

Week 3: *Great Expectations* – exploring the nineteenth century context

If you studied *A Christmas Carol* for GCSE then you will already be familiar with Dickens' life and times and if you studied that text or *Jane Eyre* then you should know some of the social context (poverty, social class etc.) relevant for the novel. The tasks below will enable you to broaden your knowledge about the nineteenth century context you'll need for *Great Expectations*.

Outline of key points in the plot: *Great Expectations* is set in the early part of the nineteenth century. It is the story of a young boy, Pip, who meets a rich lady from the upper middle classes, Miss Havisham, and her adopted daughter Estella. They treat him scornfully for being poor, uneducated and without fine manners. This has a significant effect on Pip and he becomes discontented with his life: previously he admired his brother-in-law Joe, a blacksmith, and was keen to take up an apprenticeship with him to learn his trade, but now he develops ambitions to rise in social status and become a "gentleman".

Task: The novel focuses on class and social status at a time when these things were hugely important. You are going to use the websites below to find out about the social and literary background to *Great Expectations*. Aim to make notes on the following questions:

1. What do you think the term *middle class* meant in the nineteenth century?
2. What do you think is meant by *social mobility*?
3. What were some of the factors that lead to the growth of the middle classes at this time?
4. What do you think was meant by the term *gentleman*?
5. Why might Dickens have decided to write a novel about social class?
6. How might obtaining and reading novels have been different from today?



<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-middle-classes-etiquette-and-upward-mobility>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml

<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/Class.html>

<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/gentleman.html>

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-readers>

