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<http://teachingmisterpip.wikispaces.com/Plot+Summary+of+Mister+Pip>

Plot Summary of Mister Pip

Mister Pip by Lloyd Jones is the compelling story of a girl caught in the throes of war on the island of Bougainville. It is through the guidance of a most beloved mother and teacher that Matilda survives but more importantly, through her connection with Pip. A fictional creation from the mind of Charles Dickens himself, Pip helps Matilda maintain a desire to live, especially after her mother, the wise Mr. Watts, and her island cease to exist.

The novel opens with a colorful description of Mr. Watts, whom the children call Popeye due to his eyes that "stuck out further than anyone else's - like they wanted to leave the surface of his face." We learn of his marriage to Grace, a native of Bougainville, which serves to explain why he remained long after most of the white men had abandoned the island. With military tension rising and the school room growing over with creepers, Mr. Watts decides to take on the task of educating the children. Despite his claim to be limited in intelligence, he introduces the students to one of the most brilliant authors of our time, Mister Charles Dickens.

The obvious challenge of teaching young children, starving for a distraction from ever-present turmoil, is not the only difficulty that Mr. Watts faces. Dolores, Matilda's overzealous Christian mother, expresses an extreme distrust of the teacher and his curriculum. She does everything in her power to ensure that her daughter's mind is not polluted by the strange white man, including making weekly visits to the classroom. She even goes as far as stealing and hiding Dickens' Great Expectations, an action that causes immense trouble when redskin soldiers enter the village and find Mr. Pip's name carved into the sand. Coincidentally, it is Matilda who wrote his name, and it is her guilt that makes her empathize with her mother, who refuses to give up the book as evidence of Pip as a fictional character. Convinced that this Mr. Pip must be a spy who has been hidden from them, the redskins destroy the houses. All they leave behind are smoking fragments of Matilda's former life.

As the tension escalates even further, a group of rebel soldiers returns to the village to question the only remaining white man, Mr. Watts. He agrees to explain himself over the course of five nights, and proceeds to tell a story that entwines Pip's life even further with his own. Matilda develops an idea about why he returned to the island with his wife and stayed after all the other whites left. Now that his wife has died, Mr. Watts considers moving on and offers Matilda a chance to escape from the island. However, she would have to choose between Mr. Watts and her mother but before this can happen the rebels flee and the redskin soldiers return.

This time the soldiers kill Mr. Watts, and when Matilda's mother speaks up she is taken away. Matilda is almost raped, but her mother gives up her life to spare her. In the wake of surviving the slaughter of her village, her mother and Mr. Watts, Matilda loses her will to live. She nearly drowns, but is revived by the memory of Pip, who also narrowly escaped death. After clinging to a log, Matilda is picked up by the fisherman who had arranged to escape with Mr. Watts, and eventually she reaches Australia. It is there that Matilda is reunited with her father and begins to pick up the pieces of her disrupted life. She comes to terms with the reality of Mr. Watts, who altered both the facts of his life and the contents in Great Expectations in an effort to provide escape from the world, both for himself and for the children. She reveals her success in becoming a scholar and a Dickens expert and concludes her narrative by emphasizing the power of literature to offer escape and solace in the worst of times.

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A reviewer: “a novel about the power of books to do good and to change lives.”

LEM: A story about story telling: the trouble it can cause, the pain it can heal, the inexpressible it can express, the way it can bury bad memories, the way it can connect people and protect them—the mystique of the storyteller, the way it helps people to understand each other and to anticipate and hope for change. And as Matilda writes: “Some stories will help you find happiness and truth. Some stories teach you not to make the same mistake twice. These ones offer instruction. Look here to the Good Book.” p61

—the different effect on the audience of storytelling versus preaching

—the importance of a single word ...or not: “*As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me.*” Us kids sat back in our usual state of tremulous excitement reserved for these debates between my mum and Mr. Watts. We didn’t see anything wrong with the sentence. Why, you could look out the open window and see that a statement about self-fulfillment was hardly a surprise to the grass or the flowers or the creepers growing everywhere. ...My mum said she had no problem with stating the obvious. The problem was that silly blimmin’ word *insensibly*. What was the point of that word? It just confused. If it hadn’t been for that silly bloody *insensibly*, she’d have gotten it the first time. Instead, *insensibly* had led her to suspect it wasn’t so straightforward after all. ...She thought Mr. Watts should remove the offending word. At first, he said he couldn’t; you couldn’t muck around with Dickens. The word belonged to him; the whole sentence did. To whip out an inconvenient word would be an act of vandalism, like smashing the window of a chapel. He said all that and I think from that day on he did the opposite. He pulled the embroidery out of Mr. Dickens’ story to make it easier on our young ears. “ p228

