

The Elusive Humor in Charles Dickens' Works:
Great Expectations and A Christmas Carol

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A photograph of Charles Dickens writing what was to become one of his many collections of words and phrases, known by certain laymen as a "novel" (Whiskeyclone)

INTRODUCTION

George Gissing, in the introduction to his 1898 work, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, wrote, "Humour is the soul of his [Dickens'] work. Like the soul of man, it permeates a living fabric which, but for its creative breath, could never have existed" (Gissing). The works of Charles Dickens are riddled with humor in the forms of irony and satire, which is often elusive to beginning students of Dickens their first year in high school.

Ninth grade Pre-Advanced Placement students are required to study a work of Victorian literature for English class, usually either *A Christmas Carol* or *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. These young students often struggle at the beginning because the language is obsolete, they cannot identify with situations in which the characters find themselves, and they know very little or have no historical background that allows them to visualize the settings, the clothing, and the living conditions (Porter). They are not acquainted with the strict class distinctions of Victorian England's caste system. The students have pre-conceived notions that the work is supremely difficult. In this unit students will learn to look beyond the words printed on the pages of the book and find the humor inferred between the lines. By giving students a factual, historical introduction to Victorian England, they are better able to visualize the settings, the characters, and the subtle humor in Charles Dickens' works.

Victorian literature is often perceived as being straight-laced and rigid because the subject matter is serious. Charles Dickens manages to interject ingenious humor into his novels *Great Expectations* and *A Christmas Carol* by satirizing the Victorian caste system and by introducing situations of irony: (1) the ghosts of Jacob Marley, Christmas Past, and Present in *A Christmas Carol*, and (2) Mrs. Joe's "Tickler" that she uses without provocation to punish both her young

brother, Pip, and her husband, Joe, in the beginning of *Great Expectations*. Once students have an adequate understanding of the historical context, they relax and enjoy the Dickensian experience. Students who may find the works challenging may acquire editions in formats that provide language that is easier for them to understand (Stephen). They begin to anticipate and to look for episodes of humor in Dickens' works. Sometimes these young students identify humorous events that the teacher has overlooked. Dickens draws a lot of his inspiration for writing from events that occurred during his childhood. His father was a spendthrift and was sent to debtor's prison along with all members of his family except young Charles, who was deemed old enough to work in a shoe blacking factory to help pay off his father's debts. Since his mother's brother owned the factory, she agreed to leave Charles there after the debts were paid and the family was released from prison – a fact that made the young man bitter and determined to make his own mark on the world (Perry).

Like Pip in *Great Expectations*, Dickens did not enjoy a happy, upper class childhood in Victorian England, yet he rose above his disparaging background to become a respected, renowned author – a gentleman and a scholar – against the odds of the strict caste system in which he lived (Shelston). Pip, however, relied on a generous benefactor, whom he presumed to be the reclusive Miss Havisham, to educate him and support his acquired lavish lifestyle in Victorian London. When he finds out that his magnanimous patron is none other than the convict Magwitch – which is humorously ironic because of Pip's early fear and later disgust toward the convict – Pip is dismayed because, to him, this information means his entire London existence has been a sham. Although Magwitch is proud of the gentleman the young man has become, Pip is mortified that his benefactor might want public acknowledgement.

Although Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* suffered as a poor orphan during his childhood, he managed to become wealthy within his own right, but rather than share a benevolent posture and help the less fortunate people in his community, Scrooge was feared, disliked, and even pitied. Scrooge had to be exposed to three Christmas ghosts – two of which, in their different ways introduced humor into the story – for him to be transformed into a benevolent benefactor to those around him late in his life. Scrooge, like Dickens, had no gracious sponsor as Pip did; he built his business and accumulated wealth with his business partner, Jacob Marley, whose ghost first approached Scrooge to warn him to mend his ways before he suffered the same consequence as Marley – to roam the Earth throughout eternity, dragging a heavy chain of money boxes with him.

The humor of Dickens is never mean or spiteful. His wit “tends to heighten the dignity of man” (Cruikshank viii), especially involving the plight of the lower classes. Students experience the transformation of serious situations and the dilemmas suffered by the poor into elements of humor.

TEKS OBJECTIVES (Texas Education Agency)

Since the study of the Victorian era combined with Dickens' works *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations* is a lengthy study for ninth grade Pre-Advanced Placement students, several of the TEKS involved will often be combined into one assignment (i.e., Dialectical Journals). The following objectives, as well as many others, taken directly from the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) website listing Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for high school English I classes will be addressed in this unit:

110.42 (6) (A) Expand vocabulary through wide reading, listening, and discussing. (B) Rely on context to determine meanings of words and phrases such as figurative language, idioms, multiple meaning words, and technical vocabulary.

