Unlike, I hope, most of you, this was my inaugural encounter with Charles Dicken’s Great Expectations. And unlike Pip, my great expectations were not in the least disappointed.

**genres** · Bildungsroman (coming-of-age), social criticism, autobiographical fiction

**time and place written** · London, 1860-1861

**date of first publication** · Published serially in England from December 1860 to August 1861; published in book form in England and America in 1861

**publisher** · Serialized in *All the Year Round*; published in England by Chapman & Hall

*Great Expectations* was written, according to [G. K. Chesterton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G._K._Chesterton), in "the afternoon of his life and glory," and the penultimate novel Dickens completed, preceding [*Our Mutual Friend*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_Mutual_Friend).

The novel received mixed reviews from contemporary critics: [Thomas Carlyle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Carlyle) speaks of "All that Pip's nonsense,"[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Expectations#cite_note-5) while [George Bernard Shaw](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bernard_Shaw) praised the novel: "All of one piece and Consistently truthfull."[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Expectations#cite_note-6) [George Orwell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Orwell) wrote; "Psychologically the latter part of Great Expectations is about the best thing Dickens ever did."[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Expectations#cite_note-Orwell-7) Dickens felt *Great Expectations* was his best work, calling it "a very fine idea,"[[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Expectations#cite_note-8)

Full of incredible (and yes, sometimes too coincidental) plot twists and Dickens’ trademark commentary on Victorian social classes in 19th century England, Great Expectations alternates between quick-paced action – think the opening marsh chase or the closing 10 chapters – and more slowly developed scenes of ordinary life – Joe at the hearth, Wemmick walking through the prison. Enough comedy interspersed throughout to keep the tone lighter than many of his other works, including the example of how all Hamlet plays should be presented. However, the ultimate delight in Dickens is his word craft – turn of a phrase, descriptive language, setting of tone and mood, and my favorite component of this novel, his ability to introduce even the most minor characters with unforgettable and imaginative descriptions: Molly, the Trabb boy, the Avenger.

Consisting of three volumes of almost identical length, each representing a different stage in Pip’s fortunes, and beginning and ending at the forge, *Great Expectations* has considerable structural neatness. However, there are occasionally incongruous shifts in mood within a short space to meet the demands of the original weekly serialisation. For example, Wemmick’s gently farcical wedding (chapter 55) is shoehorned between the intensity of Magwitch’s arrest and trial. As narrator, Pip has a rounded credibility and directness that David Copperfield lacks. For example, on the novel’s first page Pip describes how "as I never saw my father or my mother… my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones". Reminiscent of David’s lonely imaginings at Salem House in *David Copperfield*, this is a compelling introduction both to Pip’s vivid imagination and to some central themes of the book: appearance, reality and death.

*Great Expectations*

is written in a far simpler, less ornate style than many of Dickens’s novels. Unlike most of his books, which open with extended metaphors, *Great Expectations* plunges straight in with Pip’s dramatic graveyard encounter. This trend is continued throughout the book, which lacks the digressions that so mark his other works. Lengthy metaphors and wordplay are largely eschewed in favour of precise expression. Long lists of words are given to pin down a meaning: for instance, in the graveyard Magwitch "limped, and shivered, and glared and growled"; when Mrs. Joe washes Pip he is "soaped, and kneaded, and towelled, and thumped, and harrowed, and rasped"; London is "ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty" and the atmosphere in Newgate prison is "frouzy, ugly, disorderly, depressing". An impression of urgency and directness is thereby created.

The phrases “grand narrative” and “sweeping masterpiece” might be thrown around undeservedly in the literary world, but in this case I can think of no better praise to heap upon Mr. Dickens’ work.

Mrs. Joe Gargery: Pip’s older sister who raises Pip with her husband, Joe and becomes this overbearing and strict mother figure to Pip. She later suffers a blow to the head, which she must stay in bed for until her death. She is portrayed as harsh and demanding, also very ambitious trying to be more than just the blacksmith’s wife.

