

Task B: Great Expectations – examining Dickens’ language

One of the set novels in Year 12 will be *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. You will be studying the novel in detail, with particular focus on language features and context.

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 from a working class family, poorly educated 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 feels humiliated and embarrassed about his home and background. He begins to resent his family and develops ambitions to rise in social status to become a “gentleman”.

In this task you will analyse an extract and practise applying some language terminology. You may have used some of this terminology during the GCSE course, but don’t worry if it’s new to you.

1. Read the extract from *Great Expectations* on the following pages. This extract comes from very near the beginning of the novel and introduces the reader to two major characters – Miss Havisham and Estella. Pip later discover that Estella is Miss Havisham’s adopted daughter.
2. Examining speech: we can infer a significant amount about characters through the ways in which they speak.

Types of sentence:

Interrogative: a question

Imperative: an instruction or order

Declarative: a statement

Exclamation: a shouted sentence – ends with an exclamation mark

- a) Look at the ways in which Estella and Miss Havisham speak to Pip and to each other. How does Dickens use word choices and sentence types in their speech to create a sense of what they are like and how they behave?
- b) Now consider the language used to describe Miss Havisham and the room.

Annotate or make notes about the ways in which Dickens uses language here. You could focus on:

- lexical (or semantic) fields: groups of words used in a piece of writing that are linked to the same idea e.g. a lexical field of nature might include words such as tree, clouds, grass, stream and birdsong. These words used in the same section could create a sense of calm or freedom.
 - word classes – e.g. adjectives, verbs, nouns, adverbs
 - contrasts
 - repetition
- c) Can you work out what the story could be behind the unusual appearance of Miss Havisham, her clothes and her house? The writer leaves the reader to infer what has happened there.
 - d) Extension question for those aiming for top grades:

The novel is narrated by Pip as an adult, remembering his experiences as a young boy. How does Dickens make this extract seem like the experience of a child?

Extract from *Great Expectations* – Pip meets Miss Havisham

Pip, a young boy brought up in a working class household by his sister and her husband, is invited to visit the house of a rich lady, Miss Havisham, for unexplained reasons. He has never met Miss Havisham and is reluctant to go, but his sister and another relative, Mr Pumblechook, think that it could be useful to the family to have Pip make rich connections. Pip arrives at the house and the door is answered by a young girl, whose name we later discover is Estella.

Though she called me “boy” so often, and with a carelessness that was far from complimentary, she was of about my own age. She seemed much older than I, of course, being a girl, and beautiful and self-possessed; and she was as scornful of me as if she had been one-and-twenty, and a queen.

We went into the house by a side door, the great front entrance had two chains across it outside,—and the first thing I noticed was, that the passages were all dark, and that she had left a candle burning there. She took it up, and we went through more passages and up a staircase, and still it was all dark, and only the candle lighted us.

At last we came to the door of a room, and she said, “Go in.”

I answered, more in shyness than politeness, “After you, miss.”

To this she returned: “Don’t be ridiculous, boy; I am not going in.” And scornfully walked away, and—what was worse—took the candle with her.

This was very uncomfortable, and I was half afraid. However, the only thing to be done being to knock at the door, I knocked, and was told from within to enter. I entered, therefore, and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles. No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. It was a dressing-room, as I supposed from the furniture, though much of it was of forms and uses then quite unknown to me. But prominent in it was a draped table with a gilded looking-glass, and that I made out at first sight to be a fine lady’s dressing-table.

Whether I should have made out this object so soon if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see.

She was dressed in rich materials,—satins, and lace, and silks,—all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on,—the other was on the table near her hand,—her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a Prayer-Book all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass.

It was not in the first few moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed. But I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.

"Who is it?" said the lady at the table.

"Pip, ma'am."

"Pip?"

"Mr. Pumblechook's boy, ma'am. Come—to play."

"Come nearer; let me look at you. Come close."

It was when I stood before her, avoiding her eyes, that I took note of the surrounding objects in detail, and saw that her watch had stopped at twenty minutes to nine, and that a clock in the room had stopped at twenty minutes to nine.

"Look at me," said Miss Havisham. "You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?"

I regret to state that I was not afraid of telling the enormous lie comprehended in the answer "No."

"Do you know what I touch here?" she said, laying her hands, one upon the other, on her left side.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What do I touch?"

"Your heart."

"Broken!"

She uttered the word with an eager look, and with strong emphasis, and with a weird smile that had a kind of boast in it. Afterwards she kept her hands there for a little while, and slowly took them away as if they were heavy.

