

## STRUCTURE

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**6.0 OBJECTIVES**

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The main objectives of this unit are:

- To understand the historical context of the novel
- To know about the biographical details of the author Charles Dickens
- To get acquainted with the genre of novel *Great Expectations*.

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**6.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

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The Victorian Age is known to be the golden age of the English Novel. Before reading the novel *Great Expectations*, let us discuss the influences and the developments that gave rise to this claim.

Named after Queen Victoria who ascended the throne of England in 1837 and died in 1901; the Victorian Age is believed to have actually started in 1832-33 with the First Reform Bill that led to end the medieval feudal system and heralded beginning of democracy in England. As you can see, the period mainly covered better part of the nineteenth century. Now the question is: How do we define the Victorian Age? It is difficult to characterize any age in one or two sentences because each epoch is a complex formation of various factors responsible in defining its uniqueness. For instance, in giving specific identity to an age factors like literary, political, economic, social and cultural influence and play definite role simultaneously.

However, broadly speaking, it would be easier to term the Victorian Age as a period of peace and prosperity. Seventeenth century England struggled with Civil War and revolutions; and the eighteenth

century witnessed recurrent wars against France. Compared to previous two tumultuous centuries, the Nineteenth Century did not face major wars. The only wars were Crimean War (1853-54) against imperial Russia and the Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa, which only served to enhance Britain's power. It was a period of imperial expansion as Britain had reached the zenith of power in the mid-nineteenth century.

Major changes in political, social and economic systems of the society were witnessed by the Victorian England. Victorian age is considered as the most exciting period in the history of England that witnessed socio-economic turbulences, problems, inventions and socio-political reforms, which were the by-products of the industrial revolution changing the lives of the people tremendously. Fast growing industrialization changed the economy of England and people rushed to cities to work in the industries where they were compelled to work for longer hours in inhumane conditions. Consequently, this gave rise to class based hierarchy in the social system of England. Many of the poor who could not find their place in industry, found themselves in workhouses or prison, or they turned to crime like Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. In their quest for survival, poor people sent their children to work in factories,. Since there were no labour laws in England at that time and the poor people who were into unskilled labour jobs, they were condemned to poverty for the rest of their lives. Having had to work in a warehouse during his childhood, Dickens offers realistic picture of Victorian England in his novels.

It was also a period of economic prosperity. Hard work was regarded as the key to success. In general, a strong feeling of national harmony and optimism replaced the anxieties of the earlier period. The Victorian Age was also rather moralistic as in every sector emphasized upon the importance of the family as a key social unit.

Apart from industrialization, another major influence on Victorian literature was science and its impact on society. The Victorian era was an important period for the development of scientific inventions. One of the most influential scientific doctrines was Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, in which he espoused the theory of evolution that destabilized the philosophical ideas and religious faith of the Victorians amidst the overall stability. Subsequently, this also influenced the novelists during the Victorian age.

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## 6.2 NOVEL DURING THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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In the history of literature, the Victorian Age is often referred to as the Age of Giants. Unlike its preceding periods, the Victorian Age witnessed sudden rise in the English Novel. The Elizabethan Age can be seen as the age of drama, the Romantic age as the age of poetry, while the Victorian Age can boast of producing remarkable novels of all time.

The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was highly influenced by the romanticism, and hence, the focus was on nature and imagination. Gothic and romantic novels were written during this period. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of class-conflict, stories about poor

working class as against the aristocratic class surfaced upon the literary scenario. Broadly speaking, the general subject matter or the core theme of the majority of 19<sup>th</sup> century novel was social life and intricacies involved in human relations. The stories were woven around themes of love, marriage, quarrelling and reconciliation, social gatherings, monetary loss and gains, challenging social conventions and value systems. Novelist like Thomas Hardy presents human beings struggling against their fate and questions their tragic side of destiny. On the other hand, novelist like Charles Dickens portrays the exact picture of social evils with a corrective desire in writing his novels.

The novels of Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, W.M. Thackeray, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, as we know, are widely read even today. These novels seem to evolve out of a more general spirit of the age. In order to understand the contribution of the leading novelists during the Victorian Age, let us study, in detail, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

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### 6.3 CHARLES DICKENS

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No work of art can be written or produced in vacuum or isolation. There are multiple factors responsible for the creation. In order to understand the context of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* let us understand the author's biographical details that establish a connect between the work and forces responsible in the creation of widely acknowledge work of art.

The second of eight Children of John and Elizabeth Dickens, Charles was born on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England. Though plagued by frequent illness, during his early childhood, Charles heard exciting stories told to him by his parents and nurse. When Charles was twelve, the Dickens family moved to London, where his father was imprisoned for not being able to pay his debts. The unfavorable circumstances forced young Charles to work in a factory pasting labels on bottles. Although his job lasted for less than a year, Charles often felt abandoned and vulnerable compared to his sister who could pursue her studies at the Royal Academy. Dickens' sense of injustice multiplied with his mother's satisfaction over his job. Hence, the portrait of an unpleasant sister to an orphan is evident in *Great Expectations*.