Jaggers: The powerful well-respected lawyer who alerts Pip of his awaiting fortune in London and becomes his guardian. As a criminal lawyer, he must consort with some nasty criminals and later washes his hands obsessively to keep his job from corrupting him. Jaggers bases his decisions solely on facts and reasoning but before the novel is over, he seems to somewhat care for Pip.

Wemmick: He is Jagger’s law clerk and befriends Pip while giving him guidance and companionship from time to time. Wemmick is an odd character that is detached and unemotional at work but loving and tender away from his job. His possessions are all “portable”.

Herbert Pocket: Herbert first appears as an odd young child who Pip meets at the Satis House where he challenges Pip to a casual fistfight almost jokingly. Later, Pip encounters him again as he is the son of Pip’s tutor and the two become instant friends who share an apartment as well as their joys and sorrows. Herbert is also ambitious and hardworking who falls for a lower-status but kind girl named Clara.

Biddy: A girl of the same social class as Pip moves into his home to take care of Mrs. Joe after her attack. Sweet and intelligent Biddy befriends Pip and teaches him all that she had learnt in school. Pip wishes that he could love Biddy, rather than Estella because she actually brings him joy but he never really does.

Dolge Orlick: He was one of Joe’s blacksmith labourers who is stupid but very jealous of others and hurts them simply for his own pleasure. He had attacked Mrs. Joe and left her disabled and many years later, tried to kill Pip but was unsuccessful.

Uncle Pumblechook: An uncle figure in Pip’s life who is very arrogant and obsessed with social class and wealth. He is responsible for Pip’s job with Miss Havisham’s and later tries to take credit for his success and it was believed Miss Havisham was the secret benefactor.

Compeyson: Magwitch’s criminal partner who is educated unlike that of Magwitch. He later becomes Magwitch’s enemy and captures him at the end of the novel despite the fact that he also died. Compeyson is also the man who stood up Miss Havisham on their wedding.

Bentley Drummle: He is another one of Matthew Pockets’ students along with Pip and Herbert but is very harsh and cruel towards those he feels are socially below him, which is almost everyone. He eventually marries Estella but abuses her and dies about a decade later.

Matthew Pocket: The only relative of Miss Havisham’s who does not stick around for her money. When she dies, she ends up leaving all her wealth to him because he was the only one who truly cared for her and warned her about Compeyson. He is an intelligent and kind man whose main job is to tutor Pip, his son Herbert, Drummle and Startop.

**The Minor Characters**

Molly: Jaggers’ housekeeper who is also Estella’s birth mother.
Mr. Wopsle: The church clerk who later moves to London to pursue acting.
Startop: A gentleman who Pip and Herbert befriend and later helps with Magwitch’s escape.
Miss Skiffins: A lady whom Wemmick falls for and later marries.
Arthur Havisham: Miss Havisham’s half brother that accompanies Compeyson in the scheme to cheat some money off of her.
Camilla: an old talkative relative of Miss Havisham who sticks around her in hope of inheritance.
Cousin Raymond: Camilla’s husband whom also dreams of obtaining Miss Havisham’s money.
Georgiana: Another relative of Miss Havisham interested in her money.
Sarah Pocket: Another relative of Miss Havisham who is interested in her money.
Mr and Mrs Hubble: Couple in Pip’s village who believe they are better than everyone else.
Clara: A low-class girl who becomes Herbert’s wife.
Mr. Trabb and son: The local tailor and his son.
Mrs. Belinda Pocket: Wife to Matthew Pocket. Very beautiful but useless.
Flopson and Millers: Nurses at the Pockets’ house
Mrs. Collier: A neighbour to the Pockets
The Avenger: A useless servant to Pip
Bill Barley: Father of Herbert Pocket's wife Clara
Mrs. Whimple: Landlady to the Barleys who befriends Herbert.
The Aged Parent: John Wemmick's deaf father who Wemmick takes great care of.
Mr. Skiffins: Miss Skiffins’ brother who arranges the business of Herbert's partnership with Clarriker.
Clarriker: a merchant who does business with Herbert.