

Exploring themes

Complete these tasks to learn more about the themes in *Great Expectations*. Note down how each theme is reflected and developed by the **characters**, in the plot and the setting.



Wealth

- How many ways can you find in which the characters perceive the meaning of wealth in different ways? E.g. Pip spends his newly acquired money in a bid to improve his social status.
- How do other characters measure wealth and how important is it to them?
- Does wealth affect decisions made by the characters? Are those decisions made for the best of reasons?

Love

Love is depicted in numerous ways in this novel e.g. romance, love of family, infatuation and obsession.

- Who loves whom, and in what ways?
- Who demonstrates the purest form of love?
- Where is love mingled with deception?

Deceit

Great Expectations deals with the aspirations of a number of characters who may use deceit to accomplish their desires.

- Who uses deceit and which characters actively shun lies of any kind?
- Are there occasions when deceit actually works for good?

Class and society

- Victorian Society had rigid lines of demarcation between the classes. Do you see the barriers between classes in this novel?
- Try constructing a diagram showing the social hierarchy of the characters.
- Victorians assumed that members of the higher classes would be more 'noble' than those of the lower classes. Is that true of all characters in this novel?
- What does Pip lose, and what does he gain from his efforts to be a 'gentleman'?

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Time

- Dickens measures time in different ways throughout this novel. It affects the characters' aspirations; their hopes and their dreams are driven forward by time. In other ways time moves slowly and a character may be stuck in time somewhere.
- Note how this theme affects the characters in different ways

Rules, criminality, right and wrong, the law, justice

- From the list above, choose the areas that you think are of most importance in this novel. They are all present in the novel and make a major contribution to both the plot and the characters.
 - Was Dickens asking people to consider how just the legal system in operation in 1860 was?
 - Do the punishments meted out in the novel fit the crimes?
 - Is social status reflected in the way the law is administered?
- Now evaluate what you have recorded. Which themes are the most important for you? Where have you found examples that involve character, plot and setting?

Further themes

You might also consider innocence, redemption or friendship as themes for exploration.