110.43 (7) (B) Draw upon his/her own background to provide connection to texts. (E) Analyze text structures such as compare and contrast, cause and effect, and chronological ordering. (F) Identify main ideas and their supporting details; (G) Summarize texts, (H) Draw inferences such as conclusions, generalizations, and predictions and support them from text.

110.43 (9) Read widely, including world literature, to increase knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements across cultures.

110.43 (10) (A) Respond to informational and aesthetic elements in texts such as discussions, journals, oral interpretations, and dramatizations; (B) Use elements of text to defend his/her own responses and interpretations; (C) Compare reviews of literature, film, and performance with his/her own responses.

110.43 (11) Analyze literary elements for their contributions to meaning in literary texts.

110.43 (19) Understand and interpret visual representations. (A) Describe how meanings are communicated through elements of design, including shape, line, color, and texture.

110.43 (20) Analyze and critique the significance of visual representations.; (D) Recognize how visual and sound techniques or design convey messages in media, such as special effects, editing, camera angles, reaction shots, sequencing, and music.

110.43 (1) Write in a variety of forms, including business, personal, literary, and persuasive texts, for various audiences and purposes.

110.43 (4) (A) Use writing to formulate questions, refine topics, and clarify ideas; (B) Use writing to discover, organize, and support what is known and what needs to be learned about a topic. (E) Use writing as a study tool to clarify and remember information; (F) Compile written ideas and representations into reports, summaries, or other formats and draw conclusions.

RATIONALE

High school students, especially ninth graders, want to find humor in everything they read, but they often tend to not look past the gloomy exterior of weighty Victorian literature and see the humor between the lines. They must be made aware of the humorous undertones of otherwise serious moral issues. By being introduced to these two Victorian novels and historical background of the Victorian era, students will come to appreciate the underlying elusive humor that makes these stories live through generations of literature classes. Concepts they have to consider are:

- How would the literature work if it were re-written in a different genre?
- How can the story be considered as a humorous work of fiction?
- How would the story work if it were written from a different point-of-view?
- By looking at these works as they are presented in films and as stage productions, how do we see a series of events and filming techniques used to illustrate the satirical humor written in the original texts by Charles Dickens?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: CHARLES DICKENS/VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Before beginning the study of *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations*, students view the A&E Biography film in class, *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius*. Through a series of informative and entertaining speakers on the film, the Victorian era of Charles Dickens comes to life for the students. They complete a detailed study guide (included in the Lesson Plans section) while they are watching the film, which helps the historical information stay with them and helps them digest and understand better the information about the era in which the story is written and Dickens' motivations that drove him to write about the topics and create the entertaining characters he did.

R. J. Cruikshank believes that a mid-Victorian Englishman enjoyed a happier fate “to be laughed at by Dickens” than to be praised by his peers:

Charles Dickens is the name we give to an extraordinary bundle of cosmic energy that was flung into the middle of the self-satisfied nineteenth century, a bit of star-stuff that went on furiously creating until the day in 1870 when it at last blew itself up. ... There has been a tendency in recent times to overlook the fact that Dickens was a great humourist, the greatest humourist of the English-speaking world. ... It is true that Dickens was filled with compassion for the weak, the poor, the defenceless. But it was also true that he had in him the springs of divine laughter. ... No writer in the English tongue has had such a command of humour – not one brand of humour, but a score. His genius is surely seen in its true splendour in his comic inventiveness. (Cruikshank vi)

Dickens’ creative imagination certainly came alive when he created his comic characters, an example of which is Mr. Jaggers, the lawyer, in *Great Expectations*. Jaggers never laughed, but when he was cross-examining witnesses in court, his “bright creaking boots” are personified as he is waiting for an answer from a witness, and they “suddenly creak sharply as though they emitted a dry satirical laugh” (Cruikshank 71).

Students receive a handout including pertinent historical background information about Victorian England in the form of a timeline (*Encarta*). This material allows them to keep historical information handy to use as reference material while they are reading the books.

