

*Great Expectations*  
by Charles Dickens

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion  
by Mattis Belloncle



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# INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

**First:** All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

**Context** encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

**Structure** includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

**Style** refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

**Second:** Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher — allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

**Third:** The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at [www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics](http://www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics).

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adam Andrews', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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# QUICK CARD



<b>Reference</b>	<i>Great Expectations</i> . Charles Dickens. (1861) ISBN: 978-0-141-43956-3
<b>Plot</b>	<p>As a young orphan living with his obnoxious older sister and her kind husband, Joe, Pip helps an escaped convict who is nonetheless apprehended by the police. Soon afterward, Pip is summoned by the wealthy and eccentric Miss Havisham and meets Havisham's cold-hearted ward, Estella. As Pip grows up, he visits Miss Havisham and Estella repeatedly and clashes with Orlick, a surly man who assists Joe around his forge. Pip's sister is attacked (Orlick is suspected), and Biddy, a kind-hearted girl, moves in to care for her. Pip becomes infatuated with Estella. Not long afterward, Jaggers, a reputable lawyer, contacts Pip to inform him that he has an anonymous, wealthy patron. Pip moves to London, where he encounters the earnest Herbert Pocket, who tells Pip how Miss Havisham's bitterness derives from being abandoned by a former lover. Pip takes on debt living his new, decadent lifestyle. The convict from his youth visits him, introducing himself as Abel Magwitch, Pip's secret benefactor. Magwitch was exiled from England for life, so Pip and Herbert try to figure out how to get him out of the country, especially when Jagger's odd assistant Wemmick notifies Pip that Magwitch's old enemy Compeyson, who would be able to identify him for the authorities, is in London. Pip also discovers that Estella is Magwitch's daughter. Right before the planned escape, Orlick tries to kill Pip, who is saved by Herbert. As Pip, Herbert, and Magwitch sail toward the docks to leave England, they are discovered by Compeyson, who has led a group of policemen to arrest Magwitch. The boat collides with a steamer, Compeyson dies, and Magwitch is arrested. He dies of his injuries, sustained during the collision, before his sentence can be carried out. Pip reconciles with Joe and Biddy, who are married, then leaves the country to work with Herbert. Eleven years later, he returns to England, re-encountering Estella, who is much changed after suffering through a bad marriage. The novel closes on an ambiguous but optimistic note—perhaps Pip and Estella have a future together after all.</p>
<b>Setting</b>	The story is set in nineteenth-century England. Most of the plot takes place either in Pip's small hometown by the marshes or in London, a few dozen miles from Pip's hometown.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Characters</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pip, the novel’s ambitious and often arrogant protagonist</li> <li>• Abel Magwitch, the intimidating convict of Pip’s youth, turned Pip’s kindhearted benefactor</li> <li>• Miss Havisham, a bitter, initially cruel old lady whose lover abandoned her in her youth</li> <li>• Estella, Miss Havisham’s cold-hearted ward and the old lady’s attempt at vengeance on the male sex</li> <li>• Herbert Pocket, a young, naive, aspiring businessman whose earnest and loyal nature allows him to become fast friends with Pip</li> <li>• Joe Gargery, the sincere, awkward husband of Pip’s sister; a blacksmith who raises Pip</li> <li>• Mr. Jaggers, a talented lawyer with a forceful personality who acts as a go-between for Magwitch and Pip</li> <li>• Wemmick, Mr. Jagger’s assistant, who lives a double life: professional and aloof at work, open and kind at home</li> <li>• Orlick, Joe’s sullen assistant, who attacks Pip’s sister, then Pip</li> <li>• Bentley Drummle, the boorish suitor whom Estella marries</li> <li>• Matthew Pocket, Herbert’s absent-minded but good-hearted father, who tutors Pip when he comes to London</li> <li>• Compeyson, a criminal from Magwitch’s past and Miss Havisham’s old lover</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Conflict</b></p>	<p>Man vs. Himself: Pip’s ambitions and wealth warp his character for the worse, a change which he has to overcome. Will Pip be a real gentleman?</p> <p>Man vs. Man: Orlick tries to kill Pip, and Miss Havisham manipulates Pip’s emotions. Magwitch tries to escape arrest.</p> <p>Man vs. Society: The definition of “gentleman” is challenged.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Theme</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coming of age</li> <li>• Ambition and contentment</li> <li>• Redemptive love</li> <li>• Repentance</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Literary Devices</b></p>	<p>Foreshadowing Irony Repetition</p>

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



*The following questions are drawn from the “Setting” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 80-81 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **In what country or region does the story happen? (1a)**

The story is set in Dickens’s own England. As with many of his other novels, the action takes place primarily in London. Besides London, Pip’s hometown features prominently. We know that it’s not far from London (Pip can travel there in a day) and that it’s a lot smaller than the city.