LEM: First impression: a delightful miniature. Soon the miniature shatters (fragments) into a series of razor sharp pieces held together only by the frame —the underlying story within a story, Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. What starts out as a humorous, quirky, light tale quickly develops into a complex, tragic and, to me, a mystifying story in which the focus seems set to fuzz out or minimize the role of the truly heroic characters—Matilda’s mum and ultimately, Matilda. A difficult, complex and mystifying puzzle. Motives are unclear. Insights are unprepared for. Themes pop up and then disappear and re-appear.

It is a novel about sacrifice and love, evil and goodness, despair and hope, destitution and plenty, disconnection and attachment, keeping your voice secret and finding and using your voice and the bindings/bondage of the past versus the promise of the future

A trauma told —an expression of the inexpressible—that finally enables Matilda to “try to return home.”

The relationship between Dolores and Mr. Watts —What is their conflict (if it even exists apart from Matilda’s reckoning) about? How different are their perspectives on the world, on good and evil, God and the devil, the importance of fantasy and imagination. Their deaths are the same and for the same purpose. In death they are both heroic and self-sacrificing. Are they not figuratively and symbolically (more or less) the ‘orphan’ Matilda’s parents and benefactors who ensure she lives through the horror and has the opportunity to grow into adulthood?

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Puzzles:

Quotations from the text:

- “On the fifth night Mr. Watts introduced to the wall a scrap we’d heard in class about Pip versus the devil. ...Mr. Watts challenged Grace to describe the devil. ...”So,” began Mr. Watts, “how might we recognize this creature? Does he have horns? Does he produce a business card? Does he have a lipless mouth? And no eyebrows? Do his eyes have a wanton quality?”
- By putting up these questions Mr. Watts was creating a devil before our eyes. And, as quickly as he had produced an image in our heads, he set about dismantling it with the same explanation we’d heard my mum give us kids. “We know the devil because we know ourselves. And how do we know God? We know God because we know ourselves.” ...To those boys (the rebels) it must have come as a relief to hear their blood wasn’t all that bad...The stalemate between Mr. Watts and my mum. The preparedness of Mr. Watts to believe in one made-up character (Pip) but not another (the devil). The conviction of my mum that the devil was more real than Pip. If pushed, she might have admitted that the illustrated version of the devil—including her encounter with that witch from her childhood who turned herself into an ugly carnivorous bird—were just showbiz.” p191
- On the sixth night, Mr. Watts told a tale, his own I believe, that established the place of the nonbeliever. ...I will call it “The Mayfly Story.” If you were my mum you might have felt you were listening to an admission from a heathen that everything he had said or believed was wrong. I have come to think of it as his gift to her.
- ...After Mr. Watts composed himself he told us how he and Mrs. Watts buried their child. For a long time the two of them stood clinging to one another over the small plot of piled dirt. Mr. Watts said they stayed like that until after night fell, and they had no more tears, and their tongues were idle because there were not words. No one, he said, has yet invented words for a moment like that. “Grief,” he said, and he shook his head back at the night.” p195
- Mr. Watts decided the only way to mend his beloved Grace was for her to reinvent herself. ...I wonder, does anyone here know who the Queen of Sheba was?” ...my mum ...just had to speak up... “it’s in the Bible.” ...The Queen of Sheba was a very wise black woman who sought out Solomon to see if she could match his legendary wisdom with her own.” That’s what she said. She and Mr. Watts stared at one another, and it was Mr. Watts who chose to end it the way that he did. He looked around the rest of his audience and began to recite from the King James Bible.” She communed with him of all that was in her heart...and there was nothing hid.” p197
- “My life,” replied my mum. “I will give you my life.” The officer turned to look at me. Did you hear that? Your mother has offered her life for you. What do you say?”
 “Don’t speak Matilda. Do not say anything.”
 “No I want to hear,” said the redskin, He had placed his hands behind his back. He was enjoying himself. “What do you say to your mother?”

