

Paper on Jane Eyre & Great Expectations

Instructions: Write a critical essay on one of the topics below. Be sure you're addressing the topic itself and not using the topic as a gateway to an entirely different subject.

Good critical writing involves argument, analysis, and interpretation--not as three separate things, but as one thing with three sides to it. You need to define a thesis about the topic, and the first thing to remember is that your thesis needs two qualities: it must be arguable on the evidence, and it must be worth arguing.

The analysis in the paper, while supporting your argument, is not an end in itself. The point is that your analysis should illuminate the text--i.e., pose ways, or offer indications, for understanding how, or what, we might see by reading the text's language and action in the way you are suggesting. That's interpretation. So: your analysis, as it works out its support of your thesis (your basic argument) should have the effect of guiding a (partial) interpretation of the novel.

All of this means, of course, that to write a critical paper, you must be writing about the text itself text on the page--not a generalized account of it. Don't simply compose a plot summary or create, in effect, a catalogue of the characters or character traits. In writing a short paper about a long novel, you obviously have to be selective. But keep in focus the perspective that you are selecting from a text, not from a "plot" or a set of "characters."

If you think you can write a critical paper without aptly, skillfully, and necessarily quoting the text, you necessarily have the wrong idea about what a critical paper is.

(1) An essay that considers the problem of Pip and Jane as autobiographical narrators. Autobiography, after all, is a form that inherently allows for much self-justification even when the autobiographer prizes self-knowledge and pursues self-exploration. Your essay should compare how Brontë and Dickens deal with this issue. For example, do they take different approaches to how and when their narrators achieve self-knowledge? What levels of self-justification and self-awareness are evident in Jane as compared to Pip? Can we clearly distinguish between the character and the narrator in each case? These are examples of questions you might consider (there are many others!) as you formulate a thesis.

(2) Patterns of Imagery: Both *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* exercise control over their complex thematic developments by allowing us to see patterns of imagery that tend to underscore what is at issue in many scenes. Both novels, for example, use fire imagery in complex ways that help to define the complexity of their themes. But it is not necessary to find the same image pattern in both books. What is required in this paper is a discussion of the presence of any image patterns in the two novels that you see as clarifying, defining, or illuminating the novels' themes.

(3) Symbolic spaces in Great Expectations and Jane Eyre: Dickens' novel situates its characters in spaces and physical contexts that are themselves full of significance and meaning. The marshes, for example, where the novel begins are an extremity, indeed almost a boundary between the recognizably human and the utterly outcast. We've discussed in class how Brontë uses symbolic spaces to plot Jane's moral journey. Explore how both novels construct symbolic spaces by showing how the conflicts Pip and Jane experience are in many ways identified, and expressed, for us by the attitudes, feelings, attachments, and/or estrangements that various spaces in the novel evoke in them (or, perhaps, fail to evoke).