

Great Expectations

Learning Pack

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The Story of *Great Expectations*

Great Expectations is the story of a man's life: Pip takes us from his earliest days living as an orphan in a Kentish village with his sister and her husband to adulthood. Time and experience make him a wiser, kinder and less selfish man. The moral element of the story is balanced by rich, dark humour and vividly drawn characters.

The story was first published (in 1860-61) in weekly instalments, one or two chapters at a time. It was then reissued in volumes – this summary of the story breaks it down into these three volumes:

Volume 1

Pip is an orphan. On a foggy Christmas Eve, somewhere on the Kent marshes, he meets an escaped convict in the village churchyard. The convict terrifies Pip and demands food and a file to saw through his leg iron. Pip goes home to his foster parents, Joe Gargery and Mrs. Joe. He manages to steal the food and file and takes them to the convict the following morning. Later in the day, the convict is recaptured but Pip's guilty feelings about stealing and helping the convict haunt him for years to come.

The story moves on a year. Miss Havisham, a wealthy and eccentric lady who lives in Satis House 'up town' wants a boy to come and visit from time to time to entertain her. Her tenant, Joe's Uncle Pumblechook suggests Pip. Pip is frightened and impressed by Satis House, Miss Havisham and her ward Estella, who is a girl about his age. He is mocked for his village manners and treated with contempt, but Mrs. Joe's social ambitions mean he has to return regularly. He falls in love with Estella despite the way she is condescending towards him.



Magwitch and Pip



Pip and Joe in the forge

Pip becomes Joe's apprentice at the forge, but his time at Satis House has made him discontented. With the help of Biddy, a friend from the next-to-useless village school he tries to educate himself, hoping this will provide an escape from village life.

Mrs. Joe's reign of terror ends when she receives a severe blow to the head. It's never made clear exactly what happened, but it may have been Joe's rough journeyman Orlick who was responsible.

A lawyer, Jaggers, arrives from London. He tells Pip and Joe that Pip has 'great expectations'. An anonymous benefactor will pay for Pip's education and upbringing as a gentleman - but he must move to London. Pip is delighted, and leaves the forge, feeling only slight pangs of guilt at leaving his friends and protectors Joe and Biddy behind.

The Story of *Great Expectations*

Volume 2

In London, Pip lives and makes friends with Herbert Pocket, a distant relation of Miss Havisham. He receives his education from Matthew Pocket, Herbert's father.

As the years go by, his life becomes more and more meaningless. He gets into debt, pines after Estella, who comes to London from time to time, and neglects Joe and Biddy. At this point, it's only his friendships with Jaggers' assistant Wemmick and Herbert that make him likeable. Herbert tells Pip he is in love with a girl called Clara but can't afford to marry her.

At 21, Pip discovers that despite all his assumptions Miss Havisham was not his benefactress. Pip secretly arranges to buy Herbert a partnership in a City trading firm - the only really generous thing he does with his money.

Late one night, the convict he met on the marshes appears at Pip's flat. His name is Magwitch and he has made a fortune in Australia as a sheep farmer. To thank Pip for his help, and to get his own back on the society that forced him into crime, he reveals that he paid for Pip to be brought up as a London gentleman.



Herbert and Pip

Volume 3

Pip is horrified that he has been living off a criminal's earnings. He wants to cut off all ties with Magwitch, but is drawn into helping him when he realises he could be hanged for returning to England. One night at dinner, Jaggers reveals that his maid Molly was Magwitch's wife and that they had a child – Estella.

Pip and Herbert make a plan to smuggle Magwitch out of the country. Thinking he may be abroad for some time Pip goes back to Kent to say goodbye to Miss Havisham and Joe. He is wandering around the grounds of Satis House, about to leave, when he has a terrifying vision of Miss Havisham. He rushes back in and finds her in flames. Pip puts the fire out, but Miss Havisham dies and Pip burns his hand very badly.

He dashes back to London to meet up with Herbert and Magwitch. They are rowing down the Thames to meet the steamer to Hamburg when the police catch up with them, and Magwitch is severely injured in a river boat accident.

Magwitch is condemned to death, but dies of his injuries before the sentence can be carried out. Pip takes care of him in his dying days, and learns to feel affection for Magwitch despite his criminal past.

Pip's debts catch up with him and he faces prison. He falls ill and Joe comes to London to take care of him. Pip finally manages to drop his pride and detachment from Joe and become his friend again. Joe secretly pays off Pip's debts and returns to the country.