Although some of his critics opine that *Great Expectations* is not directly autobiographical, Dickens himself confessed that he hated working in the factory and dreamed of better life. This claimant is clearly visible in Pip's eagerness to leave Joe's forge. Thus, there are many similarities between fictional incidents – descriptions and Dickens real life experiences.

In June 1870, Dickens died of a brain aneurysm. Though physically dead, Dickens' spirit lives with his immortal works. All his novels were initially published in weekly and monthly magazines in serialized forms, later reprinted in standard book formats. At the age of twenty five, Dickens published his first novel, the *Pickwick Papers*, in a series between 1836 and 1837, brought him immediate success. He

became the most avidly read author of his generation after the publication of his popular novel *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839). His other novels *Hard Times* (1854), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *A Tale of two Cities* (1859), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *Bleak House* (1853), *Great Expectations* (1861), *Our Mutual Friends* (1865) and many more were equally successful and popular. A very prolific writer, Dickens remained a literary celebrity during his lifetime and posthumously as well.

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#### **6.4. BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL: *GREAT EXPECTATIONS***

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Like all his novels, Dickens published his thirteenth novel *Great Expectations* in a serial form in his own journal *All the Year Round* between December 1860 and August 1861. In the same year the serialized book was published in a novel form in October 1861 into three volumes. Dickens also published a simultaneous American edition in *Harper's Weekly*, precisely a week in advance to the English version. The original manuscript of *Great Expectations* is with Wisbech and Fenland Museum. In 1869, Dickens had bequeathed the manuscript to the museum. It is through the manuscript the critics and scholars learnt about two different endings of the novel.

As a novel, *Great Expectations* is full of autobiographical elements though not so openly disclosed as in *David Copperfield*. In fact, it seems that Dickens has written *Great Expectations* very carefully in order to avoid unintentional repetitions of his own life-experiences. Although the novel is considered as the darkest work by Dickens, it was well received not only by the Victorian readers but by the later generations also.

Novel *Great Expectations* has been divided into 59 chapters. After *David Copperfield*, this is the second novel by Dickens to be fully narrated in the first person. The story is narrated by the protagonist Philip Pirrip. Hence, the book is told through his eyes, some twenty eight years later. The central theme and plot of the novel revolve around the incidents and life experiences of Philip Pirrip.

##### **6.4.1 Context**

For a novel, which was being accepted immediately after its publication, *The Great Expectations* has come a long way by maintaining its popularity even after one and a half centuries. It is only in the fitness of things that you should read the text as part of your course in English Novel. Apart from its popularity, there are themes in the novel which are typically British: London setting, growing up as an orphan, social outcast, imperialism and moral regeneration as final affirmation.

Dickens' story, *Great Expectation*, takes place in London and in the county of South-East of England. The story is set between the years 1810 and 1830. In the beginning itself, Dickens provides two different pictures of class divisions with the portrayal of Gargery family- poor, uneducated and living near marshes whereas on the other hand is the family of Miss Havisham; rich, fashionable and living in a mansion.

Dickens saw lives of both poor and rich living on the outskirts and at the heart of London, the largest city of wealthy England during the nineteenth century. People from the aristocratic class of London were known as ladies and gentlemen. Those people were educated, followed social rules for correct behaviour, and dressed well in the most fashionable clothes. On the other hand, thousands of poor people lived in small, dirty houses and did not have enough to eat. Dickens saw two extremes of London society- the growing middle class imitating the prosperous and degrading lower class struggling to survive. He attempted to give realistic picture of the English society that he sensed, perceived and experienced.

Charles Dickens is considered as a very good example of the Victorian novelist who fearlessly portrayed vivid pictures of his society and gave graphic details of the experiences of the working class during the Victorian period. Here, in the given passage, the word “change” is used symbolically to show the aspirations of the poor like his protagonist Pip who has left his village for London in search of better life.

I deliberated with an acting heart whether I would not get down when we changed horses and walk back, and have another evening at home, and a better parting. We changed, and I had not made up my mind. We changed, again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me”. Pip (Chapter 19, *Great Expectations*)

#### **6.4.2 Bildungsroman**

According to the literary critics, the genre of *Great Expectations* is ‘Bildungsroman’. In literary criticism, the term ‘Bildungsroman’ is used for a literary genre that represents psychological and moral growth of the protagonist, especially covering the period from formative years to adulthood. Etymologically, the term ‘Bildungsroman’ is derived from German language, consisting of two words: ‘bildung’ meaning ‘education’ or ‘formation’ and ‘roman’ meaning ‘novel’. Thus, ‘Bildungsroman’ means “novel of education’ or “novel of formation”.