UNIT BACKGROUND: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

R. J. Cruikshank says of Charles Dickens in the “Foreward” to his book, *The Humour of Dickens*, that he [Dickens] has been portrayed as “the embodiment of Victorian hypocrisy” and “the great Communist critic of Victorian Capitalism, so that one is left with a bemused feeling that *Das Kapital* was written by an economist called Karl Dickens and *Great Expectations* was authored by a German émigré named Charles Marx who is buried at Highgate” (Cruikshank v). In *Great Expectations* Dickens exhibits humor by detailing blatant societal class distinctions: Pip’s poor, parentless childhood is spent with his cruel older sister and her husband; Pip is coupled in an imposed mentorship with the self-aggrandizing Uncle Pumblechook – who considers himself to be of the upper class and who Mrs. Joe is always trying to impress – who introduces him to the wealthy, reclusive Miss Havisham as a companion for her ward, Estella. Thus begins Pip’s delusions of grandeur as he enters his quest to become educated and live as a fine gentleman in London. Although his goal is ultimately realized, all of the social climbing on Pip’s part makes no difference in his plight since, ironically, he is financed by the lowly convict Magwitch.

Through the introduction of a melange of characters, whose silly names tend to align with their personalities, Pip is influenced to become the kind, understanding person he always was inside. When the Gargery family is entertaining Uncle Pumblechook for Christmas dinner, the conversation between Pumblechook and the sergeant who comes to Joe’s home to enlist his assistance in finding the escaped convicts is ambiguous and makes fun of class distinctions. Since Pumblechook is considered to be higher on the social strata than the Gargerys, the policeman chooses to address him over the others in an effort to ingratiate himself with Pumblechook, but the conversation is vague and without substance:

“Good stuff, eh, sergeant?” said Mr. Pumblechook.

“I’ll tell you something,” returned the sergeant; “I suspect that stuff’s of your providing.” Mr. Pumblechook, with a fat sort of laugh, said, “Aye, Aye? Why?”

“Because,” returned the sergeant, clapping him on the shoulder, “you’re a man that knows what’s what.”

“D’ye think so?” said Mr. Pumblechook, with his former laugh. “Have another glass!”

“With you. Hob and nob...May you live a thousand years, and never be a worse judge of the right sort than you are at the present moment of your life.”

(Dickens 36)

While the sergeant is trying to show that he is capable of hobnobbing with the upper classes by addressing only Pumblechook and ignoring the lower-classed Gargerys, their discourse is entirely without meaning. With this clear distinction identified between the social classes, students can debate whether the sergeant is making fun of Pumblechook by addressing him as a man of exquisite style and taste – while he clearly is not – or whether Dickens is making fun of both Pumblechook and the sergeant by creating an allegiance between them. It is clear from dialogue in the story with which faction Dickens aligns himself (Moore). From the very beginning of the novel there is very little distinction between society’s criminals and those who are victims of the Victorian society. Although Pip has every reason to hope that the convicts have escaped while they are searching for them because of his complicity in helping Magwitch, Joe, who has no reason to care whether their flight is successful, tells Pip, “I’d give a shilling if they had cut and run, Pip” (Dickens 37). By creating this allegiance between the poor Gargerys and the convicts, Dickens divides Victorian society into two distinct, albeit simple, factions: (1) those who are poor and wretched, like the escaped criminals and the Gargerys, and (2) those who are “given to government,” like Pumblechook and the sergeant (House). The convict Magwitch is satisfied with protecting a fearful child he’s just met, even though he has reason to suspect the child might have betrayed him. Joe Gargery is willing to hope, albeit secretly, that the convict escapes successfully, although he does not even know the man. Pumblechook is quick to side with the policemen to condemn the convicts although he knows nothing of them or the crimes they may – or may not – have committed. Amid all this confusion, Pip manages to proceed to the next phase of his youthful passage to maturity.

Pip’s hero’s journey becomes a *bildungsroman* as it depicts his spiritual, moral, psychological, and social development and his growth from a disadvantaged child with no parents or siblings – other than the cruel Mrs. Joe with her punishing “Tickler” – to a young aspiring gentleman enjoying the social whirl of London. He travels through the eight-step transformation process of the hero’s journey each time he steps over a new threshold to begin a new phase of his life. His life’s expedition takes many humorous twists as he proceeds to achieve his gentlemanly aspirations, which ultimately leads to his crushing downfall (Perdue, *Charles Dickens Page: Great Expectations*). Attending Mrs. Wopsle’s school, where the headmistress falls asleep during lessons everyday, would be a disaster for the ambitious Pip were it not for Bidley. Pip is genuinely interested in gaining an education because he believes an academic advantage will allow him to climb the proverbial social ladder. Since he is sorely disappointed in Mrs. Wopsle’s teaching techniques, Pip approaches Bidley to tutor him. She mistakenly thinks Pip may be interested in her romantically, but he is happy to escape her advances because he believes he is too good for a country girl like Bidley, although she is the one who has aided his educational pursuits and hence his self-esteem. She has helped elevate Pip to the level he believes is necessary for him to be acceptable to someone like Estella, although Estella still rejects Pip. Ironic humor extends through the novel when Pip returns to his childhood home to pursue Bidley and finds that she and Joe are involved. Although she is still kind to Pip, it is very obvious that she is devoted to Joe Gargery.