## **Does the story happen in the country or the city? (1b)**

London is obviously an urban environment, but the smaller size of Pip’s hometown gives it a more rural feel. Additionally, the fact that it borders the nearby, uninhabited marshes draws a contrast between London’s busy streets and the relative isolation of Pip’s growing up years.

## **Is there anything symbolic or allegorical about the place where the story happens? (1i)**

The two physical spheres in which the story takes place reflect the two sides of Pip’s character which Dickens illustrates for the reader. London is the scene of Pip’s expectations, with innumerable opportunities to spend money and cavort with other young, ambitious, and generally useless gentlemen. Pip’s hometown, on the other hand, represents the humble contentment which Pip eventually discovers and which Joe possesses all along. As Pip ingrains himself more and more in the life of a gentleman, his visits to his hometown grow scarcer and are made, not with an eye to reestablishing old friendships (with Bidley and Joe), but rather to secure future ambitions (by visiting Miss Havisham, whom Pip believes is his benefactor). Once Magwitch reveals himself and Pip starts to mature, realizing that wealth and influence hold little true satisfaction, London loses its appeal—by shedding his expectations, Pip cannot maintain his interest in the city. Conversely, his hometown grows gradually more appealing, until he finally visits merely for the sake of seeing Bidley and Joe in the novel’s final pages.

## **Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)**

The divide between London and Pip’s hometown (see the analysis above) plays out in the characters who appear in each sphere. Most of the characters in London are wealthy: Pip, Herbert, Jaggers, and the gentlemen of the Finches of the Grove are all very well-off, yet most are unhappy. Pip’s hometown is filled with poorer characters: his sister, Joe, Orlick, Bidley, Pumblechook, and Wopsle. Some of these characters are content—most notably Joe and Bidley. Others (especially Pumblechook) chafe at their relative poverty.





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



*The following questions are drawn from the “Characters” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 82-83 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

**What does the protagonist do for a living? Is he a professional or a blue-collar worker? Is he wealthy or impoverished? Is he content with his lot in life, or does he long to improve himself? (3h)**

In terms of employment, Pip follows a clearly defined arc. Before his windfall, he is apprenticed to Joe, with the intention of becoming a blacksmith. With his new wealth, he has no specific employment and instead embraces an indolent lifestyle. By the end of the novel, Pip is once again employed, working this time with Herbert and making enough money for a comfortable lifestyle, but not enough money to be considered wealthy. Of note, it is in this final state that Pip finds contentment, rather than in his wealthy, lazy lifestyle. Up until this point, Pip’s ambitions have driven him to chase ever higher social standing; only after Magwitch’s death does he truly set aside his childhood ambitions.

**Is the protagonist educated? To what degree? How do you know? (3i)**

Initially, Pip is uneducated, but his ambitions drive him to educate himself. He even tries to teach Joe what he is learning, to no avail. But his attempt is a clear indication of Pip’s priorities. To Pip, it is not enough to live a quiet life as a blacksmith; Joe needs to improve himself so that he can improve his social standing.

Pip’s tutelage under Matthew Pocket is a continuation of his previous priorities. That Pip is willing to further educate himself, despite his already abundant resources, indicates that Pip is still not content with his current situation, but wishes to keep refining his reputation.

**Is the protagonist a member of any particular religious or social group? If so, what do you know about this group? What motivates this group? What do its members feel to be important? (3l)**

Pip joins the Finches of the Grove, a group of like minded young gentlemen who are all similarly shallow. Dickens’s first description of the Finches is unequivocally negative; Pip tells the reader that “the object of [the] institution I have never divined, if it were not that the members should dine expensively once a fortnight, to quarrel among themselves as much as possible after dinner” (273). The goal of the Finches is to achieve the appearance of enjoyment by submerging themselves in wealthy trappings, a goal which aligns perfectly with Pip’s in the middle of the novel.

**What does the character think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? Does the character say this out loud, or do his thoughts and actions give him away? Do the character priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? (3m, n)**

Pip's priorities change over the course of the novel. His initial desire becomes apparent immediately after he meets Miss Havisham and Estella. He chafes when Estella mocks him (65), resenting his common upbringing. He tells us, "What I dreaded was, that in some unlucky hour I, being at my grimmest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge. I was haunted by the fear that she would, sooner or later, find me out, with a black face and hands, doing the coarsest part of my work, and would exult over me and despise me" (108). This desire to leave behind his common roots drives him to start improving himself by learning to read and write (44), surpassing the skills which have landed Joe in his spot in life. Even once Pip begins receiving Magwitch's money and assumes Miss Havisham intends him to marry Estella, Pip is still not content. He spends money lavishly, joins the Finches of the Grove, submits to Matthew Pocket's tutoring, and jealously vies for Estella's attention, all of which indicate he is not content with his lot in life. He wants to be the epitome of a fashionable, enviable gentleman. Along the way, more tangible concerns, like his relationship with Joe and Biddy, fall by the wayside.