"I am tired," said Miss Havisham. "I want diversion, and I have done with men and women. Play."

I think it will be conceded by my most disputatious reader, that she could hardly have directed an unfortunate boy to do anything in the wide world more difficult to be done under the circumstances.

"I sometimes have sick fancies," she went on, "and I have a sick fancy that I want to see some play. There, there!" with an impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand; "play, play, play!"

For a moment, with the fear of my sister's working me before my eyes, I had a desperate idea of starting round the room in the assumed character of Mr. Pumblechook's chaise-cart. But I felt myself so unequal to the performance that I gave it up, and stood looking at Miss Havisham in what I suppose she took for a dogged manner, inasmuch as she said, when we had taken a good look at each other,—

"Are you sullen and obstinate?"

"No, ma'am, I am very sorry for you, and very sorry I can't play just now. If you complain of me I shall get into trouble with my sister, so I would do it if I could; but it's so new here, and so strange, and so fine,—and melancholy—." I stopped, fearing I might say too much, or had already said it, and we took another look at each other.

Before she spoke again, she turned her eyes from me, and looked at the dress she wore, and at the dressing-table, and finally at herself in the looking-glass.

“So new to him,” she muttered, “so old to me; so strange to him, so familiar to me; so melancholy to both of us! Call Estella.”

As she was still looking at the reflection of herself, I thought she was still talking to herself, and kept quiet.

“Call Estella,” she repeated, flashing a look at me. “You can do that. Call Estella. At the door.”

To stand in the dark in a mysterious passage of an unknown house, bawling Estella to a scornful young lady neither visible nor responsive, and feeling it a dreadful liberty so to roar out her name, was almost as bad as playing to order. But she answered at last, and her light came along the dark passage like a star.

Miss Havisham beckoned her to come close, and took up a jewel from the table, and tried its effect upon her fair young bosom and against her pretty brown hair. “Your own, one day, my dear, and you will use it well. Let me see you play cards with this boy.”

“With this boy? Why, he is a common labouring boy!”

I thought I overheard Miss Havisham answer,—only it seemed so unlikely,—“Well? You can break his heart.”

“What do you play, boy?” asked Estella of myself, with the greatest disdain.

“Nothing but beggar my neighbour, miss.”

“Beggar him,” said Miss Havisham to Estella. So we sat down to cards.

It was then I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago. I noticed that Miss Havisham put down the jewel exactly on the spot from which she had taken it up. As Estella dealt the cards, I glanced at the dressing-table again, and saw that the shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn. I glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent, and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged. Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud.

So she sat, corpse-like, as we played at cards; the frillings and trimmings on her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper. I knew nothing then of the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, which fall to powder in the moment of being distinctly seen; but, I have often thought since, that she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust.

“He calls the knaves Jacks, this boy!” said Estella with disdain, before our first game was out. “And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!”

I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it.

She won the game, and I dealt. I misdealt, as was only natural, when I knew she was lying in wait for me to do wrong; and she denounced me for a stupid, clumsy labouring-boy.

"You say nothing of her," remarked Miss Havisham to me, as she looked on. "She says many hard things of you, but you say nothing of her. What do you think of her?"

"I don't like to say," I stammered.

"Tell me in my ear," said Miss Havisham, bending down.

"I think she is very proud," I replied, in a whisper.

"Anything else?"

"I think she is very pretty."

"Anything else?"

"I think she is very insulting." (She was looking at me then with a look of supreme aversion.)

"Anything else?"

"I think I should like to go home."

"And never see her again, though she is so pretty?"

"I am not sure that I shouldn't like to see her again, but I should like to go home now."

"You shall go soon," said Miss Havisham, aloud. "Play the game out."

Saving for the one weird smile at first, I should have felt almost sure that Miss Havisham's face could not smile. It had dropped into a watchful and brooding expression,—most likely when all the things about her had become transfixed,—and it looked as if nothing could ever lift it up again. Her chest had dropped, so that she stooped; and her voice had dropped, so that she spoke low, and with a dead lull upon her; altogether, she had the appearance of having dropped body and soul, within and without, under the weight of a crushing blow.

I played the game to an end with Estella, and she beggared me. She threw the cards down on the table when she had won them all, as if she despised them for having been won of me.

"When shall I have you here again?" said Miss Havisham. "Let me think."

I was beginning to remind her that to-day was Wednesday, when she checked me with her former impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand.

"There, there! I know nothing of days of the week; I know nothing of weeks of the year. Come again after six days. You hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Estella, take him down. Let him have something to eat, and let him roam and look about him while he eats. Go, Pip."