Great Expectations is a “picaresque” novel; it is satirical and “depicts in realistic and often humorous detail the adventures of a roguish hero [Pip] of low social class who lives by his or her wits in a corrupt society. [Dickens] ...read voraciously, with a particular fondness for the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. He talked later in life of his extremely

poignant memories of childhood and his continuing photographic memory of the people and events that help to bring his fiction to life” (“Charles Dickens” *Wikipedia*). Pip travels through much of his life’s journey proudly thinking Miss Havisham is his benefactor and being ashamed of Joe, who represents his background. Although Pip is loathe to acknowledge the convict Magwitch in public, the humor of the situation must be recognized when Pip realizes that he has Magwitch to thank for his acquired lavish lifestyle as a gentleman in Victorian London.

An extremely comical character is Mr. Wemmick, who has created his own small fortress as his home – complete with a drawbridge – where he lives with his “Aged P” [very elderly father]. The humor of this setting and Mr. Wemmick’s character is without parallel in the novel:

“Wemmick’s house was a little wooden cottage in the midst of plots of garden, and the top of it was cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns.

I think it was the smallest house I ever saw; with the queerest gothic windows (by far the greater part of them sham), and a gothic door, almost too small to get in at.

That’s a real flagstaff, you see,’ said Wemmick, ‘and on Sundays I run up a real flag. Then look here. After I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up – so – and cut off the communication.’

‘I am my own engineer, and my own carpenter, and my own plumber, and my own gardener, and my own Jack of all Trades,’ said Wemmick.

‘When I go into the office, I leave the Castle behind me, and when I come into the Castle, I leave the office behind me.’

(Dickens 193-94)

Students begin to appreciate the humor injected into some of the seriousness of the novel and look forward to finding instances of humorous events when they are reading. They annotate for humorous or comedic episodes while they are reading. They must find at least one instance of humor in each of the six steps of plot development, and they look for specific instances of humor to cite in their dialectical journal entries (complete instructions included in Lesson Plans).

UNIT BACKGROUND: A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* to line his own pockets because he was financially strained. When Queen Victoria married her first cousin, Albert, who was the German son of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, two years after her coronation as Queen of England, she was twenty years old. Albert became her devoted confidante and advisor. When Victoria and Albert had children, the face of Christmas celebrations in England changed to revolve more around family celebrations (*Who 2*). Dickens took advantage of this new tradition to construct his tale about a grouchy, miserly old bachelor who despised everything involved in happy events, including children and families.

Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* is a character that students all love to hate in the beginning because he is insufferable, selfish, hateful, gruff, and fiendish. Worst of all – he hates Christmas! The very name “Scrooge” has, in the English language, become synonymous with miserliness and misanthropy, the traits displayed by Scrooge – often in hyperbole (Perdue, *Charles Dickens Page: A Christmas Carol*). There is nothing the least bit likeable or humorous about him until he is visited by the ghost of his old partner, Jacob Marley, and the ghosts of Christmas Past and Present when this hateful, formidable man is reduced to cowering and begs the ghosts to leave him alone. Oddly, Scrooge is unaware of other people’s feelings about him until he is presented with the facts of his life by the ghosts of Christmas Past and Present. When

he sees that he is the subject of ridicule and pity, he is appalled. After all, he is one of the wealthiest men in the community and should be one of the most respected citizens in the city, not the object of others' pity and certainly not ridiculed by the poor, wretched masses. Students see the humor of the character's situation when his only companions on Christmas Eve are specters.

