

### Excerpt I from *Great Expectations*

*Great Expectations* tells the story of Pip, a working-class English orphan being raised by his sister and her husband Joe. In this excerpt, Pip returns home after being threatened by an escaped prisoner who has demanded his help.

My sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, was more than twenty years older than I, and had established a great reputation with herself and the neighbours because she had brought me up “by hand.”<sup>1</sup> Having at that time to find out for myself what the expression meant, and knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon me, I supposed that Joe Gargery and I were both brought up by hand.

She was not a good-looking woman, my sister; and I had a general impression that she must have made Joe Gargery marry her by hand. Joe was a fair man, with curls of flaxen hair on each side of his smooth face, and with eyes of such a very undecided blue that they seemed to have somehow got mixed with their own whites. He was a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish, dear fellow—a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness.

My sister, Mrs. Joe, with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap. She was tall and bony, and almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops, and having a square **impregnable** bib in front, that was stuck full of pins and needles. She made it a powerful merit in herself, and a strong **reproach** against Joe, that she wore this apron so much. Though I really see no reason why she should have worn it at all: or why, if she did wear it at all, she should not have taken it off, every day of her life.

Joe’s forge adjoined our house, which was a wooden house, as many of the dwellings in our country were—most of them, at that time. When I ran home from the churchyard, the forge was shut up, and Joe was sitting alone in the kitchen. Joe and I being fellow-sufferers, and having confidences as such, Joe **imparted** a confidence to me, the moment I raised the latch of the door and peeped in at him opposite to it, sitting in the chimney corner.

“Mrs. Joe has been out a dozen times, looking for you, Pip. And she’s out now, making it a baker’s dozen.”

“Is she?”

“Yes, Pip,” said Joe; “and what’s worse, she’s got Tickler with her.”

At this **dismal** intelligence, I twisted the only button on my waistcoat round and round, and looked in great depression at the fire. Tickler was a wax-ended piece of cane, worn smooth by collision with my tickled frame.

“She sot down,” said Joe, “and she got up, and she made a grab at Tickler, and she Ram-paged out.

That’s what she did,” said Joe, slowly clearing the fire between the lower bars with the poker, and looking at it: “she Ram-paged out, Pip.”

“Has she been gone long, Joe?” I always treated him as a larger species of child, and as no more than my equal.

“Well,” said Joe, glancing up at the Dutch clock, “she’s been on the Ram-page, this last spell, about five minutes, Pip. She’s a-coming! Get behind the door, old chap, and have the jack-towel betwixt you.”

I took the advice. My sister, Mrs. Joe, throwing the door wide open, and finding an obstruction behind it, immediately **divined** the cause, and applied Tickler to its further investigation. She concluded by throwing me—I often served as a connubial<sup>2</sup> missile—at Joe, who, glad to get hold of me on any terms, passed me on into the chimney and quietly fenced me up there with his great leg.

“Where have you been, you young monkey?” said Mrs. Joe, stamping her foot. “Tell me directly what you’ve been doing to wear me away with fret and fright and worrit, or I’d have you out of that corner if you was fifty Pips, and he was five hundred Gargerys.”

“I have only been to the churchyard,” said I, from my stool, crying and rubbing myself.

“Churchyard!” repeated my sister. “If it warn’t for me you’d have been to the churchyard long ago, and stayed there. Who brought you up by hand?”

“You did,” said I.

“And why did I do it, I should like to know?” exclaimed my sister.

I whimpered, “I don’t know.”

“I don’t!” said my sister. “I’d never do it again! I know that. I may truly say I’ve never had this apron of mine off, since born you were. It’s bad enough to be a blacksmith’s wife (and him a Gargery) without being your mother.”

My thoughts strayed from that question as I looked **disconsolately** at the fire. For, the fugitive out on the marshes with the ironed leg, the mysterious young man, the file, the food, and the dreadful pledge I was under to commit a **larceny** on those sheltering premises, rose before me in the avenging coals.