Once Magwitch reveals himself, Pip's arrogance and ambition crumble. With the realization that he has not been selected by Miss Havisham for Estella for any of his own merit (because she has not selected him at all), and it is revealed that the only things he has done to earn his wealth were the scared actions of a child, Pip can no longer attribute his success to any intelligence, hard work, or talent on his part.

This realization sends Pip spiraling into depression. Without his expectations, he has nothing to focus on other than basic survival: getting Magwitch out of the country before any consequences catch up to them. Gradually, however, Pip begins to mature. He starts seeing Magwitch as less of an obstacle and more as the kind-hearted old man he is. By the time Magwitch is arrested, Pip cares for him as for a father, spending as much time with him as possible with no hope of gain. All the time that Pip spent with Estella or with Miss Havisham involved some sort of hope—a constant vying for Estella's favor. But with the injured and slowly dying Magwitch, Pip acts selflessly in an attempt to alleviate Magwitch's suffering rather than to advance his own agenda. The same attitude is displayed in his relationship with Joe. Before Magwitch's arrival, Pip barely spared any time, thought, or effort for his old friend, focusing instead on improving his relations with those people who could realistically improve his standing in life. But in the wake of Magwitch's death, Pip once again realizes how precious Joe's love is, visiting Joe with no other agenda for the first time since his move to London. No longer is Pip prioritizing wealth, power, or social standing; instead, he is endeavoring to restore the real human connection with Joe and Biddy that he almost threw away without realizing it. This is Pip's final stage of development: more mature, kinder, more selfless, and wiser.

**Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an "Everyman" with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life? (3p)**

Pip's attempts to improve himself continue to speak to the modern world. So much of life centers around progressive achievements, beginning with education, which is largely geared towards securing ever greater salaries and career advancements. Even outside the world of employment, urges to improve oneself can become all-consuming: in sports or exercise, for instance. Consequently, Dickens's warning not to get too caught up in our expectations is incredibly relevant today.

Likewise, Pip's subsequent realization that Joe's affection is infinitely more valuable than, for in-

stance, his “friendships” with the members of the Finches of the Grove, is one everyone must come to at some point in their lives. For all Joe’s awkwardness, his affection is far more genuine than Pip finds in anyone fawning over his new wealth—Pumblechook, Trabb, or the Finches. The wisdom Pip gains over the course of the story is just as applicable today as it was then.

**Is the protagonist a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)**

As the story begins, Pip is a sympathetic character. His youth and his innocence in the face of Magwitch’s intimidation immediately evokes the reader’s sympathy, and even the first touches of his ambition are relatable—self-improvement is not inherently objectionable. However, after Pip moves to London, funded by Magwitch’s money, he becomes increasingly unlikable as his quest for self-improvement becomes all-consuming, a priority to the exclusion of all others. This comes to a head every time Pip treats Joe scornfully or Magwitch, the man who has given him more than he ever could have imagined as a child, with repugnance. Only when Pip learns to love Magwitch and reconciles with Joe does Pip regain the reader’s full sympathy.

The title itself, as well as the frequent repetition of the word “expectations” in the text of the novel, enhances Pip’s unlikeability. Compare it to a word like “ambition.” We might hope that our ambitions will be realized, but there’s no connotation of certainty in the word ambition—an ambition may be realized or it may not. Not so with “expectations.” If we have expectations, like Pip does, we are assuming some level of certainty. We don’t just hope that our expectations will come to pass, we expect that they will. By repeatedly referring to his ambitions as expectations, Pip reveals just how entitled he is, and entitlement rarely engenders sympathy. This does not mean, however, that Pip is not uncomfortably relatable.

**Is there a single character (or a group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)**

Several characters play small antagonistic roles in the story: Miss Havisham tries to make Pip suffer as she did, Estella taunts Pip, Orlick attacks him, and Compeyson tries to have Magwitch arrested. Don’t get too caught up evaluating each of these antagonists, however; the primary conflict is undoubtedly Pip’s struggle to overcome his own expectations. Each of the antagonists figures in that overarching conflict, but only in ways that enhance it—not as its central element.

**Is the antagonist out to do physical harm to the protagonist, violence to his reputation, his memory, his work, or his family? How do you know? (4d)**

Miss Havisham wants to force someone else (Pip, in this case) to experience the bitterness and heart-break she went through when Compeyson vanished.

At first, Estella taunts Pip: her harsh words make him cry after their first encounter. As time progresses, she leads him on, mostly at the behest of Miss Havisham. By the time Pip moves to London, Estella continues to torment Pip by seeing him often enough to keep his hopes alive.

Orlick resents Pip for warning Biddy away from him: “How dared you come between me and a young woman I liked?” he asks Pip (424). He also complains that Pip “was always in Old Orlick’s way since ever you was a child” (425). Like Miss Havisham, Orlick takes his bitterness to the extreme, trying to kill Pip in retaliation.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



*The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **Does the protagonist try to capture an object? Or a person? Or something else? (5d)**

Pip chases contentment. Sometimes it seems that all he’s after is money and reputation, but he isn’t just chasing money for money’s sake or influence for influence’s sake. Even when he has money and influence, he remains discontent. Instead, he seems to be hoping to find happiness behind every new expenditure or accomplishment: he keeps spending money even though it gets him nowhere, and he keeps pursuing Estella, believing that the present misery she causes him might somehow be transformed into future happiness.

By the end of the novel, Pip has found a quieter form of contentment, one that has been on display in Joe’s character throughout the novel. He may not be wealthy, but he works hard and values his friends, and it turns out that’s all he really needs to be happy. All the hoops Pip jumps through in search of contentment lead him to a very simple conclusion: happiness is only elusive if you think it is; sometimes, contentment is a choice.

## **Do the protagonist’s objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (5f)**

See the analysis for question 5d. Pip’s goal does not change. What changes is Pip’s method of achieving that goal. He switches his guiding principle from ambition to selflessness.

## **Is the conflict a Man vs. Man struggle? (6g)**

Small Man vs. Man conflicts are scattered throughout the book. See question 4d, above, for more details. Miss Havisham tries to hurt Pip emotionally, Estella does so without trying, Orlick takes out his anger on anyone he can get his hands on (Pip’s sister, Pip, Pumblechook), and Compeyson tries to get Magwitch arrested.

## **Is the conflict a Man vs. Society struggle? (6j)**

The story also involves a Man vs. Society element that centers around the definition of a gentleman. Joe does not possess wealth or status, but he is, in fact, the supreme example of a gentleman. In the same way, society perceives Magwitch as an outlaw, but it is his hard work and generous gift which provide Pip the means for his aristocratic lifestyle.

## Is the conflict a Man vs. Himself struggle? (6k)

While reading the story, we have to distinguish Pip the narrator from Pip the character. Pip the narrator, having already experienced all the lessons the story chronicles, often interjects to comment on his younger self's mistakes, highlighting the Man vs. Himself conflict at the heart of the novel.

The conflict revolves, as the title suggests, around Pip's expectations, which pressure him to leave behind his old life, even if that life includes genuinely good components like Joe and Biddy. Admittedly, Miss Havisham and Estella have a hand in heightening Pip's aversion to what he sees as the life of a common laborer. Pip's fears that Estella will see him at the forge illustrate this. (108) He also tells the reader that, upon leaving Satis House with the news (which Miss Havisham gleefully imparts) that Estella has gone abroad to be educated, "I felt more dissatisfied with my home and with my trade and with everything" (116). But while Miss Havisham certainly manipulates Pip into despising his upbringing more, the problem is still not ultimately a Man vs. Man issue, because Pip doesn't need to triumph over Miss Havisham to resolve it. It's hard to say how ambitious Pip is before meeting Estella and Miss Havisham: whether Miss Havisham ignites his ambitions, or whether she merely plays into pre-existing fears. Pip the character seems to think his expectations stem from Miss Havisham. He tells Biddy, "See how I am going on. Dissatisfied, and uncomfortable, and – what would it signify to me, being coarse and common, if nobody had told me so!" (128). Either way, the conflict rests securely in the Man vs. Himself sphere; to overcome his expectations, Pip must overcome himself. It would be very hard to claim that Pip bears no responsibility for his downfall.

The main issue is the callousness Pip develops towards the uneducated and the unwealthy, which is especially problematic when it comes to those who love him unconditionally—Joe and Biddy. Essentially, Pip pins his definition of what makes a person respectable on wealth and social class rather than on who the person is at heart.

In evaluating this conflict, Pip's early interactions with Biddy are telling, both when it comes to displaying the extent of Pip's immaturity and hinting at the more experienced mindset Pip eventually discovers. Pip tells us how he recounted his fight with Herbert to Biddy, "I reposed complete confidence in no one but Biddy; but, I told poor Biddy everything. Why it came natural to me to do so, and why Biddy had a deep concern in everything I told her, I did not know then, though I think I know now" (96). There's a lot to uncover in Pip's words: the dichotomy between past ignorance and present wisdom; the fact that it felt "natural" to talk to someone who genuinely cares about him, as opposed to the Finches, where "good feeling [is] promoted in the usual manner by no one's agreeing with anybody else" (308); and the fact that Biddy had "a deep concern" in what Pip is saying (another marked contrast with the Finches).

Another interaction is even more revealing:

"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."