Marley, who is condemned to walk the earth for all eternity dragging around a heavy chain, partly made up of money boxes constructed by his own greed and selfishness, visits Scrooge on Christmas Eve, exactly seven years after his death. Marley implores Scrooge to become a more benevolent, compassionate man to avoid the same eternal fate that he is suffering. He fears that Scrooge's fate will be far worse since he has outlived Marley, and his eternal chain of shame will be greater and heavier to carry around. However, Scrooge fails to see the error of his own ways and thinks the apparition of Marley is perhaps the result of his eating bad food or having too much to drink. He says to Marley, "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a glob of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of a grave about you, whatever you are!" (Dickens 18) The use of asyndeton sentence structure and a pun add to the humor of the situation in which Scrooge finds himself when facing Marley's ghost. When Marley replies with an ear-piercing howl, Scrooge's fear begins to manifest itself in traditionally dramatic forms.

Scrooge is not only miserly with other people but also stingy with himself and does not believe in eating too much, or in eating good food, or in opening his entire house when he only lives in one room. He believes there is no reason to keep all rooms in good order or well-lighted or warm during the harsh winter when he can retire to his one room and keep himself comfortable without spending a fortune, although he has a fortune to spend. Scrooge is the opposite of Pip in that he is a self-made wealthy businessman whom no one respects or likes because of his unscrupulous business dealings and his hateful cruelty to everyone around him, including his employees and his nephew, the son of his only, beloved sister.

In the "Preface" to his 1843 publication of *A Christmas Carol* Charles Dickens addresses the humor with which he hoped his reading audience would receive the story; he writes:

I have endeavored in this Ghostly littlebook, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly and no one wish to lay it.

The Ghost of Christmas Past is presented as a "white-robed, androgynous figure of indeterminate age" ("A Christmas Carol," *Wikipedia*) – a genderless apparition who shows Scrooge how he was as a young man, who was removed from a cruel orphanage to Mr. Fezziwig's kind home and thriving business. This ghost has a blazing light on its head, akin to a candle flame, and carries a metal cap made in the shape of a candle snuffer. Scrooge is shown events from the past that occurred around the time of Christmas during his youth. He sees his beloved sister, Fan, and visits the time when he let his fiancé Belle leave him because he was more interested in business and making money than in establishing a home and having a family with her. Scrooge evolved from an idealistic, ambitious clerk into an astute and driven businessman for whom money and profit was an end in and of itself. Students begin to understand how Scrooge has been transformed from this caring, intelligent young man to the hateful old miser he is today. He becomes so angry with the ghost after he sees how Belle has found happiness with another man that he grabs the candle-snuffer cap the ghost is holding and extinguishes the ghost's light like a candle. He then finds himself back in his room in the cold, lonely existence he has created for himself. After all, he has his money to keep him warm and happy.

The Ghost of Christmas Present spirits Scrooge around the city, showing him scenes of festivity and happiness, depicting the very opposite of Scrooge's existence. When Scrooge is

shown the Cratchit's home with Tiny Tim's crutch leaning against the fireplace mantle, he asks the apparition if Tim will die. The spirit reminds him of his statement earlier that day, using Scrooge's unkind remark against him that "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (Dickens 57), when two charitable solicitors had asked him for a donation to help poverty-stricken families during the Christmas season. The Ghost of Christmas Present appears to Scrooge as "a jolly giant" (Dickens 69), his dark brown curls adorned with a holly wreath with shining icicles and wearing a fur-lined green robe. He carries a large torch resembling a cornucopia and appears amid a large feast. He is given to outbursts of laughter and can change his size to fit in any space, thus adding to his comedic attributes. This ghost can only exist for one year's Christmas holiday, and as he shows Scrooge scenes of current Christmas celebrations in the homes of the Cratchits and Fred, he grows older and disappears at midnight on Twelfth Night. Scrooge is left once again – alone in his cold, desolate room, an existence of his own making.

By the end of the story, Scrooge is morally and financially able to repent his past behavior and become a benevolent benefactor, whereas at the end of *Great Expectations* Pip has lost everything worldly which he held dear. Both characters, Ebenezer Scrooge and Pip Pirrip, have the opportunity to begin their lives anew through a series of serious, albeit humorous, events. Each character comes to the realization that he must change himself if he expects to change his future and have the possibility of a happy and productive rest of his life. Each of these stories is a Victorian morality tale in its own right, and through a series of humorous twists each character is able to overcome challenges and succeed (House).

LESSON PLANS

Lesson 1: Historical Background / Viewing and Representing

Students write responses to the following questions while watching the A&E Biography *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius* in class:

STUDY GUIDE

Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius

A&E Film Biography

1. How did Charles Dickens become "the most beloved and respected author" in Victorian England?
2. Explain how childhood events drove Dickens to strive to better himself later in his life.
3. How did being a part of "the growing middle class" affect Dickens' family?
4. Explain the quote, "I was swallowed up in an abyss of love." Who was Mariah Beadnell? Why was Dickens unacceptable to her family?
5. How did Dickens' characters portray people he knew in his life? How did he satirize many of these characters? Why did Dickens have such a hateful dislike for lawyers?
6. Who was Katherine Hogarth? Who were Georgina and Mary Hogarth? Describe Dickens' relationship with the Hogarths, and explain the "source of his discontent." What was the ultimate outcome of Dickens' unhappiness?
7. Who was George Cruikshank? What was *Sketches by Boz*? Explain the impact of *Sketches by Boz* on Dickens' career.
8. What were "serialized texts"? Explain the importance and the impact of serialized texts on Victorian society and why they were so important.
9. Why did Dickens lose popularity in America after he traveled to the United States for a tour? How did he recover from this loss of popularity?
10. Why is *Great Expectations* considered to be a very "ambitious and autobiographical" book by Dickens?

11. When Dickens met Mariah Beadnell later in life, what was his impression of her? How did he portray her in *Little Dorritt*?
12. What did Dickens' young mistress mean when she said, "I so loathed the old man's touch"? What does this statement say about what kind of man Dickens had become? What happened to the young actress?
13. What was the reaction of Americans during Dickens' second tour?
14. Describe the end of Dickens' life. Was this a fit or just ending for the man who was acclaimed as a well-known and "beloved" author? Cite evidence to defend your response.

Lesson 2: Writing Exercises – Technical and Creative

Students will re-write sections of these two novels in a contemporary setting creating contemporary characters to interject situational humor with the use of satire and irony. The writing will take the form of:

- a skit or a one-act play
- musical compositions, rap or hip-hop
- write original jokes about characters and situations
- poetry
- design a comic book or a graphic novel
- dialectical journals finding elements of humor in literary devices

Lesson 3: Vocabulary in Context/Annotations

As students are reading and annotating the novels, they will mark words or phrases – obsolete language – that they do not understand. To define these words, they will look at context clues to help them determine connotation.

In their annotations they will circle the word or phrase they do not understand, and they will highlight or underline clues in the sentence that help determine the meaning of the word. Then they will rewrite the sentence where the word or phrase occurs, substituting a definition for the word/phrase.

By completing this exercise, students learn to look beyond the words on the page and search for context clues that lead them to the meanings of words and phrases they don't understand in a literary work.

Lesson 4: Writing and Viewing/Representing

Students will also choose a scene from a classic film and write about the visual comedic nuances of the scene and the characters in the film.

Novels rely greatly on tone and style, which don't have exact equivalents in filmmaking. Films rely on structure, plot, and the skills of the directors and actors. This may be one reason why Dickens is appealing to filmmakers: his novels are very plot-heavy and carefully structured. But Dickens does two things that cannot be done on film: his humor relies on understatement, and he condenses things, which maybe sounds unbelievable, looking at the length of his novels, but consider the scene shown above showing Pip, Joe, and Mrs. Joe at the dinner table very early in the movie. This scene is a "static shot" in which Joe tries to communicate with Pip silently, without Mrs. Joe knowing. "By putting them all in the same frame and just leaving the camera rolling, the actors get to play it to the hilt; the viewer always knows right where Mrs. Joe is looking, and it's one of the funniest parts of the movie" since both Pip and Joe are afraid of her wrath and the consequences they may suffer from the Tickler. "Good direction and editing

depends on knowing when to trust actors to carry a scene; all the humor in this would be lost if this scene were edited” (Dessem).

While watching the 1952 black and white film of *A Christmas Carol*, students will take notes to complete the following assignment. They are comparing/contrasting the text of the novel with the film presentation:

Assignment: The final product should be TYPED, 12 PT. TIMES FONT, DOUBLE-SPACED, 1” MARGINS; each question should be appropriately numbered. All responses must be written in complete sentences (no fragments or run-ons) and punctuated correctly. Points will be deducted for punctuation, spelling, and syntactical errors. Each of the following questions is worth 20 points (total assignment = 100 points). Proofread your responses carefully.

As you view the film, take copious notes about the following:

Characterization of Scrooge: distinguish Scrooge’s character as it is described in the text vs. the way he is portrayed in the film. (comparison)

Setting: compare/contrast the setting you see in the film with the setting described in the text. (i.e., Is the setting in the film what you visualized in the text? How?)