“Hah!” said Mrs. Joe, restoring Tickler to his station. “Churchyard, indeed! You may well say churchyard, you two.” One of us, by-the-bye, had not said it at all. “You’ll drive me to the churchyard betwixt you, one of these days, and oh, a pr-r-recious pair you’d be without me!”

<sup>1</sup> **by hand**, adv. bottle-fed (as opposed to breast-fed)

<sup>2</sup> **connubial**, adj. having to do with marriage

## Comprehension Questions

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following words mean?

undecided (line 14)  
confidence (line 39)  
intelligence (line 48)  
spell (line 62)  
ironed (line 96)  
restoring (line 101)

How does Pip (as the child in the scene, not as the narrator) interpret the expression “to raise by hand,” and why does he interpret it this way? What do you think is the tone of the narration in revealing this fact?

What rhetorical device is the use of “laying” (on line 7) an example of?

What effect do you think the description of Joe’s eyes (lines 14-16) is intended to have on the reader’s perception of Joe?

What rhetorical devices are used on line 18, and what is their effect?

What effect do you think the image of Pip’s sister washing herself with a nutmeg grater (lines 20-22) is intended to have on the reader’s perception of her?

Interpret the following sentence from lines 26-29: “She made it a powerful merit in herself, and a strong reproach against Joe, that she wore this apron so much.” In this context, what symbolic meaning does the apron have? What does the following sentence imply about Pip’s sister?

What rhetorical devices is the name “Tickler” an example of? What is the effect of the repetition of “Tickler” and “tickled” on lines 50 and 52? In context, what does the description of Tickler as “worn smooth” suggest?

What is the effect of the word “species” on line 59? What does the expression “no more than my equal” (lines 59-60) imply about Pip’s attitude toward Joe?

What does it mean that Pip’s sister “applied Tickler to its further investigation,” and what does “its” refer to (line 69)? What connotations might the word “divine” have as used in this context (line 68)?

Why is Joe “glad to get hold of [Pip] on any terms” (lines 71-72)?

What qualities is Pip’s sister probably ascribing to him by calling him a “monkey” (line 74)?

What does Pip’s sister mean when she says that if it weren’t for her, Pip would have “been to the churchyard long ago, and stayed there” (lines 83-84)?

What is Pip’s sister’s parenthetical comment on line 92 intended to suggest?

In what sense do the fugitive, the “mysterious young man,” the file, etc. “[rise] before” Pip (lines 95-100)? What is the effect of the description of the coals as “avenging” (lines 99-100), and what literary devices are contained in that expression?

What is the effect of the use of the pronoun “his” in line 101, and what literary device is this an example of?

What ironies are there in Joe’s sister’s claim that Pip and Joe will “drive [her] to the churchyard” (line 104) one day and that they would be a “precious pair” (lines 105-106)?

## Questions for Discussion and Writing

Describe the narrative voice. From what point of view is the story being told, and what characteristics of the narration reflect this point of view?

Describe Pip, Joe, and Pip’s sister as they are presented in the passage. In what way is Joe a paradoxical character? What is his relationship with Pip like? What effect is this introduction to Pip’s home life likely to have on the reader’s perception of Pip?

Why do you think Pip, as the narrator, never refers to his sister by name, but instead frequently calls her “my sister, Mrs. Joe”? What is the effect of this choice?

## SAT-Style Essay Prompt

Consider the following quotation carefully, then read the prompt below.

“You will learn one day, great king, that there are but three things that men respect: the lash that descends, the yoke that breaks and the sword that slays. By the power and terror of these you may conquer the earth.”  
—from *The Thief of Baghdad*

(Source: *The Columbia World of Quotations*)

**Assignment:** Do you agree that intimidation and the threat (or use) of physical force are necessary to establish order within a family or a society, or are there other ways to create harmony and order?

Decide which of these two positions you agree with, and write an essay in which you use specific examples from your own experiences, your observations, or your studies to support your opinion.