

Text 2.5 *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born in England in 1812. He wrote many successful novels, often commenting on the social difficulties of the age he lived in. *Great Expectations* tells the story of an orphan, Pip, who starts his life as an apprentice to a blacksmith in a small village. However, a chance encounter with an escaped prisoner changes his life forever.

This extract comes from Chapter 21 of the novel. It is the start of Part 2 of Pip's 'great expectations' and he has just moved to London. In this extract he first visits his new home in London.

'Do you know where Mr Matthew Pocket lives?' I asked Mr Wemmick.
'Yes,' said he, nodding in the direction. 'At Hammersmith, west of London.'
'Is that far?'
'Well! Say five miles.'
5 'Do you know him?'

'Why, you're a regular cross-examiner!' said Mr Wemmick, looking at me with an approving air. 'Yes, I know him. I know him!'

There was an air of toleration or deprecation about his utterance of these words that rather depressed me; and I was still looking sideways
10 at his block of a face in search of any encouraging note to the text, when he said here we were at Barnard's Inn. My depression was not alleviated by the announcement, for I had supposed that establishment to be a hotel kept by Mr Barnard, to which the Blue Boar in our town was a mere public-house. Whereas I now found Barnard to be a disembodied spirit,
15 or a fiction, and his Inn the dingiest collection of shabby buildings ever squeezed together in a rank corner as a club for Tom-cats.

We entered this haven through a wicket-gate, and were disgorged by an introductory passage into a melancholy little square that looked to me
20 like a flat burying-ground. I thought it had the most dismal trees in it, and the most dismal sparrows, and the most dismal cats, and the most dismal houses (in number half a dozen or so), that I had ever seen. I thought the

windows of the sets of chambers into which those houses were divided, were in every stage of dilapidated blind and curtain, crippled flower-pot, cracked glass, dusty decay, and miserable makeshift; while To Let, To Let, To Let, glared at me from empty rooms, as if no new wretches ever came there, and the vengeance of the soul of Barnard were being slowly
25 appeased by the gradual suicide of the present occupants and their unholy interment under the gravel. A frouzy mourning of soot and smoke attired this forlorn creation of Barnard, and it had strewn ashes on its
30 head, and was undergoing penance and humiliation as a mere dust-hole. Thus far my sense of sight; while dry-rot and wet-rot and all the silent rots that rot in neglected roof and cellar – rot of rat and mouse and bug and coaching-stables near at hand besides – addressed themselves faintly to my sense of smell, and moaned, 'Try Barnard's Mixture.'

35 So imperfect was this realisation of the first of my great expectations, that I looked in dismay at Mr Wemmick. 'Ah!' said he, mistaking me; 'the retirement reminds you of the country. So it does me.'

He led me into a corner and conducted me up a flight of stairs – which appeared to me to be slowly collapsing into sawdust, so that one of those
40 days the upper lodgers would look out at their doors and find themselves without the means of coming down – to a set of chambers on the top floor. Mr Pocket, Jun., was painted on the door, and there was a label on the letter-box, 'Return shortly.'

Guiding questions

- 1 How does Dickens present the environment of Barnard's Inn in this extract?
- 2 What do we learn about the character of Pip from this extract?

Sample student response: transcript of sample student commentary

This is an SL commentary (you will remember that an HL commentary will always be on poetry). It was awarded very good marks by the teacher who was assessing it. The commentary has been marked up to show you how the student addresses some of the assessment criteria.

This passage from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is taken from Chapter 21. It comes at the start of the second section of the novel. Pip has arrived in London, has met Mr Jaggers in his office and then is taken by Mr Wemmick, Jaggers' clerk, to visit the place where he is going to stay, the home of Mr Matthew Pocket.¹ In this extract I want to look at the two areas suggested by the guiding questions; firstly to look at how the character of Pip is presented by Charles Dickens, and secondly to look at the way he presents the environment at Barnard's Inn.²

The first focus is the character of Pip. It is important to point out that this is a first person narrative. Pip is telling us his story and Charles Dickens makes it very obvious to the reader how Pip is feeling at particular points. In line 9, for instance, he describes himself as being rather depressed. The opening dialogue suggests that Pip is inquisitive, lively, interested and, indeed, he draws the comment from Mr Wemmick 'you are a regular cross-examiner', which Dickens describes as being said with 'an approving air'; coming from a legal background, Wemmick approves of

- 3 Excellent knowledge of the text (Criterion A) is evident when the student makes passing reference to other sections of the text.
- 4 By talking about the writer's narrative choices the student makes sure he addresses Criterion B.
- 5 The student's focus on the writer's word choices underlines how the commentary will be very successful in terms of Criterion B.
- 6 Accurate use of technical language gains credit for both Criteria B and C.
- 7 This is another example of how the careful and accurate use of language can address both Criteria B and C.
- 8 The commentary reaches an obvious conclusion. This will gain further credit for Criterion C.

Key term



Personification The attribution of certain human qualities to inanimate objects.

cutting to the chase, approves of speaking your mind and approves of being to the point. Pip also shows his naivety when he uses the phrase in line 10, 'I had supposed that establishment to be a hotel kept by Mr Barnard', and he makes the link back to the Blue Boar from his village back in Kent,³ showing that his frame of reference for making judgements about the environment he finds himself in is rather limited. By drawing our attention to that through Pip's narrative, Dickens is showing how Pip is both naive and innocently lacking in experience. We also learn that this is an important staging process in terms of the narrative.⁴ The first part of Pip's great expectations ends with his journey to London.