Plot: outline the stages of plot development *as they appear in the film* (exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion).

Appearance of the four ghosts: compare/contrast the ghosts as they are described in the text vs. their appearances in the film. This includes Marley.

“This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want”: This quote from the text is at the end of Stave Three. How are “Ignorance” and “Want” portrayed in the film? What do “Ignorance” and “Want” symbolize? Why does the second spirit warn Scrooge about these two “children”?

Bonus Question (10 points): To earn credit for this bonus question you must complete ALL the above assignment and respond appropriately to all sections of the questions. You must also answer the following *completely*:

Explain the conflict between Scrooge and “The Phantom” in Stave Four. What does The Phantom represent? Why is Scrooge’s reaction to The Phantom so different from his interactions with the other spirits? What issues are involved (think about symbols)? Be very specific in your response, and *thoroughly* explain the conflict.

Lesson 5: Close Reading and Plot Development

Students need to learn to read closely and to understand that not everything they read is as it appears. Classical literature can be interpreted in many different ways, and humor can be found where none was seen in previous readings. As students progress through the six steps of plot development, they must find at least one element of humor in each phase of the plot:

- Exposition – introduction to setting, background, situation, and characters
- Inciting incident – what happens that makes the whole story progress
- Rising action – all events leading up to the climax; the longest part of the story
- Climax – the highest part or turning point of the story
- Falling action – events leading to the resolution of the story
- Conclusion – resolve all loose ends and supply a satisfactory ending to the story

Lesson 6: Historical Background / Discussion

This unit will introduce students to historical background of the Victorian era in London, England, specifically emphasizing the age and works of Charles Dickens. The students will be taught to read closely and to draw elements out of the literature that really enhance the humorous aspects addressed by the author. Some topics for discussion that will be introduced are:

- Does a “ghost” always have a negative connotation? Explain instances when the presence of an apparition can be positive and what specifically makes the spirit a positive presence.
- What contemporary stories – books, films, short stories, poems – have components that can be compared to the Christmas ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*?
- What humorous elements are present in the appearances of the ghosts and in Scrooge’s reactions to them?
- Why is Magwitch a comic figure?
- Why are class distinctions, that are normally construed as so important, ultimately the biggest joke of all?
- Explore the names of characters in *Great Expectations* and discuss/explain the parallels in their names and their functions in the story. (i.e., Pip Pirrup, Pumblechook, Miss Havisham, Magwitch, Wopsle, Gargery, Jaggers, Wemmick, Startop, and Bentley Drummle) How do the characters’ traits and personalities mirror their names? Research and explain the humor reflected in names/traits.

Lesson 7: Dialectical Journals

The dialectical journal is a process of double-entry note taking students use while reading literature. Students write notes in a columnar format that dialogue with one another, thereby developing critical reading and reflective questioning (Calvert). Students will write dialectical journal entries for both *Great Expectations* and *A Christmas Carol* in which they discuss characterization, themes, imagery, and figurative language as these elements contribute to the humorous context in the stories. Students are very resourceful and want to find humor in serious or desperate situations. This unit allows them the opportunity to do just that and to express themselves accordingly. Writing dialectical journal entries allows the students to choose a particular element in the literature and to interpret that chosen device to their liking. They must choose advanced structures and explain how these structures make the works humorous. The format students will follow to complete their dialectical journal assignment is found below.

Dialectical Journal Assignment

Dialectical journals are journals in which *a reader records a mental conversation* with the text. The journal records a dialogue (conversation) between the ideas in the text and the response of the reader.

- 1) **Summarize and question:** summarize passages from the text in the left column; note observations and ask questions in the right column (level one questions = knowledge/comprehension; level two questions = application/analysis requiring the use of inference; level three questions = synthesis/evaluation going beyond the specifics of the text and into the area of universal meaning). Choose a significant passage from a text you are reading to analyze in the format below.

SUMMARY	OBSERVATIONS and QUESTIONS

- 2) **Character analysis:** identify evidence about a character (words, actions, reactions); use quotation marks around quotes and cite page numbers; based on the evidence, make inferences about the character; write commentary that explains how or why the evidence leads to or supports the inference; write a character analysis essay. Choose a character-based quotation from a text you are reading, and analyze it using the format below.

