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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

Summary

Pip, a poor orphan being raised by a cruel sister, does not have much in the way of great expectations between his terrifying experience in a graveyard with a convict named Magwitch and his humiliating visits with the eccentric Miss Havisham's beautiful but manipulative niece, Estella, who torments him until he is elevated to wealth by an anonymous benefactor.

Full of unforgettable characters, *Great Expectations* is a tale of intrigue, unattainable love, and all of the happiness money can't buy. *Great Expectations* has the most wonderful and most perfectly worked-out plot for a novel in the English language, according to John Irving, and J. Hillis Miller declares, *Great Expectations* is the most unified and concentrated expression of Dickens's abiding sense of the world, and Pip might be called the archetypal Dickens hero.

Discussion Questions

1. In this novel, *Great Expectations*, things are often not what they seem. Discuss how the theme of "expectations" is illustrated by and through the various major characters in this book. How are Pip's expectations different and similar from those of his surrogate father, Joe (the blacksmith), Miss Havisham (the eccentric recluse), Estella (the daughter of a convict and murderess) and Pip's benefactor, (the convict) Magwitch?
2. Why do you think it is one of Magwitch's principal conditions that Pip (his nickname) "always bear the name of Pip" in order to receive his financial support?
3. If Pip had not received his "Great Expectations" and never left Joe's forge, how do you think his life would have been different? Are the lessons he learns during his physical and emotional journey necessary for him to arrive at the wisdom he evinces as the middle-aged narrator of this tale? In what ways?
4. Why do you think Miss Havisham manipulates and misleads Pip into thinking she is his secret benefactor? What, if anything, does she derive from this action?
5. Given Dickens's portrayal of Estella, what do you think attracts Pip to her in the first place and what, when he learns of her cold-blooded manipulation of men such as her husband, keeps Pip

devoted to her until the end, loving her, as he says, "against reason, against promise, against peace?"

6. In the final chapter Estella says to Pip: "Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching." Discuss the theme of suffering in this book—specifically how it instructs Pip, Miss Havisham and Estella.
7. In Chapter 49 Miss Havisham confesses to Pip that in adopting Estella, she "meant to save her (Estella) from misery like my own." Do you believe this, given Dickens's harsh characterization of Miss Havisham throughout the novel?
8. In the same Chapter (49) when Miss Havisham is set afire, do you believe that, given her state of mind, Dickens intends us to read this as an accident or a kind of penance/attempted suicide on her part for her cruelty to Pip and Estella?
9. What do you think makes Pip change his opinion of his benefactor Magwitch from one of initial repugnance to one of deep and abiding respect and love?
10. In Chapter 59, when Pip places Joe and Biddy's son (also named Pip) on the same tombstone that opens the novel, what do you think Dickens intends to tell us with this image? Given the novel's theme of how the sins of others are visited upon us, do you view this image as a foreboding one in any way?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the Penguin Classics Edition