What to Expect from Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

…Courtesy of the Berkley High School English Department
Class Mobility in England: A Broad Historical Context
(Or, Hundreds of Years of British History in One Slide)

- Medieval society is economically dominated by the aristocracy and landed gentry; a few people have almost everything and almost everyone else works for them.

- This is loosened in late Medieval society (14th & 15th Century). Workers have greater mobility and a merchant class appears (remember Shakespeare’s upbringing?).

- The Industrial Revolution (beginning in the mid-1700s) helps accelerate these changes, creating a sizable middle class and causing a large population shift from the country to cities.
Major Binaries in *Great Expectations*

In *GE*, Dickens explores several issues related to the hopes and horrors of his day, many of which are related to social class:

- Life in cities vs. life in the country
- The rich vs. the poor & how having (or not having) money affects people
- Class mobility—the differences between earned wealth vs. inherited wealth
The Industrial Revolution & The Rise of Big Cities

• Those who were previously skilled tradesmen were replaced by machinery and factories.
• This caused many people to move into cities for work and to pursue opportunity—cities grow significantly as a result.
• City life was dirty, cramped, and unsanitary (think open sewers and multiple families sharing toilet facilities.)
• 18 hour days were the norm. Life expectancy for factory workers was in the mid-40s.
The Industrial Revolution & The Rise of Big Cities

Shift to cities

- In 1600, 8% of the English population lived in cities, 70% on farms.
- In 1800, 28% lived in cities, 36% on farms.
- More people = more economic interaction = rise in middle class. Cities are where things are happening!
- More working and middle class people = more readers → the rise of the popular press.
- Bottom line: Many people are movin’ on up, and this movement becomes part of the story people tell themselves about themselves.
Upside of the Industrial Revolution: Newfound Wealth

• Due to the low price provided by mass production, people were able to purchase products that they previously could not.

• This resulted in the “Consumer Revolution”: people tried to emulate those in a class above by “aspiring to the habits and patterns of consumption of their superiors” (Hudson).

• GE Theme: Portable Property. Pay attention to how Pip and other characters manage and are affected by money
The Prison System: Not Everyone Shares the Wealth

• Dickens was critical of the prison system of his time. Pay attention to his depiction of prisoners as you read.
• A bit about 19th Century British prisons: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca7I8xcUP5A
The Prison System: Life for the Less-Fortunate

- It was not uncommon for families to join prisoners in prison—families would go off to work during the day and return in the evenings or on weekends.
- Prisons were overcrowded, so “prison hulks,” large ships that were no longer fit for sea, were utilized. This is why Pip encounters the convict in the graveyard at the beginning of the novel.
About the Author

- Dickens’s father often mismanaged the family money, forcing the family to live in poverty.
- Dickens had to leave school at 12 and start working when his father was sent to debtors’ prison in London in 1824.
- Scarred by working in a factory as a child and by poverty, he later became involved in social causes: prisoner rights, child labor reform and the plight of the poor.
- Wrote serial fiction—the mass medium of the day.
- Also wrote *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. 
Publishing *Great Expectations*

- Published in Dickens’s own magazine, *All the Year Round*.
  - First edition of the magazine was published in April of 1859. (*GE* was published in 1861.)
  - 24 pages at twopence each (approximately $1 today)
  - Quickly outsold *The Times* with the first edition selling over 100,000 copies
  - No essays about politics (big shift from predecessors)
  - Prime space was given to “serial fiction”
  - So, Dickens was a powerful cultural force, both an author and a publisher!
PART 25.

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Publishing *Great Expectations*

*Great Expectations* was published in installments (weekly issues). This process shapes the book in several ways:

- Dickens would tailor characters and plot to audience / critical reaction
- Many chapters end with a cliffhanger to keep the readership coming back to purchase the next issue.
- Chapters sometimes begin with a quick recap of the last chapters/issue to remind the reader of the last issue
Great Expectations: A Reflection of Victorian England

To recap: watch for...

- How rich and working class characters are depicted
- How rich and working class characters view themselves and those of other classes
- How class mobility is depicted through the characters
- How Dickens is, therefore, exploring the tensions about social class present in his society
Great Expectations: A Victorian Novel

Though GE doesn’t directly address all of the underlying causes of change in British society, it does reflects these tensions, especially through Pip’s reactions to his environment.

In Pip, we get a character that is given the opportunity to rise in society and live in London, one of the world’s seats of power. Through his eyes we get a sense of both the promise and the darker side of Victorian society.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca7I8xcUP5A>.


<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/ge/>.

<http://wiki.uiowa.edu/display/vicwik/Great+Expectations>.