Pip follows Joe home, planning to propose to Biddy, but she has already agreed to marry Joe. Pip decides to go abroad with Herbert to work for Herbert's firm in Egypt and pay off his debt to Joe.

Several years later Pip goes home. Joe and Biddy have a small child called Pip. The older Pip makes one last return to Satis House and meets Estella in the garden. Her husband has died and she is a sadder, kinder person - the ending leaves us uncertain as to whether Pip and Estella are finally united or agree to part forever.

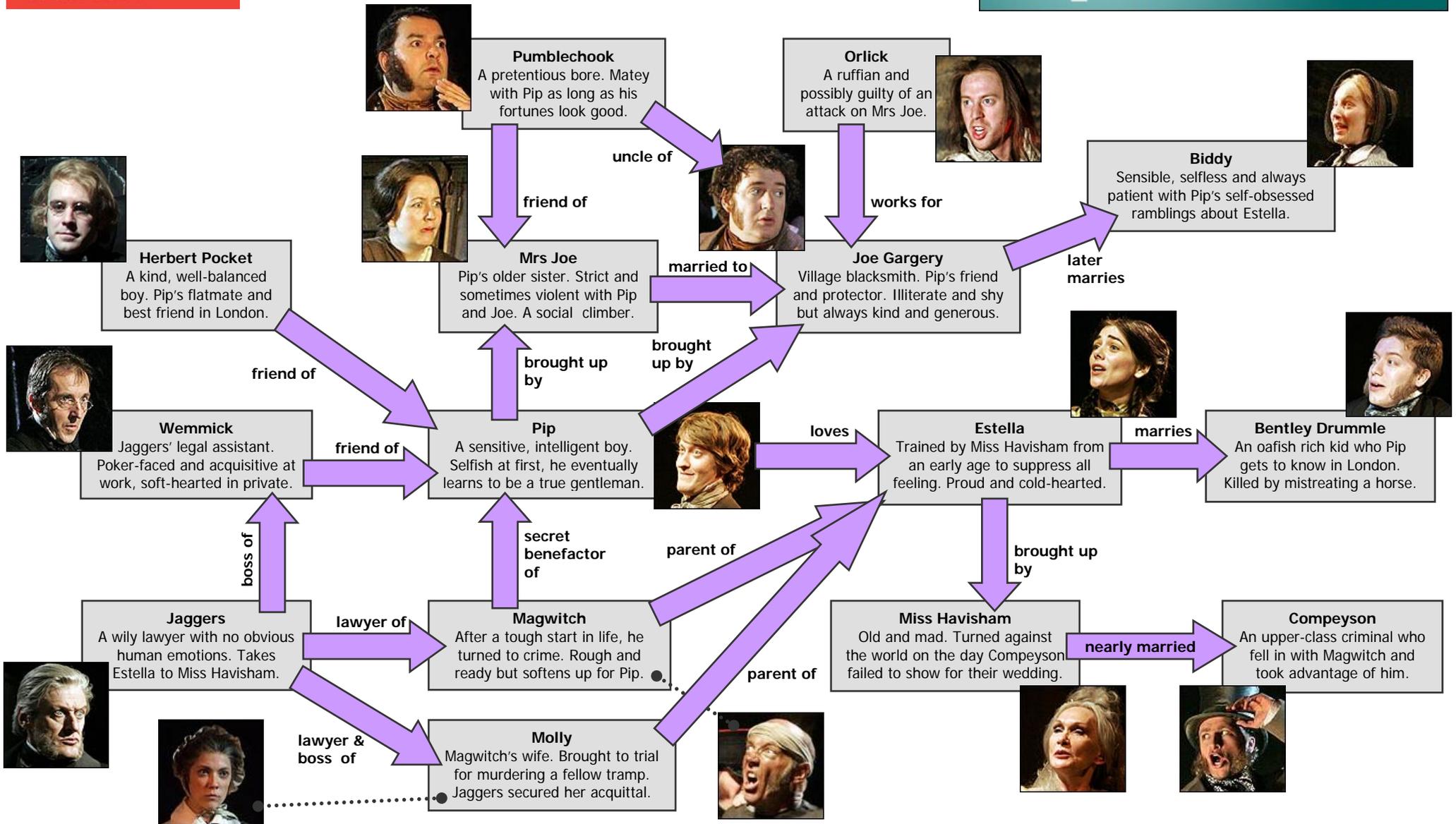


Pip and Joe

The Characters

Great Expectations

This map shows the characters and their relationships to each other.



