

# Charles Dickens's Miss Havisham: Her Expectations and Our Responses

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most significant figures in Charles Dickens novel *Great Expectations* in terms of affective power is Miss Havisham. Dickens's contemporary readers probably understood either consciously or sub-consciously that Miss Havisham's ill-fated marriage and her consequent behaviour made a peculiar sort of sense in their world. Since stories like Miss Havisham's have been told and re-told from Dicken's time to ours in the continuing narrative of Western experience, this frustrated spinster may seem familiar even to present-day readers. Infact, we respond to codes that inform *Great Expectations* almost intuitively: the differenc is that our intuitions are informed by two centuries of additional development both cultural and literary. Her characterization provides a model of the power of repressive forces especially in their dual roles as agents of society at large acting on individual and as internalized matter directing one to govern the conduct of self and others. For the twenty first century reader, the richness of the novel may be enhanced by the analysis that pays attention to the cultural dynamics at work during Dickens's time with an emphasis on what more recent psycho-analytic, social and literary narrative offer us for understanding.

**KEYWORDS:** Dickens, Miss Havisham, *Great Expectations*, cultural analysis, narcissism.

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## INTRODUCTION

"*Great Expectations*" is often linked in readers' minds with earlier *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *David Copperfield*, in all four novels trace the careers of young men through difficulties to a serene conclusion. But "*Great Expectations*" belongs to a much later period of Dickens' work, and blends the originality of invention which he had already demonstrated with a new maturity in handling structure, atmosphere, and tone. Infact, it must be very much easier to read adequately with a sympathetic and intelligent comprehension of the spirit in which it was written and of what it was actually about in Dickens's own day or in any time up to present . Q.D.leavis deprecates her contemporary critics and general readers, who presumable "have no knowledge of the constitution and actuality of Dickens's society" (1970:277) . Leavis continues her discussion with extolling Dickens's apprehension of the relation between the inner and outer life. What seems curious is that leavis asserts the value of this novel over Dickens's other works because of its "greater relevance outside of its own age" ( 281-289). This is a part of that relevance which is determined by the response of late twentieth and early twenty first century readers who understand the novel differently than Dickens's contemporaries.

Since the publication of Leavis's essay, a host of scholars—specially those whose work informed by feminism, sociological, and psychoanalysis—have given us new insight into the text and the ways we readers make sense of them. Much of this recent work challenges claims for superiority of readings contemporary to a work by asserting the openness of the text to the new interpretations. While *leavis's* reading of *Great Expectations* illuminates many of fine qualities of the novel, specially those which require psychological interpretation, her argument that later readers are impaired suggests a stagnant location of the text in a precise time and place and a privilege for its contemporary readership that similarly ignores the dynamic nature of the text. According to William Myers in his discussion of "*Little Dorrit*" as a work of art, "the novel must be against the reader in a certain sense; it must disconcert his aesthetic expectations; it must trap, surprise, and frustrate, as well as gratify, the literary appetites of the English bourgeoisie"(1971:79).Indeed, the endurance of *Great Expectations* as a valuable work of art depends on the ability to continue to trap, surprise, and frustrate us—to ask us to go further into and beyond the text to fully appreciate its accomplishments which *Leavis* fails to account in her thesis.

## DISCUSSION

Miss Havisham has often been described by critics as one instance of an irrational and vindictive female figure embodying the mythic horrors of countless cruel mothers, stepmothers, and witch-like figures. Comparing her to other Dickensian women who are perverted by passion, Micheal Slater asserts that "Miss Havisham is the most compelling and the most haunting" (1983:291). In his book titled as " *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction*", Thomas Vargish says that she is "the most clearly culpable' when compared to Magwitch because "her twisting of Stella's nature seems more consciously malevolent than his plan for Pip" (1985:152-153), and H.P. Sucksmith refers to "the extremely powerful effect and vision which the figure of Miss Havisham contributes to *Great Expectations*" (1970:186) