Concept/Vocabulary Analysis  
for Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*  

**Summary**

In the first part of the novel, Pip, an orphan, is living a humble, simple life in the English countryside with his older sister and her husband Joe. One day while out walking by the cemetery to visit his parents’ graves, Pip meets Magwitch, an escaped convict who convinces Pip to steal food from home and bring it to him. Pip worries that he will be caught for stealing but, after Magwitch is apprehended by the authorities and arrested, he clears Pip’s name by telling Joe that he himself robbed their house. Pip becomes dissatisfied with his humble, impoverished upbringing after meeting and interacting with the wealthy local Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter Estella. Pip decides he wants to pursue bigger and better things and, after inheriting a fortune from an unknown benefactor, Pip moves to the city to begin a “gentleman’s” life, leaving behind his country friends Joe and Biddy and becoming ashamed of them. In the end of the novel and after discovering that the convict he once helped has been funding his lavish lifestyle, Pip realizes he has had his priorities mixed up and returns to the country to apologize to Joe and Biddy. Eventually he decides to earn an honest living by joining his friend Herbert in the east shipping trade business.

**Organizational Patterns**

*Great Expectations* is organized into three volumes or stages, each reflecting a different part of Pip’s emotional journey towards maturity and the realization that money and social status are not worth sacrificing friends and ethics. Volume one (chapters one to nineteen) introduces Pip as a simple country boy who becomes ashamed of his low station in life and, after inheriting a large fortune, moves to London to become a gentleman. Volume two (chapters twenty to thirty nine) shows Pip’s life in London and his education in the mannerisms and ways of gentlemanly behavior and cultured society. In this section Pip squanders his fortune because of extravagant purchases and becomes more and more prideful because of his social status. Volume three (chapters forty to fifty nine), shows how Pip has matured, becoming ashamed of the way he treated his country friends after he became wealthy and returning to the country to...
apologize. In the end of the novel he becomes a respectable merchant in the shipping trade and married Estella, the woman who once scorned him because of his low social station.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue

SOCIAL STATUS AND PRESTIGE

What would you do in order to move up on the social ladder?: *Great Expectations* focuses on Pip's obsession with moving up on the social ladder by gaining wealth and becoming a gentleman. Much is expected from Pip after he inherits a fortune from an initially unknown benefactor and he has “great expectations” for life. However, in order to realize these expectations and goals, he is forced to abandon his humble country lifestyle and his friends there.

What things are worth gaining social prestige?: While it seems as though nothing would be worth abandoning loyal friends, Pip does exactly that in the novel. Ultimately he decides that social status, wealth, and title are worth more to him than Joe’s loyalty and Biddy’s friendship, companionships, and advice. In the end, however, Pip matures and realizes that his fixation on gaining social prestige almost cost him the most important thing of all – loyal friendship.

How does a community’s perception of status influence how people feel about their various positions on the social ladder?: Before Pip meets Miss Havisham and Estella he is perfectly content with his station in life and is not ashamed that he is not wealthy and has no social title or rank. However, after Estella mocks him for being “low” and “common” he becomes bitter about his lot in life and aims to gain social status. Pip’s negative perception of his country lifestyle, then, is imposed on him by others.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

THEME
Class Distinction: As can be seen through examining the central question/enduring issue of *Great Expectations*, class distinction plays a huge role in Pip’s life and influences his motivations and decisions throughout the novel. It is Pip’s drive to rid himself of his “common” background and mannerisms and become an educated gentleman that causes him to turn his back on his past, Joe, and Biddy. Pip’s rise in social rank almost immediately causes him to become prideful and think himself above his fellow countrymen. Even before Pip leaves to go to London he declines Joe’s invitation to accompany him because he doesn’t want to be associated with Joe’s ignorance and lowly ways. At one point when Joe comes to visit Pip in London, Pip is so mortified by the thought of being connected with him that he wishes he could pay to keep him away.

Personal Ambition: Personal ambition is a theme in this novel because it is Pip’s personal drive to be successful and noteworthy on a larger scale that leads him to leave his life in the country and take a chance living in the city and trying to work his way up in the dog-eat-dog world of rank and title.

Bildungsroman/Coming of Age: *Great Expectations* is a coming of age, or bildungsroman, novel because the three volumes follow Pip through different stages of his life toward emotional maturity. In the first part of the novel Pip is relatively unaware of the world outside his small country town and is satisfied with his lot in life, not knowing that he is near the bottom of the social totem pole according to outside sources. However, after Pip becomes aware of his comparative poverty and low station in life, he becomes set on bettering his condition in life through acquiring wealth and education. After he inherits a fortune he becomes prideful and ungrateful for the people who have cared about him the most as he seeks to gain social prestige. In the end of the novel, after he has lost his fortune and realized the error of his ways and his own ingratitude, Pip’s reaches emotional maturity and apologizes to those he has wronged.

Gratitude: Gratitude is a central theme of *Great Expectations* as Pip repeatedly is ungrateful for the things others, like Joe and Biddy, have done for him. After he receives more education than Biddy, for example, he flaunts his knowledge in front of her, failing to express gratitude to her for the things she taught him when she was his teacher at
the local school. He also becomes ungrateful toward Joe and unappreciative of the
kindness Joe showed him for so many years in caring for him and providing a roof over
his head. At the end of the novel Pip fully realizes how ungrateful he has been after Joe
discharges all of his debts and nurses him back to health, not asking for anything in
return. Pip finally feels sufficient remorse and gratitude toward Joe, making his coming
of age complete.

**Loyalty**: Another theme of *Great Expectations* is based on the
importance of loyalty among friends. While Pip is not a good example of this (at least
until the end of the novel), both Joe and Biddy never waver in their loyalty to him.
Despite Pip’s poor treatment of him, Joe pays all of his debts in the end of the book and
does not resent him for his prideful nature.

**Public vs. Private Life**: Mr. Wemmick, one of the minor characters of the novel,
illustrates the difference between people’s public and private lives. Publicly he is very
straightforward and cold while privately he is very open and inviting. He explains to Pip
that he is two very different people in his public and private lives. This theme seems to
manifest itself elsewhere in the novel as people (and even Pip at some points) put their
public ambitions ahead of their private affairs and relationships.

**SETTING**

**Country**: The novel takes place first in the English countryside, although there
are two different country settings that Pip experiences. One is with regard to the marsh
lands, Joe’s forgery (a blacksmith’s workhouse), and the humble house Pip was reared
in – which represents a simpler way of life with fewer to-dos about titles, wealth, and
status than in the city. It also represents Pip’s poor origins, his upbringing by and
friendship with Joe, and his more genuine, feeling, and loyal nature. The other country
setting is with regard to Miss Havisham’s house (which is located in the more central
part of the country) and represents the beginning of Pip’s “expectations” and his
dissatisfaction with his “common” and low life. His introduction to Miss Havisham’s and
Estella’s ways of life and pride takes Pip down a road that eventually leads him to cast
off Joe and Biddy, his true friends, in exchange for a life of misery, debt, and
dissatisfaction.
City: The other parts of the novel take place in London. The city, with its emphasis on social status and business affairs, represents Pip’s expectations and his sudden rise to fortune, prestige, and reputation as a gentleman. It also represents, however, Pip’s dissatisfaction with his new life as he longs for the unattainable Estella and feels guilt about his shameful behavior toward Joe and Biddy. The city thus reflects Pip’s dissatisfaction with the changes, both external and internal, that his fortune have wrought upon him, causing him to reassess his priorities and the things he values most.

POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE VOICE

*Great Expectations* is a first person narrative told from Pip’s perspective. The first person narrative is effective because it allows readers an inside look at Pip’s mind and the reasons behind his decisions. Through this inside look readers are able to see that, even though Pip leaves behind Joe and Biddy in the country, he never fully forgets them and feels remorse from time to time about how he has treated them. At one point in the novel Pip realizes that the ways he has changed since acquiring wealth have not all been good. These thought processes help readers understand that Pip is human and has made mistakes but that he is capable of recognizing and those mistakes and fixing them.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Students should be able to relate to *Great Expectations* in a variety of ways. First students should be able to relate to Pip’s desire for popularity and social status. What student in junior high or high school doesn’t want to be well-liked and held in high esteem by others? Furthermore, students should be able to relate to Pip’s desire for wealth and financial prominence because there is so much pressure in junior high and high school to be accepted and sometime being accepted by peers means having material things like cool clothes or a nice car. Students should also relate to Pip’s desire to be accepted as a gentleman and to leave his country ways behind because there is
great peer pressure in secondary school to fit in, even if it might mean leaving old friends behind.

Students may also be able to relate to Joe’s and Biddy’s plights after Pip abandoned them for wealth and social status. Some students may have been similarly abandoned because friendships in junior high and high school can often be fickle and fleeting. However, students may disagree with Joe’s continued loyalty and kindness toward Pip after Pip treated him so rudely, instead arguing that Joe should have treated Pip poorly in turn. This would be a good lead in for a class discussion about when being loyal to a fair-weather friend is a bad thing and when loyalty and kindness like Joe’s should be shown.

Finally, some students should be able to relate to Pip’s rejection by Estella and his undying passion for and obsession with her. Students that have been similarly rejected by a love interest will be able to relate this to their own experiences.

**Vocabulary Issues**

*Great Expectations* has a more difficult vocabulary because it was published serially in England between 1860 and 1861 and Charles Dickens uses a lot of complicated words that the average student probably isn’t familiar with. Because of its somewhat antiquated language and more formal speech, students may struggle with unpacking the text and figuring out the definitions of some of the words. It is intended to be taught in high school so this higher reading and vocabulary level is appropriate. However, scaffolding will still need to be implemented to help students more easily access the text.

Some vocabulary terms (among others) students will need to be familiar with are:

- **trenchant**- keen, sharp; penetrating
- **remonstrance**- present reasons to oppose; plead in protest
- **augmented**- to make greater, more numerous, larger, or more intense
• **imprecations**- to evoke evil on; to utter curses
• **dissuading**- to advise against something
• **contumaciously**- stubbornly disobedient
• **imperious**- commanding; dominant
• **execrating**- to put under a curse; detest
• **pilfering**- to steal stealthily in small amounts and often again and again
• **exonerated**- to relieve of responsibility, obligation, or hardship; clear from blame
• **venerated**- to regard with reverential respect or with admiring deference
• **erudition**- extensive knowledge acquired chiefly from books
• **perspicuity**- plain to the understanding because of clarity and precision of presentation; clear
• **sagaciously**- keen in sense perception; wise
• **ablation**- the washing of one's body or part of it
• **gourmandizing**- gluttonous, eating excessively
• **transfixed**- frozen in place or time
• **capricious**- impulsive
• **ignominiously**- humiliatingly
• **adamantine**- unyielding, hard in attitude

It will be important for teachers to go over necessary vocabulary words prior to assigning students to read this novel so that they can more fully understand it and not become frustrated.

**Background Knowledge**

In order to understand *Great Expectations* students will need to know something about social stratification in England during this time where wealthy, educated gentlemen were regarded more highly than working class men. Students will also need to be aware of the role a benefactor plays in bequeathing money to a dependent to understand why Pip was so indebted and bound to Magwitch, even though he initially inwardly despised and wished to have nothing to do with him. It would also be helpful
for students to understand the importance during Pip’s time of having useful connections in order to gain a fortune, be successful, and move up in the world and on the social ladder.

**Implications for Student Diversity**

*Great Expectations* has little to no mention of ethnic but there is obvious economic and vocational diversity, as we can see when we compare Pip’s situation in life after he received the fortune with Joe’s working at the forge in the marshlands. Although Joe works much harder than Pip does and earns a respectable living, Pip lives a life of relative ease and luxury because he was lucky enough to inherit a fortune and become an educated gentleman. In the end of the novel Pip’s gentlemanly status is stripped from him when he is left literally without a dime to his name, having to have his debts paid for him by Joe. This kind of shows the easy come, easy go aspect of money acquired with very little effort on the part of the recipient. While Pip rose in rank and enjoyed a short time of material happiness, Joe enjoys the more permanent kind of happiness because he has earned an honest living and learned the principles of hard work, dedication, loyalty, and kindness. This type of diversity shows that, although financial gain seems on the surface to be ideal and the answer to all of life’s problems, the honest man who works hard will in the end be successful in life.

**Gender Issues**

*Great Expectations* deals with gender issues because the women in the novel are not quite as prominent as male characters and they seem to come off as fickle, inconstant, or extreme. After Miss Havisham was abandoned by her lover on her wedding day, for example, she stopped all the watches and clocks in the house and remained in the very dress she was preparing to be married in. She has let life pass her by, too distressed and obsessed with living in the past and generating bitter feelings toward her deceitful lover and men in general. Miss Havisham passes on this bitterness and anger toward men to Estella, her adopted daughter, causing Estella to be cold and heartless toward men and to push them away as if they mean nothing to her. Her derogatory treatment of Pip causes him considerable heartache and makes him question women and the
lengths they will go to in order to get revenge. In the end of the novel, however, Miss Havisham sees the error of her ways and apologizes to Pip for the way Estella has treated him. Pip and Estella eventually end up together but not until after Pip has endured much concerning her. Perhaps Dickens is trying to make a point about the inconstand and sometimes absurd natures of women?

Research Issues/Project Ideas

Character Connection Chart: Because there are so many complex relationships and prominent characters in *Great Expectations* I think it would be helpful for students to map out the different characters and how they relate or connect to each other on some kind of chart. This would help students organize the characters in their minds and how they relate to Pip, especially in the various stages of his life. It would also be helpful to include on the map some qualities of each of the characters so students can keep them all straight.

Cost of Living in London in the Late 1800s: Students could research online to see how much it cost to live in London during the late 1800s to see how much money Pip needed a month to survive (how much he needed for basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter). Contrasting this with the large sums he requests from the lawyer in charge of dispersing his inheritance, students would be able to see how much money Pip spent frivolously on clothes, eating out, and gambling.

The Diary of Pip: Students could write three journal entries from each stage of Pip’s emotional journey toward maturity, each expressing his feelings about his social status in life, discussing the relationships that are the most important to him, and talking about how he feels about his own conduct. This would be a fun way for students to really get inside Pip’s head and would help teachers know whether or not they understand Pip’s character and the different life stages he goes through with their accompanying changes in his attitudes toward life, friendship, money, and social prestige.
**Real World Connections:** Students could bring in newspaper or magazine clippings illustrating real world connections to Pip’s desire for financial and social status.

**Enrichment Resources**

If *Great Expectations* seems to be too complex for some students to understand students could start out with easier texts that explore similar themes of a fixation on financial gain and social status. One example could be Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace,” where a woman spends a lifetime earning money to replace a lost pearl necklace she borrowed once in order to fit in at a social event. This relates to Pip’s fixation with material objects and social status.

Teachers could provide students a more extensive look at vocabulary in *Great Expectations* by referring them to http://ch104.k12.sd.us/english/web_page_docs/vocab_definitions.pdf.

Finally, teachers could refer students to http://charlesdickenspage.com/expectations.html, a very useful website with information on the characters, locations, and timeline of *Great Expectations* as well as information about Charles Dickens.