EVIDENCE	INFERENCE - COMMENTARY

- 3) **Literary or rhetorical analysis of tone:** focus on concrete devices and their effect or purpose (i.e., fill in the chart with diction and imagery that create tone); commentary should explain and analyze how or why the concrete devices lead to the abstract feeling. Choose a passage from text you are reading that seems to you to indicate a certain tone, and analyze it using the format below.

EVIDENCE	COMMENTARY

- 4) **Analysis of theme:** identify evidence that supports the thematic idea and traces motifs within a work; write commentary that explains the connection. Choose a passage from a text you are reading that seems to indicate one of its themes, and analyze it using the format below.

EVIDENCE	COMMENTARY

- 5) **Symbolism:** identify symbols within a work; discuss the literal meaning of the “symbol” within the work; explain the symbolism in the larger context of life; analyze the effect or purpose of the symbolism; reflect on the insight gained. Choose a passage from a work you are reading that is symbolic, and analyze it using the format below.

SYMBOL (LITERAL)	SYMBOL (ABSTRACT)	EFFECT/PURPOSE/INSIGHT

- 6) **Syntactical analysis:** choose complex and compound-complex examples of syntax (i.e., asyndeton, polysyndeton, anaphora, epanalepsis, epistrophe) from the work you are reading; break down the sentence structures to determine abstract meanings; imitate the sentence structures in writing about the passage where they occur.

EVIDENCE	ANALYSIS/COMMENTARY

Students will frame the dialectical journal entries as they are reading and annotating the texts, which will allow them the ability to pick and choose their evidentiary citations as they come across them in the texts, rather than relying on memory or going back through the texts multiple times to find the citations they want.

Lesson 8: Films: Viewing/Representing

The students will see several variations of these two stories as they have been presented in Hollywood film productions throughout the years. Students will watch these stories in vintage black and white films, in variations of contemporary films, and in animated films. By watching

different adaptations of these stories, students will learn that they can be creative in their interpretations of classic literature and that it is allowed for them to find humor in morality stories or other narratives with serious undertones. Students will choose a scene from one of the films to analyze about its humorous aspects, from the techniques used in filming, to the choice of actors who portray the various characters, to the settings and experiences depicted in the film. They will cross reference with the texts to write a critical analysis and present evidence of their interpretations.

CONCLUSION

Although this unit is written primarily for Pre-Advanced Placement ninth or tenth grade high school students, it can easily be adapted to serve regular grade level students or students in higher or lower grade levels. It is always interesting to see what different students determine to be humorous as they read through these texts. It is wonderful to see the transition of the students' personalities as they begin to understand the different editions of texts and different adaptations of film or stage presentations. Young high school students undergo a transformation akin to a personal hero's journey of their own as they read more mature literature and begin to understand other eras and cultures. These students acknowledge that reading works of classical literature is an exercise to be enjoyed, and they can further learn to enjoy the work if they look for instances of comedy or humor within the texts. When they progress to Advanced Placement Literature classes, they will understand that if they take the attitude of enjoyment in their reading, they will learn a lot more from the literature. "In such a period as ours, when the world is filled with hatred and gloom, the humour of Dickens is doubly endearing to us. It is a purifying and redeeming humour. To renew acquaintance with it after some time spent with 'the news of the day' is like coming out of a sick room, where the blinds are down, into the brightness of a sunny beach, the waves dancing, a strong wind blowing, and the shouts of healthy children, running down to the sea, in one's ears." (Cruikshank ix) Students must choose their own episodes of humor from the works, but *A Christmas Carol* and certainly *Great Expectations* present them with a rich and bountiful source from which to make their choices and learn to appreciate the subtle, sometimes elusive, humor of Charles Dickens.

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Films to be used in class

Certain scenes will be selected to show different approaches and variations of each story as it is adapted by film makers. Students will differentiate between the film variations and the text of the novels.

A Christmas Carol

- 1) 1951 (Alistair Sim), VCI Entertainment, B&W, 86 minutes.
- 2) 1984 (George C. Scott), 20th Century Fox, 100 minutes.
- 3) 1992 (Muppets), Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 86 minutes.
- 4) 2004 (Jason Alexander – “The Musical”), Lions Gate, 97 minutes.

Great Expectations

- 1) 1946 (John Mills), Criterion Studios, B&W, 118 minutes.
- 2) 1981 (Gerry Sundquist), BBC Home Video, 351 minutes.
- 3) 1998 (Ethan Hawke), 20th Century Fox, 112 minutes.
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(The study guide in the lesson plans accompanies this film.)