Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Great Expectations

Contents

1. Plot
2. Themes
3. Context
4. Key quotations
5. How to get top marks
6. Key terms
7. Quick questions
8. What to do next

Plot

- Pip, an orphan raised by his harsh sister and her kind husband, Joe Gargery, the blacksmith, helps an escaped **convict**, Magwitch, on the marshes.
- Pip is sent to play at Satis House, where the rich, bitter Miss Havisham, **jilted** on her wedding day, still wears her wedding dress. She has raised the beautiful Estella to break men's hearts. Pip falls in love with Estella and becomes ashamed of his 'common' life.
- A lawyer, Jaggers, tells Pip he has 'great expectations': a secret **benefactor** will make him a **gentleman** in London. Pip assumes it is Miss Havisham, and becomes snobbish towards Joe.
- The **benefactor** is really Magwitch, who made a fortune in Australia and risks death by returning to England. Pip also learns that Estella is Magwitch's daughter. Miss Havisham repents, but is badly burned in a fire.
- Pip's plan to smuggle Magwitch abroad fails; Magwitch is captured and dies. Pip falls ill and is nursed by Joe. He works abroad, and at the end meets Estella, changed by suffering, at the ruins of Satis House.

Themes

- Social class and ambition, what makes a true **gentleman**, guilt, crime and justice, love and rejection, and loyalty and gratitude.

Context

- Published in 1860–61. Victorian society was sharply divided by class. The growing middle classes could rise through wealth, but many believed true gentility came from birth.
- **Convicts** could be transported to Australia. Dickens criticises snobbery and suggests that goodness matters more than status.

Key quotations

- 'What coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!' (Estella about Pip).
- 'Break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!' (Miss Havisham to Estella).
- 'I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope' (Pip). 'Dear boy' (Magwitch to Pip).

How to get top marks

- Remember who's telling the story. Older Pip looks back with shame on younger Pip, and that gap is where the irony is.
- Use the question of what makes a **gentleman**: compare Joe's goodness and Magwitch's loyalty with Pip's ambition.
- Link to Dickens's view of Victorian class only where it explains why Pip is taught to be ashamed.

Key terms

Bildungsroman	A novel about a character growing up.
Benefactor	A person who gives money or help to someone.
Gentleman	A man of high social class, or one with good manners and morals.
Convict	A person found guilty of a crime and sent to prison.
Jilted	Abandoned by a lover, especially close to the wedding.
Transportation	Sending convicts to live and work in a colony, such as Australia.
First-person narrator	A narrator who tells their own story using 'I'.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who raises Pip?
2. Whom does Pip help on the marshes?
3. Why does Miss Havisham still wear her wedding dress?
4. What has Miss Havisham raised Estella to do?
5. Who is Pip's real benefactor?
6. Who is Estella's father?
7. How does Pip treat Joe after becoming a gentleman?
8. What happens to Miss Havisham?

Your notes

Answers

1. His sister and her husband, Joe Gargery
2. An escaped convict, Magwitch
3. She was jilted on her wedding day
4. Break men's hearts
5. Magwitch
6. Magwitch
7. He is ashamed of him and snobbish
8. She is badly burned in a fire

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

Your notes