"Biddy," said I, with some severity. "I have particular reasons for wanting to be a gentleman."

"You know best, Pip; but don't you think you are happier as you are?"



“Biddy,” I exclaimed, impatiently, “I am not at all happy as I am. I am disgusted with my calling and with my life. I have never taken to either, since I was bound. Don’t be absurd.” (127-128)

Pip articulates his goal (to be a gentleman) as well as his primary motivation (I am not at all happy as I am). Biddy expresses qualms about becoming a gentleman (I wouldn’t if I was you, don’t you think you are happier as you are?) which exactly predict Pip’s eventual realizations. Dickens frequently uses foreshadowing like this to hint at the progress of Pip’s future. After Pip comes down for his sister’s funeral, he promises Joe he will come see him often, to which Biddy responds, “Are you quite sure, then, that you will come to see him often?” (284). Pip the character responds angrily, but Pip the narrator closes the chapter by saying, “Once more, the mists were rising as I walked away. If they disclosed to me, as I suspect they did, that I should not come back, and that Biddy was quite right, all I can say is – they were quite right too” (285). Pip has drifted farther from Joe and Biddy than ever before, and he isn’t self-aware enough to realize it.

### **How are the protagonist’s obstacles finally overcome? (9b)**

It takes the shock of Magwitch revealing himself to jar Pip from his self-destructive course. Once Pip loses the sense of entitlement that has, up to this point, accompanied his expectations, he begins prioritizing other people over himself. At first, this extends no further than wanting to get Magwitch out of the country, but it soon expands to include genuine concern for the man. After Magwitch’s death, Pip’s newfound maturity changes his attitude toward Joe as well. As he recovers from his illness, he appreciates Joe for who he is, a turnabout from his youthful attempts to push Joe to improve himself. Likewise, Pip’s consistently unreasonable attitude toward Biddy changes as he considers proposing to her, yet he isn’t at all angry when Joe marries her instead, displaying a selflessness conspicuously absent in the Pip of a few months earlier.

### **What events form the highest point of the story’s tension? Are they circumstantial events, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? (9d)**

Pip’s unsuccessful attempt to smuggle Magwitch out of the country marks the physical and emotional climax of the novel. In committing to helping Magwitch, Pip is doing something selfless, abandoning his self-centered ambitions. It signals a change for Pip’s character. Pip tells us that after the collision and Magwitch’s arrest,

When I took my place by Magwitch’s side, I felt that that was my place henceforth while he lived. For now, my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (446)

The boat incident marks the final turning point where Pip pivots to overcome the flaws in his character, making it the climax of the Man vs. Himself conflict.

### **After the climax of the story, did you wonder how it would end? How does it end? How are the “loose ends” tied up? Were all of your questions answered? (10a)**

The ending of the story still has a few surprises: Biddy’s marriage to Joe and Pip’s reconciliation with Estella. Herbert and Clara’s marriage is to be expected. Orlick is arrested after attacking Pum-







# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



*The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **What is the main idea of the story? (13a)**

The title implies that the main point of the story hinges on Pip’s expectations, and, indeed, the story is less a unified sequence of events (as some stories are) than it is a kind of autobiography of Pip’s life. As discussed above, the story revolves primarily around a Man vs. Himself conflict. For a while, Pip gives in to the siren call of his expectations, which lure him away from the people he genuinely cares about with the promise of ever greater happiness around every new turn. The fundamental change in Pip’s mindset is to value what he has instead of what he *could* have. Bidy highlights this when she questions how happy Pip would actually be as a gentleman (127-128), a concern which Pip brushes aside, assuring her that he could never be happy with his current situation. At that point in the story, Pip has solid friendships with Joe and Bidy, and his career plan is not in question—he’s going to follow Joe’s footsteps and become a blacksmith. Hypothetically, he has everything he should need to be content. Yet, as his words to Bidy reveal, and as frequent interjections from the narrator further display, Pip feels cut out for so much more.

Once he gets to London, he begins to acquire the things he was hoping for. Magwitch supplies him with more than enough money, Matthew Pocket tutors him to make up for his uneducated upbringing, and Herbert and the Finches of the Grove give him an access point to the high society he has envied for so long. But Pip finds contentment in none of these things. Even though he has seemingly endless resources, he keeps spending it without figuring out how to obtain happiness. He has Herbert—a good friend—but Herbert’s friendship isn’t enough to make Pip happy, either. It all comes down to his ambition. Pip’s goal is not to make good friends. That’s clear enough in the fact that Herbert, Bidy, and Joe are not enough for him. His goal isn’t just to have a lot of money, either—otherwise he’d be happy once Magwitch starts funding him. His goal, instead, seems to be to become good enough so that Estella accepts him. After Bidy warns Pip not to obsess over Estella, Pip as the narrator echoes, “Exactly what I myself had thought, many times. Exactly what was perfectly manifest to me at the moment. But how could I, a poor dazed village lad, avoid that wonderful inconsistency into which the best and wisest men fall every day?” (129) Because Pip is so infatuated with Estella, it makes sense that Estella’s mockery also seems to motivate Pip’s initial desire to improve himself. (65) This goal is problematic, however, since it is fundamentally impossible. Miss Havisham has trained Estella to be unreachable, aloof to all of Pip’s advances. Pip, in his immaturity and naïveté, has pinned his happiness on something he cannot have. And because he can’t have it, he can’t be happy, either.

