



## [Great Expectations](#), by Charles Dickens

### **In A Nutshell**

*Great Expectations* was Charles Dickens's penultimate novel (a.k.a. the second to last one he ever wrote), and it was originally featured in a magazine. That's right. *Great Expectations* was a serialized publication lasting from December 1, 1860 until August 3, 1861. Two chapters were published every week, telling the story of a young man named Pip who aspired to be a gentleman and win over the beautiful Estella. Basically, *Great Expectations* (and serialized novels like it) were as close as Victorian England got to *Gossip Girl*, *Grey's Anatomy*, or *Lost*. People waited anxiously every week for the next "episode" to arrive in the newsstands and on the shelves.

When he prepared to write this novel, Charles Dickens was already world famous for his robust body of work, but he was also the editor of a struggling publication called *All the Year Round*. This publication was no *Atlantic Monthly*, but it was a solid literary magazine featuring stories, essays, and illustrations. The problem was that his number one, superstar writer was churning out one seriously snooze-worthy (serialized) story. *All the Year Round*'s readership was diminishing, and Charles Dickens had to do something drastic to keep it from tanking altogether. As luck would have it, he had the plot for a new novel sketched out. He was saving it for publication in another (cooler and better-paying) publication, but decided to run it in his own magazine in order to stave off bankruptcy.

Though Dickens had the plot and skeleton of *Great Expectations* already planned, he was able

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to listen to the criticism and comments of his readers each week over the nine-month period (like a TV season) and to make adjustments to the novel accordingly. Much like current sitcom writers do today, Dickens paid very close attention to the criticism that his work garnered each week. In many ways, the novel was always changing form. Dickens is known as a master of the serialized novel; he was able to create enticing two-chapter segments each week, full of cliff-hangers and nail-biting action, while remaining true to the novel's overall storyline. His stories worked well in fragments and as a cohesive whole. That's not easy to do.

*Great Expectations* was widely popular and was riddled with many of the themes that fascinated Charles Dickens throughout his literary career. He was drawn especially to social justice and to commenting on the inequalities inherent to Victorian society. While England was growing rich and powerful in the era of colonialism and the Industrial Revolution, Dickens saw the injustice that ran rampant among the working and lower classes. He sought to document Britain's underbelly and to explore the fight for survival in a time of such wealth.

Dickens, along with many other nineteenth century novelists, was also very interested in childhood and in orphans. The innocence and hopefulness of childhood contrasted heavily with the sadness and suffering that he witnessed. Dickens also was in love with doppelgangers and doubles, and so constructed the world of his novels out of complex networks of character doubles. Things come in twos in Dickensian works, so get ready for some double-hunting.

Charles Dickens wrote almost fifteen novels, none of which have ever gone out of print. He's pretty much the bomb-diggity.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 What is this Industrial Revolution you speak of and did it involve cool uniforms? But seriously, was the Industrial Revolution a good thing? Somebody help us.
- 2 Dickens wrote a lot of travel books and travel guides. Are there any points in the novel where you hear our author slipping into tour guide? What portrait of London does Charles Dickens paint?
- 3 It is widely said that it is far better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Discuss amongst yourselves.

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