

Discussion Questions for *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

1. The novel is concerned with the concept of prisons. We are first introduced to prisons in the form of the “hulks” that Magwitch escaped from, and later, when Magwitch returns to England. Miss Havisham lives in a self-imposed prison where time has stopped. Pip’s sister, Mrs. Gargery is imprisoned in her body after she is attacked by Orlick. Estella is imprisoned by her lack of love, her later marriage to Drummle, and her upbringing by Miss Havisham. Pip is imprisoned by his expectations and his idea that fortune will bring him happiness. Is there anyone who is not imprisoned in this novel? If so, what allows them to remain free?
2. Estella tells Pip repeatedly that she is heartless and cannot love. Why does he pursue Estella, while at the same time not recognizing that Biddy loves him?
3. Throughout the novel, Pip is concerned with becoming a gentleman. He believes that a gentleman is defined by his possessions and place in society, its “expectations.” Are there any true gentlemen in the novel, and if so, who?
4. Why is Pip embarrassed that his money comes from Magwitch, rather than Miss Havisham? Should he be embarrassed? Why would it matter that the money came from Miss Havisham or Magwitch? Which of the two is a better character and friend to Pip?
5. The end of the novel hints at a rapprochement between Estella and Pip. Do you think that such a reconciliation is possible; why or why not?
6. At the end of the novel, we learn that Estella is the daughter of Magwitch and Mr. Jaggers’s maid, and that she was born out of wedlock. If this secret was known, how would it affect Estella’s position in life? Does Pip seem to mind that Estella is illegitimate?
7. Who is the hero/heroine of the novel? Why?
8. Pip makes a number of acquaintances in the novel, but very few real friends. Who are some of the people who might be considered Pip’s real friends?
9. What do you make of the relationship between Jaggers and Wemmick? Why is there such a separation between their public and private life?
10. How does the novel treat the notion of “expectations?” What can we infer from the novel of Dickens’s thoughts about money, society, friendship and love?