*Great Expectations* is considered as the ‘Bildungsroman’ novel due to its intricate narrative and character developments. Scholar John H. Hagan divides *Great Expectations* into three parts- boyhood, youth and maturity. (Hagan,54). The first part acts as a setup that initiates the reader into the development process of both the plot and the character. Here, one finds Pip’s preferences for material considerations over human relations. The second part of the novel focuses upon Pip’s “Selfish pursuits, neglects all in his past life that is worthy of his remembrance and gratitude”. (Hagan,55). In the third part, Pip learns that his ambitions and expectations prove wrong as the absolute means towards inner happiness. This final realization brings visible transformations in the perception as well as personality of Dickens’ protagonist.

As significant aspect of the novel is unlike other bildungsroman protagonists, Pip gains maturity not by gaining, but by losing his initial ambitions. He realizes that only by losing his expectations he is able to gain happiness, acceptance and freedom. According to Allingham, *Great*

*Expectations* includes many other features of bildungsroman genre such as “responsible versus irresponsible parenting, of a loving versus tyrannical parent, and of the right sort of role-modeling a child requires from a parent in order to develop into a mentally well-balanced adult” (Web.)

Thus, as a bildungsroman, *Great Expectations* presents central character’s psychological and moral growth; a method employed by the author to show literary and artistic explorations of the development of an individual from youth to adulthood.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1**

1. Discuss in brief about society during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

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2. Give biographical details of Charles Dickens.

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3. Present a brief overview of the Victorian Age.

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4. Write about the impact of science during the Victorian Age.

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5. Establish the context of *Great Expectations* with the 19<sup>th</sup> Century England.

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6. Elucidate upon the genre of *Great Expectations*.

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## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

### Fill In The Blanks By Choosing Correct Option

1. In the history of England, the 19<sup>th</sup> is considered as the period of \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Norman expedition
  - b. Military dictatorship
  - c. Imperial expansion
  - d. Establishment of Republican Governments
2. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century \_\_\_\_\_ changed the economy of England.
  - a. Industrialization
  - b. Great Depression
  - c. World War
  - d. Natural Calamity
3. \_\_\_\_\_ is not a novel by Charles Dickens.
  - a. *David Copperfield*
  - b. *Nicholas Nickleby*
  - c. *Wuthering Heights*
  - d. *A Tale of Two Cities*
4. \_\_\_\_\_ narrates the story of *Great Expectations*.
  - a. Abel Magwitch
  - b. Philip Pirrip
  - c. Estella
  - d. Miss Havisham
5. For many of the literary critics, the genre of *Great Expectations* is \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Historical novel
  - b. Dystopian novel
  - c. Bildungsroman
  - d. Utopian novel

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## 6.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt about

- Some of the historical traits of England during the Victorian Age in brief.
- The life and works of Charles Dickens.
- How Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* reflects the social class system, economic struggles and moral crisis during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century England.
- Bildungsroman- the genre of *Great Expectations*

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## 6.6 KEY WORDS

**Autobiographical:** a work of art dealing with writer's own life

**Bequeathed:** pass on something to someone as a will

<b>Bildungsroman:</b>	A German word that shows genre of the work meaning “novel of education”
<b>Context:</b>	the forces or circumstances responsible for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.
<b>Etymology:</b>	Study of the origin or history of a particular word
<b>Graphic:</b>	visual, pictorial
<b>Imperialism:</b>	a system in which a country rules or controls other countries economically, politically or forcefully through military power.
<b>Manuscript:</b>	hand written document
<b>Narrate:</b>	tell, portray, describe
<b>Outcast:</b>	a person rejected by social group
<b>Posthumously:</b>	happening after the death of a creator
<b>Protagonist:</b>	The central or leading character of a novel, short story etc.
<b>Victorian Age:</b>	The period of Queen Victoria’s reign in England
<b>Zenith:</b>	high point

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## 6.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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1. Alexander, Michael. *A History of English Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.
2. Allingham, Philip V. “The Biographical Context of *Great Expectation* (1861) : Positioning the Novel (2)”. (2001): n. page. The Victorian Web  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authers/dickens/ge/pva/03.htm>
3. Birch, Dinah ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, OUP, 2009.
4. Davis, Paul Benjamin. *Critical Companion to Charles Dickens: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Facts On File, 2007.
5. Hagan Jr., John H. “Structural Patterns in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*” *ELH* the John Hopkins University Press 21 / (1954) – 54-666. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2871933>

## ANSWERS

1-c , 2-a, 3-c, 4-b, 5-c.