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While he waited for me to say something my mum used her eyes to plead with me, and I understood. I was to say nothing... I was to pretend that my voice was my secret... I found out later what I didn't see. They took my mum to the edge of the jungle to the same place they'd dragged Mr. Watts, and there they chopped her up and threw her to the pigs. ...The day held so many layers, almost too many things, contradictory things, all jumbled up, that the world lost any sense of order." p209

- I am always reminded of what Mr. Watts once told us kids about what it is to be a gentleman. It is an old-fashioned view. Others, and these days I include myself, will want to substitute *gentleman* with *moral person*. **He said that to be human is to be moral and you cannot have a day off when it suits. My brave mum had known this** when she stepped forward to proclaim herself God's witness to the cold-blooded butchery of her old enemy, Mr. Watts. p210
- "So, Matilda, aren't you going to tell me about that book?" ...I told her how Pip went back to the house for a file and food to take to the convict in the morning I hadn't done it justice in my telling. There was no sound to what I said. Just the bare facts. And when I reached the end I had to say, "That's all I know, so far." P27
- I have tried to describe the events as they happened to me and my mum on the island. I have not tried to **embellish**. Everyone says the same thing of Dickens. They love his characters. Well, something has changed in me. As I have grown older I have fallen out of love with his characters. They are too loud; they are **grotesques**. But strip away their masks and you find what their creator understood about the human soul and all its suffering and vanity. When I told my father of my mum's death he broke down and wept. That is when I learned there is a place for embellishment after all. But it belongs to life—not to literature." p253

Some important words

grotesque
embellish
grief
horrific, horrible
emigrant
fantasist

Some important images

The color white
The color blue

Blue is the color of the Pacific. It is the air we breathe. Blue is the gap in the air of all things, such as the palms and iron roofs. But for blue we would not see the fruit bats. Thank you, God, for giving us the color blue....(as spoken by Daniel's grandmother p59)

(Mr. Watts says)

Today we have been very lucky. Very lucky. We have received a handy reminder that while we may not know the whole world. We can if we are clever enough, make it new. We can make it up with the things we find and see around us. We just have to look and try to be as imaginative as Daniel's grandmother." He put a hand on the shoulder of the old woman. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you so much." p60

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Voicing the horrific:

The rebels and the red-skins' helicopters

We were used to the red-skins' helicopters buzzing in and out of the cloud around the mountain peaks. Now we saw them head out to sea in a straight line. The helicopter would reach a certain point, then turn around and come back as if it had forgotten something. Where they turned back was just a pinprick in the distance. We could not see the men thrown out. But that's what we heard. The redskins flung the captured rebels out the open door of the helicopter, their arms and legs kicking in the air. And whenever us kids strayed into range our mums and dads would stop talking, and so we knew, didn't we, that there was some fresh atrocity, the details we didn't yet know about." p12

The disappearance of Sam

"Two weeks after Gilbert's father dug the bullets out he took Same out to seah in his boat. It was nighttime and in the black stillness we could hear the slapping of the oars on the water. Gilbert's father's boat had an outboard, but he didn't want to use the last of his fuel; he was saving that. He was gone for two days. We were asleep when he dragged his boat up on the third night. And when I saw him the next day he did not look the same.

We never saw Sam again. p82

The killing of Mr. Watts

They must have untied his (the rambo's) hands, because he was dragging the limp body of Mr. Watts toward the pigs. We averted our eyes for the next bit. But some of us were too slow to avoid seeing the flash of the machete as it was raised. They chopped Mr. Watts up and threw him in pieces to the pigs." p203

The killing of Daniel and his grandmother

He spoke to one of his soldiers, who nodded to another, and the two of them took Daniel into the jungle. He went without complaint, ...And for a moment it seemed none of us would complain. Then Daniel's grandmother spoke up, the same woman who had come to our class to talk about the color blue. "Sir, let me go with my grandson. Please, sir." p204

The killing of Dolores

My mum pleaded with the soldiers. "Please. Have mercy. See. She is just a girl. She is my only girl. Please, I beg you. Not my darling Matilda. ...God's witness had changed back to a mother, but the officer didn't see that. He only saw the woman who had promised to be God's witness, ..." "What will you give me to save your daughter?" ... "I will give myself," she said.

"My men have had you. You have nothing left to give."

"My life," replied my mum. "I will give you my life."

The officer turned to look at me. Did you hear that? Your mother has offered her life for you.

What do you say?"

"Don't speak Matilda. Do not say anything."

"No I want to hear," said the redskin, He had placed his hands behind his back He was enjoying himself. "What do you say to your mother?"