Of note, winning Estella isn’t really Pip’s only goal. Estella symbolically represents an arbitrary threshold of social class towards which Pip is striving. Yes, Pip is infatuated with Estella. Yes, Estel-

la seems to play a large role in the development of Pip's expectations. But arguably, Pip is striving towards the symbolic, ultimate acceptance of high society that Estella's acceptance represents. Take, for instance, his association with the Finches of the Grove. The Finches are not directly tied to Estella; she doesn't know what happens between them, and Pip never tells her details about the Finches. Joining the Finches does not, in itself, seem to further Pip's chances with Estella. By not bringing up the Finches with her, it's clear that Pip isn't merely joining the Finches for Estella's sake. This indicates that marrying Estella isn't his only goal—he values marrying Estella so highly because it would mean that he has once and for all overcome the upbringing that she mocked.

The turning point in Pip's character comes from several different sources. Magwitch's revelation shocks Pip so much, in part, because that means Miss Havisham is not his benefactress and Estella is not meant for him. Up to that point, Pip assumes that he has earned his wealth. Since he thinks Miss Havisham is funding him, he thinks that his visits to Satis House have achieved Miss Havisham's affection. And because of this mistaken belief, he also thinks Miss Havisham intends him to marry Estella. Both of those beliefs collapse instantaneously. But these realizations alone aren't enough to turn Pip's character around. They do deflate his arrogance, but they don't overwrite his selfishness. He resents Magwitch at first because the old man is the cause of Pip's collapsing expectations and because he sees Magwitch as a burden—a problem that needs to be smuggled out of the country, instead of a stunningly kind old man.

However, the onset of moody resentment primes Pip to change for the better. Without his expectations, he drifts aimlessly for a while, planning only for the short term: how to get Magwitch out of England. He has no greater goal for the moment; the revelation that Estella is going to marry Drummle means Pip has no further hope to marry her, and his refusal to accept any more of Magwitch's money undermines his ability to participate in high society. Pip is left with no chance for his previous long-term goals.

Then, as Pip interacts more with Magwitch, hearing his story and familiarizing himself with the older man's motivations and outlook on life, he begins to understand the extent of the kindness Magwitch has shown him. By the time the climax of the novel rolls around, Pip treats Magwitch not as a distasteful former convict, but as a father figure and a friend. He sees past Magwitch's rough exterior (something he has always struggled to do with Joe) and instead focuses on Magwitch's kindness. This change has far-reaching consequences; his closeness with Magwitch leads naturally into his reconciliation with Joe and Biddy and, eventually, with Estella.

The main point of the story, then, has to do with contentment. At the end of the novel, Pip is happy with the things that could not make him happy before. Pip agonized over his common employment while apprenticed to Joe; by the end of the novel, he is perfectly content to work under Herbert. Herbert's friendship was never enough for Pip to be happy in London; his friendship with Herbert becomes a cornerstone of his contentment by the novel's conclusion. At the end of the novel, Pip's goals are simple, straightforward, and attainable: he wants to live a comfortable life with people who care about him. Because this goal is so manageable, compared to his pursuit of Estella, he can be happy with much less.

### **Is the protagonist changed in his mind or heart by the events of the story? (11a)**

Yes—see the analysis for question 13a above. The novel is primarily about how Pip matures. Any contemplation of the novel's themes without a consideration of Pip's transformation would be incomplete.





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



*The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **Does repetition play a role in the story?**

The word “expectations” appears thirty-five times in the story. Given how important Pip’s ambitions are to the plot, this repetition makes sense. Dickens leverages the repetition to hint at his primary message: expectations can be all-consuming and dangerous.

## **Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17a)**

Dickens loves *foreshadowing*, which appears in most of his works.

Some examples:

“It was not with me then, as it was later in life, when I fell into the society of the Passions” (44).

“A dread possessed me that when I least expected it, the file would reappear” (79).

“He was nothing to me, and I could have had no foresight then, that he ever would be anything to me” (83).

“Why it came natural to me to do so, and why Biddy had a deep concern in everything I told her, I did not know then, though I think I know now” (96).

“He quite understood and reciprocated my good intentions, as I had reason to know thereafter” (132).