Some key themes

Great Expectations

Becoming a gentleman

Pip's childhood experiences at Satis House quickly make him dissatisfied with his own background and likely future as Joe's apprentice. He wants to become a 'gentleman' but has very little idea what that means. At first he thinks it means having money and an education. He tries to educate himself, but when Jaggers arrives with his news of Pip's 'great expectations' it seems that matters have been taken out of his hands and he will be made into a gentleman without any real effort.

In London, Pip picks up the external appearance of a gentleman – clothes, table manners, being free with his money – but he is unhappy and unfulfilled. Towards the end of the novel, when he is ill and Joe is taking care of him he finally recognises that it is Joe's qualities of steadfastness, kindness and generosity that make a true gentleman, when he calls him "this gentle Christian man."



Pip dressed as a 'gentleman'

Crime & punishment

When Jaggers admits to Pip (Chapter 51) that he gave Estella, the child of the criminals Magwitch and Molly, to Miss Havisham to bring up, he explains his actions with a vivid description of the inevitability of crime:



Jaggers

"Put the case that he [Jaggers] lived in an atmosphere of evil, and that all he saw of children, was their being generated in great numbers for certain destruction. Put the case that he often saw children solemnly tried at a criminal bar, where they were held up to be seen; put the case that he habitually knew of their being imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hangman, and growing up to be hanged. Put the case that pretty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business-life, he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net - to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, bedevilled somehow."

Pip's own associations with crime start early in the novel. The opening chapters see Pip steal the bread and butter, the meat pie and the brandy from Mrs. Joe's larder, to feed to the convict out on the marshes. At the Christmas meal, the following day, Mrs. Joe and the assembled guests lecture Pip on how certain it is that he will come to a bad end. When the soldiers arrive and the convict is recaptured and taken back to his prison ship, Pip gets a firsthand demonstration of the consequences of crime, at a time when he is already feeling frightened and guilty. Pip's innocent childish crime, performed from a mixture of fear and pity, becomes associated for him with serious crime and serious punishment.

In London, Jaggers and Wemmick give Pip a more detailed insight into the workings of the justice system and the criminal world: he visits Newgate prison with Wemmick, meets the 'tamed beast' Molly at Jaggers' home and encounters Jaggers' rather desperate clients in the street outside his office.

Throughout *Great Expectations*, crime and the criminal justice system are portrayed as part of society, and yet Pip tries as hard as he can to see them as a completely separate category of life. Despite his childhood experience and what he has learned from Jaggers and Wemmick, he is shocked to discover that crime has specific links with himself, Estella and even Miss Havisham, through her near-marriage to Compeyson. His reconciliation with Magwitch leads him to a more intelligent and open response to crime and criminals. In the same way that Jaggers plucked Estella out of the seething 'spawn' of London, Pip learns to see Magwitch as an individual, not just the representative of a separate criminal world.

Some key features

Great Expectations

Great Expectations: The fairy tale

Many of the characters who appear in *Great Expectations* could be taken straight from a fairy tale: Miss Havisham, the cruel witch; Estella, the cold-hearted princess; Joe the simple countryman; Mrs. Joe the evil stepmother; and Pip, the Dick Whittington-like character who goes to London to seek his fortune. There is also a conventional fairy-tale style moral to the tale – it is better to be kind and humble and content with your lot, than to strive for riches and social status if this makes you into a hard-hearted person.

But the complex structure of *Great Expectations* takes it well beyond the simplicity of a fairy tale. The ending, in particular, goes beyond convention – there is no certainty that it was ‘happily ever after’ for Pip.

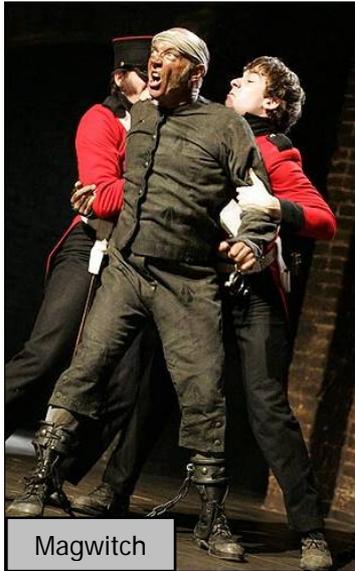


Miss Havisham & Estella

Dickens' poetry: atmosphere and description

Dickens is not afraid to put the plot on hold from time to time, to create an elaborate description of a room, a person or a place. These descriptions help build the atmosphere of individual scenes and the novel as a whole and often stand out from the ordinary flow of the text. One of the first is Pip's first impression of Magwitch in the churchyard:

“A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied around his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.”



