

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Beneath the Dickens' major theme of a great respect for wealth is an analysis of the fate of the outsider. At least four known orphans — Mrs. Joe, Magwitch, Estella, and Pip himself — have suffered loneliness, but each character reacts differently. Pip begins his story as a child standing in a gloomy cemetery at the grave site of his family, so pitifully alone that he can do no more than imagine his mother as the "wife of the above," which he can only interpret as directions to his mother's current address in heaven. Pip himself is often threatened with death by his sister and again by his convict, Magwitch. Even Orlick, the town lout, tries to kill an adult Pip. Joe Gargery is Pip's only friend on the marshes, and even after Pip is introduced to city life friends are few compared to the number of those who are coldly uncaring or dangerous. On the other hand, Estella's odd childhood, in the wrinkled hands of an old woman with a twisted mind, teaches her to reject all affection or friendships. Estella plays with Pip like a cat toys with a mouse, certainly not like an equal or playmate, for that is not Miss Havisham's intention. Likewise, as Magwitch confesses to Pip, his childhood on the streets of London was such a nightmare that he cannot even remember how he once learned his own name, and it is no wonder he has had to turn to a life of crime. Mrs. Joe is another character who is antisocial. She lives on the marshes among rough, working class men and has no friends but Joe and no female acquaintances whatever. Pip's guardian and Joe's wife, she is so rude, antagonistic, and violent that she drives away those who would otherwise love her. As Pip's sister, Mrs. Joe shares the same loss of their family, but her means of coping with loneliness is quite different from Pip's attempts to get along with people and to stay out of trouble. Indeed, Mrs. Joe causes most of the problems in her life and everyone else's at the forge. Aside from these obvious loners, each struggling to find his or her place in the world, Jaggers also stands alone, an upholder of the law but to an inhuman degree. He never lets down his guard, as though he were likely to be sued if he relaxed, misspoke, or reacted at all with emotion. No matter how openly Pip offers friendship, Jaggers maintains a distant attitude and instead admires the wealthy but evil Bentley Drummle for knowing what he wants and getting it. While Pip has the greatest number of friends of these alienated characters, even he is strangely hesitant to leave London to rejoin Joe and Biddy or to accept Herbert Pocket's offer of a position in his firm. Only when Pip has exhausted his expectations and has no other direction to turn does he realize that he is quite lucky to have two good friends who love him for himself and can forget about his social status. By doing this, Pip is the one character who works his way out of alienation and loneliness into a socially active life that is enriched by love shared with friends. Although this hard-earned knowledge was not one of his original "expectations," Pip finds that this is far greater wealth than any benefactor's inheritance.