The arrival in London is the second part of his great expectations. He makes it very clear in line 35 that the realisation of the first of 'my great expectations' was – and the phrase he uses is, in this instance – 'so imperfect'. His dream of living in a pleasant environment has been rather shattered by his first impression of Barnard's Inn. Indeed, the narrative tension is suggested by the very last couple of words of the extract, 'Return shortly'.⁵ We anticipate and await the arrival of Mr Picket. However, perhaps the passage's most interesting concern is with the presentation of Barnard's Inn; Barnard's Inn which so disappoints Pip's great expectations. After admitting that he had anticipated some sort of hotel like the Boar, what Pip describes is a 'disembodied spirit, or a fiction, and his inn' (Mr Barnard's), was the 'dingiest collection of small buildings every squeezed together in a rank corner at a club for Tom-cats'. The fact that Barnard is seen to be a 'disembodied spirit' starts the process of personification⁶ which continues throughout this passage. In order to create a sense of the nastiness of Barnard's Inn, its lack of dignity and its lack of propriety, Dickens makes it out to have the qualities of a rather unappealing or unattractive human being, a 'disembodied spirit', a spirit that has been taken away from its body and therefore does not have a sense of being grounded. It's a 'fiction'; indeed, the fact that he uses the word 'fiction' suggests that it is so removed from what he might expect something to be in reality that it has the qualities of being made up.

The third paragraph starts: 'We entered this haven through a wicker gate,' and we can see Dickens's use of irony here; clearly 'haven' is the opposite of what the Barnard's Inn building is actually like so he is using that to signpost just how out of sync his expectations are with what he actually discovers. This idea of Barnard's Inn being an actively nasty influence is encouraged by Dickens's use of verbs⁷ like we were 'disgorged' by the introductory passage, almost as if they are being spat out; they – Wemmick and Pip – feel as if they are the victims of this building and this establishment. Dickens uses repetition: 'most dismal trees, most dismal sparrows, most dismal cats and most dismal houses' to draw attention to his constant surprise that the buildings are even worse than he had imagined they might be; but the fact that 'most dismal' is used to qualify not only manmade buildings but also nature seems to suggest that this establishment has had an influence beyond the constructed environment and into the natural world. Indeed, the sign 'to let, to let, to let' – the repetition drawing attention to just how unpopular this place is as a residence – is described as if it 'glared at me', again giving the sense that Barnard's Inn has this personal quality; Dickens is using personification in order to convey how disappointed Pip feels on encountering these rooms. Techniques like alliteration

In line 28, the 'soot and smoke' which are described as a 'frowzy mourning of soot and smoke', again cast Barnard's Inn in a rather unappealing light.

Finally,⁸ the last use of repetition is the ongoing repetition of rot: 'dry rot, wet rot, silent rots that rot, rot of rat and mouse and bug and coaching stables'. The way in which Dickens conveys the horror that Pip feels on discovering what Barnard's Inn is actually like results in his realisation that the first of his great expectations was 'so imperfect'.

After you've given your commentary, your teacher will ask you further questions. Here is an example of the sort of question your teacher might ask you following your commentary and the sort of answer you might give.

Teacher: Why do you think Dickens includes this passage at the start of the second section of Pip's 'great expectations'?

Student: Dickens uses the structure of the novel very carefully. In the first section, Pip begins to dream of a world beyond the one he knows. However, Dickens wants to show us that what Pip thinks will be automatically better won't necessarily be. When Pip arrives in London he is surrounded by death and punishment (just like in the first section, with the gibbets, Miss Havisham, the Hulks and the convict). That difficult first impression is extended in this passage where the rot and decay and destruction are used by Dickens to suggest that all is not as it seems.

HL discussion questions

If you are an HL student and have been studying *Great Expectations* for Part 2, you might discuss this text after you have given your IOC on poetry. Here is an example of the sort of question you might be asked with a sample student response.

Teacher: Why do you think Dickens calls his main character Pip?

Student: Pip tells us the story of *Great Expectations*. Indeed, it is *his* story. We learn his name at the very start of the novel, so it is obviously very important. Dickens tells us that it came about literally because, as a child, Pip was incapable of saying anything else. However, it also has an important symbolic value. A pip is something from which something grows. In other words, it contains the potential for further growth. *Great Expectations* is, of course, the story of Pip's life and of his growth – physically, mentally and morally. The novel has sometimes been called a bildungsroman. This term means a novel which is about someone's growth and development. In this case, Pip is the main character who grows and develops so it is entirely appropriate that he should be called Pip, a name that he is given at the start of this story about his life.

Activity 2.3

Look again at the criteria that are used to assess the discussion, particularly:

- Criterion D: Knowledge and understanding of the work used in the discussion
- Criterion E: Response to the discussion questions.

Then consider and discuss the following:

- How successful is this student in answering the teacher's question?
- What does the response do well?
- If there were more time, how could the student take this discussion even further?