Magwitch

The passage is highly stylised: there's no verb in the first two sentences so nothing happens — it's pure description. Then the relentless rhythm bears down on the reader just as Magwitch is bearing down on Pip. The paragraph returns to the plot in the last few words as Magwitch seizes Pip by the chin. The first description of Miss Havisham in Chapter 8 has a similarly poetic tone, and again brings the narrative to a halt.



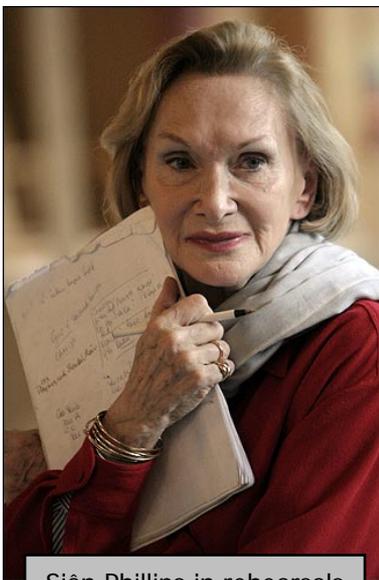
Estella & Pip

As well as inserting these poetic passages, Dickens also creates descriptive threads which run throughout the novel. One of these is connected with Estella. When Pip first meets her he finds her beautiful and proud; as he follows her across the brewery courtyard at Satis House, he finds the “cold wind seemed to blow colder there, than outside the gate”. *Stella* in Latin means ‘star’, and Estella has the cold, unchanging quality of starlight. As Pip stands at the forge door in Chapter 6, he looks up at the stars “and considered how awful it would be for a man to turn his face up to them as he froze to death, and to see no help or pity in all the glittering multitude.” When Dickens wants to soften our impressions of Estella in the final chapter, he softens the associations — instead of starlight he gives us the rising moon and soft evening mists, which reflect Estella's tears.

Who was Charles Dickens?

Charles Dickens was born at Portsmouth in 1812. His father, John Dickens, was an administrator in the Royal Navy and his job took the Dickens family to Chatham and then to London.

The family was not badly off at first, but John slowly became deeper and deeper in debt. Dickens was taken in and out of school, despite the fact that he was clearly bright and keen to learn. When John Dickens was imprisoned for his debts, Charles was sent to work in a boot polish factory for several months. He found the work tedious and humiliating, and never forgot it.



Siân Phillips in rehearsals

Desperate to make himself independent of his feckless family, Dickens learnt shorthand and set himself up as a freelance journalist reporting from the law courts, and later the House of Commons.

He made the break into fiction with a series of short stories known as 'Sketches by Boz'. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* was published in serial form in 1836-37 and made him an instant celebrity at the age of twenty-four. *Oliver Twist* followed soon after and confirmed his fame.

From then on Dickens wrote a novel every year or two and became famous all over Europe and America. As well as his punishing writing schedule he also gave readings, published magazines, produced plays, founded a newspaper and took a strong interest in the social issues of the day, particularly education and child welfare. He married, and had ten children with his wife Kate, but their marriage was never especially happy and they separated in 1858, against a background of rumours that Dickens was having an affair with a young actress called Ellen Ternan.

Great Expectations was written two years later. It was Dickens' thirteenth novel. The circumstances in which he decided to write it don't seem to have been particularly inspiring – it was more of a business decision. There had been a serious drop-off in sales of Dickens's magazine *All The Year Round*, and he decided that the only way to pick sales up again was to 'strike in' himself, by writing a new novel to be serialised in the magazine.

The effect was instant – sales of the magazine went up to 100,000 copies a week. The novel was clearly a popular success but had mixed reviews. Some reviewers saw it as Dickens' best work so far, praising the complex plot, the way he created a highly-charged atmosphere in a very ordinary setting, and the creation of characters like Joe Gargery, Miss Havisham and Jiggers. Others were more critical, finding the plot and characters exaggerated and unconvincing.



Adaptor Nick Ormerod (centre) in rehearsals

Many readers today would agree that *Great Expectations* was one of Dickens' finest novels. It was also one of his last. *Our Mutual Friend* followed and was the last complete novel Dickens ever wrote. He died in 1870, while still working on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The World of *Great Expectations*

Dickens set *Great Expectations* in the world and time of his own childhood. Like Pip he had lived in Kent in the 1820s, then moved to London in his early teens. Satis House is said to be based on Dickens's own house Gad's Hill, which his father had pointed out to him on a boyhood walk, and which he bought in 1855.