“If my time had run out, it would have left me still at the height of my perplexities, I dare say. It never did run out, however, but was brought to a premature end, as I proceed to relate” (133).

“ I again warmly repeated that it was a bad side of human nature (in which sentiment, waiving its application, I have since seen reason to think I was right)” (150).

“A great event in my life, the turning point of my life, now opens on my view” (299).

**When read literally, do the words of a character or narrator offer information that contradicts what you've already discovered to be true about a character's circumstances, character, or thoughts? (17d)**

Dickens employs *irony* to critique certain characters: Pip's sister, Pip himself, the Finches, and Pumblechook are among the leading victims.

"He also made known to me for the first time in my life, and certainly after having kept his secret wonderfully well, that he had always said of me, "That boy is no common boy, and mark me, his fortun' will be no common fortun'" (156).

"This collation disposed of at a moderate price (considering the grease: which was not charged for" (186).

"I said I could not deny that this was a strong point. I said it (people often do, in such cases) like a rather reluctant concession to truth and justice;—as if I wanted to deny it!" (249).

"The late king of the country not only appeared to have been troubled with a cough at the time of his decease, but to have taken it with him to the tomb, and to have brought it back" (253).

"And still I stood looking at the house, thinking how happy I should be if I lived there with her, and knowing that I was never happy with her, but always miserable" (271).

"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" (274).

"What a fellow of resources you are!' my friend would reply, with admiration. 'Really your business powers are very remarkable.' I thought so too" (276).

"Finally, he went away with Mr. and Mrs. Hubble—to make an evening of it, I felt sure, and to tell the Jolly Bargeman that he was the founder of my fortunes and my earliest benefactor" (281).

"I reflected what an unkindness, what an injury, what an injustice, Biddy had done to me" (285).

"I had looked into my affairs so often, that I had thoroughly destroyed any slight notion I might ever have had of their bearings" (287).

"I never had one hour's happiness in her society, and yet my mind all round the four-and-twenty hours was harping on the happiness of having her with me unto death" (301).

"On a certain occasion when the Finches were assembled in force, and when good feeling was being promoted in the usual manner by nobody's agreeing with anybody else" (308).

**NOTES:**

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT:



The following questions are drawn from the “Context” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

## Who is the author? (18)

Charles Dickens was born in Hampshire, England in 1812 to a family of eight children. They moved twice during Dickens’s first ten years of life, but he had an otherwise peaceful early childhood. Dickens applied his excellent memory to a wide variety of reading and the solid education which his father’s income could provide. When Charles was twelve, however, things began to unravel. His father went to debtor’s prison, and Charles had to relocate several times, living with whichever family, friend, or acquaintance would take him. With his father in prison, Dickens needed to help support his family, so he quit school and started working common jobs. The harsh conditions gave him empathy for laborers in similar situations, an attitude that appears frequently in his writings (*Hard Times* is a compelling example, as is Dickens’s treatment of Joe in *Great Expectations*. Additionally, *A Christmas Carol* was inspired in part by the harsh conditions facing the poor in America at the time of Dickens’s first visit).

When his father was released after inheriting enough money from the death of a relative to pay off his creditors, Dickens went back to school, attending Wellington House Academy. After two years in attendance, Dickens worked at a law office for a year. He became deeply invested in the theater during this time. He then began pursuing a career as a freelance reporter. At this point, without too clear an idea of where he wanted to end up (other than that he wanted to be famous), Dickens began trying to get published, sending his first story to a magazine at the age of twenty-one. His first great success came with *The Pickwick Papers*. His novels caught the attention of Queen Victoria as his fame continued to grow.

In 1850, Dickens became publisher and editor of *Household Words*, a journal through which Dickens published *Hard Times*. The people Dickens met often inspired his characters; his memory furnished him with enough details to immortalize even old acquaintances in his writings (Mrs. Roylance and Archibald Russell, two of the family friends whom Dickens lived with as a child, for instance). The many letters which Dickens wrote often reveal the personal connections. His novels only grew in popularity, and people all around the world requested readings from him (he was offered ten thousand pounds to do a reading tour in Australia).

By 1867, his health was failing. He survived one stroke but died of a second in 1870 at the age of 58. His tombstone declared him “a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.” Dickens traveled frequently during his life. In 1842, Dickens visited America for the first time and was horrified by his first exposure to slavery, which he had for a long time condemned as similar to the oppression of the poor in England. He visited America once more in 1867 to perform a series of readings, a service which had become immensely popular in England. He also frequently visited France, having developed a liking for the country and its people.



# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:



*Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.*

1. What is Bidley's role in the narrative? She appears infrequently, yet Dickens still made the decision to include her in the story—why?
2. Normally, novels are built around likable characters, since readers will invest themselves in characters they like. Why, then, do we stay invested in Pip at his most unlikable?
3. What is it that affects Pip so deeply when Magwitch reveals himself as Pip's benefactor? Why, for instance, does Pip go from wallowing in the money provided by his patron to refusing it altogether? What explains Pip's aversion to Magwitch—is it merely knowledge of his past, or is something else going on?
4. Orlick is a strange addition to the story. He's only ever tangentially related to any of the main characters. Why would Dickens include scenes like Orlick's attack on Pip? What does Orlick have to do with the main ideas of the story?
5. Obviously, most of the story centers around Pip and his character development. It's not too hard to trace his steps from poor orphan to arrogant gentleman, but the subsequent change is less easy to follow. What are the biggest influences that spur Pip to mature during this second transformation?

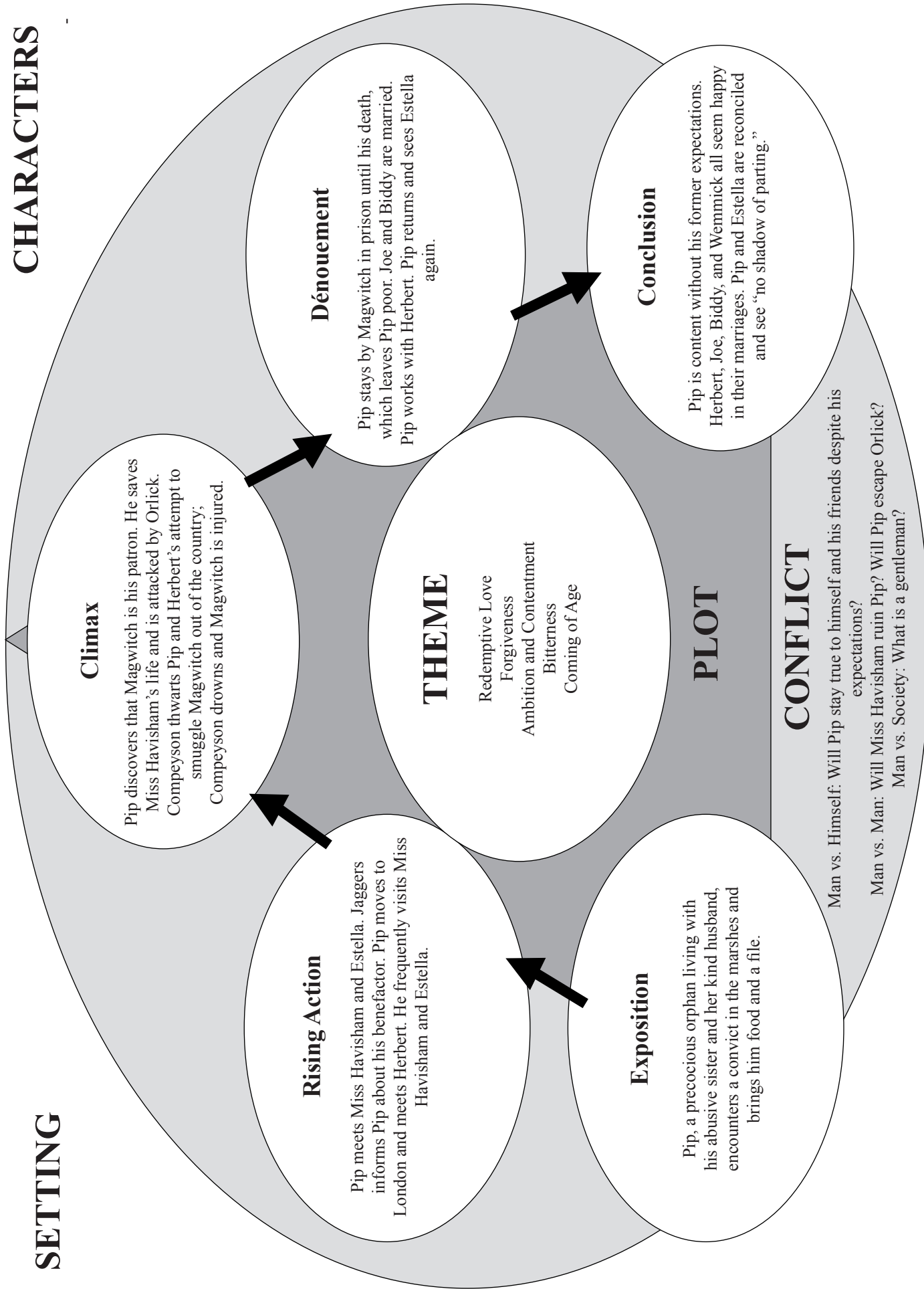
# STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central conflict. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected — even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

# Story Chart: *Great Expectations*



# Story Chart: *Great Expectations*

**SETTING**

**CHARACTERS**