While he waited for me to say something my mum used her eyes to plead with me, and I understood. I was to say nothing... I was to pretend that my voice was my secret....

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Mr. Watts (Tom Christian Watts)– “Everyone called him Pop Eye.”

Who is he?

“It wasn’t just for the fact he was the last white man that made Pop Eye what he was to us—a source of mystery mainly, but also confirmation of something else we held to be trueWe had grown up believing white to be the color of all the important things, like ice cream, aspirin, ribbon, the moon, the stars. White stars and a full moon were more important when my grandfather grew up than they are now that we have generators.” p4

“Pop Eye,” she said, is the offspring of a shining cuckoo.” . . . She thought she had Mr. Watts summed up. She could not see what us kids had come to see: a kind man. She only saw a white man And white men had stolen her husband and my father . White men were to blame for the mine, and the blockade. . . .p48

“You cannot be any more stuck than the only white person living among black people. Mr. Watts was another I regarded as stuck. He had given us Pip, and I had come to know this Pip as if he were real and I could feel his breath on my cheek. I had learned to enter the soul of another. Now I tried to do the same with Mr. Watts.

I watched his face and I listened to his voice and I tried to hear how his mind ticked, and what he thought. . . .We always watched Mr. Watts’ face for a sign that what we were hearing was nonsense. His face never gave such a sign. It displayed a respectful interest. . . .” p58

I had a fragment. The acting part of Mr. Watts. So, what about it? The fact he enjoyed acting gnaws away with its questions of sincerity. Especially when I think about Mr. Watts’ classroom gestures. . . .Was this Mr. Watts, or an actor playing Mr. Watts the schoolteacher? Who was it that us kids saw in the classroom? A man who genuinely thought *Great Expectations* to be the greatest novel by the greatest English writer in the nineteenth century? Or a man left with only a morsel who will claim it the best meal of his life?

I suppose it is possible to be all of these things. To sort of fall out of who you are into another, as well as to journey back to some essential sense of self. We only see what we see. . . .I had hoped to get more from my visit to Mrs. Watts. . . .I had the scrapbook and it answered the mystery about the red nose. Otherwise, Mr. Watts was as elusive as ever. He was whatever he needed to be, what we asked him to be. . . .teacher, magician, saviour p245

Why did he come to the island?

“No one knew what Pop Eye did; he did no work as far as we could tell. He was invisible for most of the time. . . .It was easy to accept (Mrs. Watts) was mad. Mr. Watts was more of a mystery because he’d come out of a world we didn’t really know. My mum said his tribe had forgotten him. They wouldn’t have left behind a company man.” p11

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Why did Matilda suspect there was a first Mrs. Watts?

“If Mr. Watts had held back certain characters from *Great Expectations*, who had he omitted from his own life? I looked in the phone book. It had listings for forty-three Wattses. I can't remember if it was call number nine or ten who said. “Oh, I think you want June Watts...p235

Why did he wear the clown nose?

—the clown and the trickster

Wikipedia: The Trickster or Clown, is an example of a **Jungian archetype**. **In modern literature the trickster survives as a character archetype**, not necessarily supernatural or divine, sometimes no more than a stock character.

In later folklore, the trickster/clown is incarnated as **a clever, mischievous man or creature, who tries to survive the dangers and challenges of the world using trickery and deceit as a defense. He also is known for entertaining people as a clown does**. For example many typical fairy tales have the King who wants to find the best groom for his daughter by ordering several trials. No brave and valiant prince or knight manages to win them, until a poor and simple peasant comes. With the help of his wits and cleverness, instead of fighting, he evades or fools monsters and villains and dangers with unorthodox manners. Therefore the most unlikely candidate passes the trials and receives the reward. More modern and obvious examples of that type are Bugs Bunny, The Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) and Pippi Longstocking. (*See list*).

The trickster is an enduring archetype that crosses many cultures and appears in a wide variety of popular media.

Why does he tell Matilda that his wife Grace changed her name to Sheba? Who is Sheba?

Is Dolores the Mayfly?

Book Discussion Guide Questions

What is the significance of the novel's epigraph?

Why does Matilda's mother take such offense at *Great Expectations*?

How does Matilda use *Great Expectations* to make sense of the world?

How does race permeate the life of the island?

What does *Great Expectations*' appeal suggest about one culture's appreciation for another's art?

Why does Mr. Watts's long story so enthrall the village and the rebels?

Why does Matilda decide to leave England in the end, after making such an effort to get there?