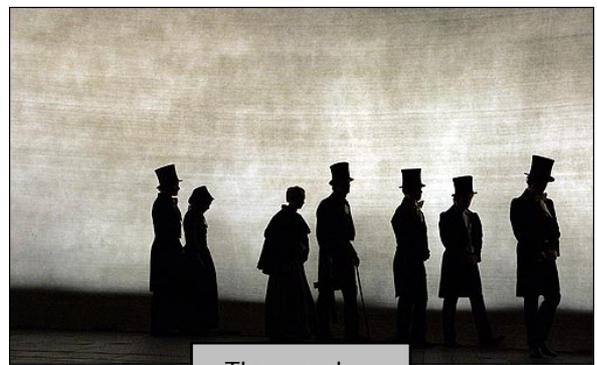


Satis House

Some of the first readers of *Great Expectations*, like Dickens, would have remembered the early years of the nineteenth century from their own childhood. The social details of *Great Expectations* create a detailed, complex world, a rich and satisfying background for Pip's story. In some respects the world Dickens describes is one that had already gone forever, but in others it is a world that would have been very familiar to his first readers.

The historical setting is strongly established in the opening chapters of the novel. In Chapter 7 Pip observes that Joe's education "like Steam, was yet in its infancy". As Pip gets older he travels between London and Kent by stagecoach. When Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* in the 1860s, railways were still new and exciting, but not the very latest thing. The first successful English steam railway line, between Liverpool and Manchester, had opened in 1830. Closer to home for Dickens and Pip, the East Kent Railway, which ran between London and Dover, was opened in 1858.

The prison system described in the opening chapters was also distinctive to the early years of the nineteenth century. Pip describes a gibbet on the marshes – a wooden frame used to hang criminals and display their bodies as a warning to others. Magwitch escapes from a prison ship (a hulk) standing on the marshy muddy Kentish shore, with a ball and chain locked onto his leg. He is waiting to be transported to Australia, where he would have to work on a prison farm for several years, before being released – a free man, but forbidden to return to England. Transportation began in 1787 (the first convicts were sent to North America) and was abolished in 1868, but in practice it had died out by the mid-1850s.



The marshes

Pip's school (described in Chapter 10) is clearly ineffectual, as many were in the early nineteenth century. The 'teacher', an elderly woman, who has no professional training or aptitude for the job, sleeps through most of the lesson. The children spend their time messing around, and are not actively taught anything. It wasn't until 1870 that there was compulsory schooling for under-12s and education for the poorest children seriously improved.



Pip learns to write

Dickens took a strong interest in politics and social reform. On his first trip to the United States in 1842 he made almost as many visits to orphanages, blind schools and factories as public appearances. In earlier novels, like *Oliver Twist*, he drew attention to many important issues of the day, holding up a mirror to the society he lived in and asking people to look at how orphans, the sick and the poor were treated. But *Great Expectations* is not a novel that aims at social reform. It is set so firmly in the past that Dickens's readers cannot be expected to change the world they see there. If this book is asking readers to change anything, it is not society but themselves and their dealings with others.

Sources & Recommended Reading

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Dickens, Charles – *Great Expectations*, Penguin Classics, London 2003

Messenger, Nigel – *Great Expectations*, York Notes Advanced, York Press, London 2003

Tredell, Nicholas (ed.) – *Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, a reader's guide to essential criticism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 1998

Searchable online text: <http://www.online-literature.com/dickens/greatexpectations>

Social and political history: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Britain.html>

Credits

The RSC's *Great Expectations*

By

Charles Dickens

A new adaptation by

Nick Ormerod and Declan Donnellan

Directed by

Declan Donnellan

Designed by

Nick Ormerod

Cast

Tobias Beer (Mr Wopsle/Orlick), Richard Bremmer (Jaggers), Gwendoline Christie (Mrs Hubble), Philip Cumbus (Mr Hubble/Drummler), Brian Doherty (Joe Gargery), Julius D'Silva (Pumblechook), Sophie Duval (Mrs Joe), Ruth Everett (Molly), Robert Hastie (Herbert Pocket), Emma Lowndes (Bidley), Philip McGinley (Startop), Neve McIntosh (Estella), Joseph Macnab (Watchman), Adam Newsome (Compeyson), Siân Phillips (Miss Havisham), Samuel Roukin (Pip), Roger Sloman (Magwitch), Jem Wall (Wemmick), Jo Woodcock (Young Estella) and Jack Cheeseman (Young Pip), Harry Davies (Young Pip), Jack Fielding (Young Herbert Pocket) and George Haynes (Young Herbert Pocket).

RSC Learning Pack

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Declan (left) in rehearsals