely unified work of art that Dickens ever produced”.

*Great Expectations* has been so successful partly because it’s an exciting story. Dickens always had a keen eye on the market and subscribed to Wilkie Collins’s advice: “make ‘em laugh, make ‘em cry, above all make ‘em wait.” From the violent opening scene on the marshes to the climax of Magwitch’s attempted escape on the

Thames, the story is full of suspense, mystery and drama. But while these elements of *Great Expectations* have ensured its popularity, it is also a novel which, as this guide will seek to show, raises profound questions not just about the nature of Victorian society but about the way human relationships work and the extent to which people are shaped by their childhoods and the circumstances in which they grow up.



Henry Hull as Magwitch in the 1934 American film adaptation

## A summary of the plot

The hero of *Great Expectations*, “Pip” (christened Philip Pirrip), is an orphan, brought up by his much older sister and her husband, Joe Gargery. Joe is a good-hearted blacksmith who treats Pip kindly. Mrs Joe is a cane-wielding tyrant. Visiting his family’s graves on Christmas Eve, in a deserted graveyard in the marshes, Pip is jumped on by a convict on the run from the “hulks” – prison-ships lying in the mouth of the nearby Medway estuary. Terrified, he agrees to steal food for the convict, as well as a file to saw off his fetters. Later, when the convict, Abel Magwitch, is recaptured, he does not betray Pip. Nor does he forget Pip’s kindness.

Pip’s apprenticeship in Joe’s forge, a year or two later, is preceded by a strange summons to visit the imperious Miss Havisham in nearby Satis House. Abandoned at the altar 20 years earlier she has kept its interior, and her dress, and even the wedding table feast (now rotted and food for mice) exactly as it was on the day, when she was jilted.

At her ruined and shuttered house, Pip is humiliated and tormented by Miss Havisham’s young ward, Estella. He nonetheless falls hopelessly in love with Estella.

After several visits to Satis House, Pip is called on by an inscrutable London lawyer, Jaggers, who

informs him that he now has “expectations” – a handsome bequest is in prospect. He, Jaggers, is not free to say who the mysterious benefactor is. Pip naturally assumes it to be Miss Havisham, the heiress to a great brewing fortune.

Now Pip can rise in life. He goes off to London to pursue the goal of becoming a “gentleman”. Joe and the housekeeper, Biddy, whom he leaves behind, are heartbroken. In London, which he has never visited before, he lodges in the city’s legal quarter, with Herbert Pocket – a young clerk, distantly related to Miss Havisham. Herbert has no expectations whatsoever and slaves in an insurance office. He and Pip become friends. Pip also befriends Wemmick, Jaggers’s head clerk, one of the more amiable characters in the novel.

Now a man about town, Pip still aspires to marry Estella, who has become a serial breaker of men’s hearts, as Miss Havisham has trained her to be. She is cold as ice towards Pip, out of kindness as she perversely tells him, because she actually cares for him, and would rather not break *his* heart. But she will never love him, or any man. She cannot.

Pip learns that his sister has been savagely attacked and left a helpless invalid. Dolge Orlick, a journeyman blacksmith dismissed by Joe, is suspected. One night, when alone – aged 23, and about to come into his fortune – Pip is visited by Abel Magwitch, the escaped convict he helped on

the marshes. To his dismay, Magwitch, alias Provis, turns out to be his benefactor. Having prospered as a sheep-farmer in Australia he decided to use his money to create a gentleman “of my own”, both in gratitude to Pip and as an act of revenge against his accomplice, Compeyson, who, because he was a gentleman, was treated leniently by the court for the same offence (forgery) as led to his being transported for life. Having come back without leave, Magwitch will be hanged if caught. Pip, mortified as he is, gives his patron refuge but refuses to accept any more of his money.

He visits Miss Havisham to protest at her having cruelly misled him and learns that Estella is to marry oafish Bentley Drummle, a “gentleman” by birth with aristocratic connections. Estella has no feeling for Drummle or any man. She is simply carrying through Miss Havisham’s merciless campaign against the male sex.

On a subsequent visit, in which Miss Havisham finally implores Pip’s forgiveness, the old woman dies as the result of a fire which burns Satis House to the ground. Pip himself is badly injured trying to save her. It emerges that Magwitch is Estella’s father. (Her mother, Molly, is Jaggers’s house-keeper.) Magwitch’s mortal foe, Compeyson, is, it further transpires, the man who jilted Miss Havisham at the altar. Dickens was never a novelist frightened by coincidence or improbability.

After nearly being murdered in an encounter on the marshes with his old enemy, Orlick, Pip tries to help Magwitch escape. His efforts are foiled by Compeyson, who – still making mischief – has found out what is going on and has tipped off the police. In a desperate fight in the waters of the Thames, Compeyson is drowned and Magwitch mortally wounded. He dies in the condemned cell of Newgate prison. Pip, having contracted jail-fever as a result of his visits to the jail, is nursed back to health by Joe, who nobly pays off Pip’s debts – Magwitch’s fortune being confiscated by the crown – thus stopping him being sent to the debtors’ prison. Pip then returns home to ask Biddy to marry him but finds she is already married – to Joe.

Penniless, he becomes a clerk, and goes off to work abroad alongside Herbert. Eleven years later he returns to visit Joe and Biddy. In the ruins of Satis House he is reunited with Estella whom he finds walking there. (Estella’s husband, Drummle, has been killed by a horse he was abusing.) The narrative suggests that they may at last marry but the ending is left deliberately ambiguous.



# What is *Great Expectations* about?

At the heart of *Great Expectations* – as searching an exploration of Victorian civilisation and its values as can be found in literature – lies this exchange between Pip and Biddy, the housekeeper at the forge.

*“Biddy,” said I, after binding her to secrecy,  
“I want to be a gentleman.”  
“Oh, I wouldn’t, if I was you!” she returned.  
“I don’t think it would answer.” (17)\**

The idea of becoming a gentleman is almost synonymous with the Victorian era. A variety of factors, from the rapid pace of industrialisation and urbanisation to the invention of the railways, better schools and a greater emphasis on the professions, combined to make raising oneself up – moving into a higher sphere of life – seem much more possible than it had in the more settled rural England of the 18th century. It was a time when one could have “great expectations”, or at least greater expectations than one’s parents had had.

Dickens’s great rival, Thackeray, was as preoccupied as Dickens was with the idea of

\*Throughout this book, the numbers in brackets refer to the chapters from which quotations are taken.

gentility and his own fiction, notably *Vanity Fair*, as his biographer, Gordon Ray, suggests, calls for a “redefinition” of gentlemanliness for an age with a more fluid class structure. The Thackerayan redefinition involved detaching “nobility” as an exclusive property of the traditionally “noble” classes and relocating it in the middle classes who, Thackeray implies, were morally superior and in any case already rising to the top of English society in steadily greater numbers. The nobles in *Vanity Fair* – Sir Pitt Crawley, the Marquis of Steyne, etc. – are, all of them, utterly ignoble. It is Dobbin, the greengrocer’s son, who is the true gentleman.

Dickens’s own view of gentility is more complex, understandably so given his background. Thackeray, in a sense, wrote about gentlemen from “the inside”. Born into a respectable family, and very much at home in the world of London clubs, his province, in W.C. Roscoe’s words, is that “debateable land between the aristocracy and the middle classes”. (Most of his main characters, even Dobbin, went to public school.) Dickens, on the other hand, had more slender claims to gentility: his grandfather had been a steward to Lord Crewe, his father a clerk in the Navy Pay Office who lost any claim to respectability when, after moving to London in 1822, he was imprisoned for debt. Dickens himself, in the most scarring experience of his life, was sent to work in a blacking factory, making all the more remarkable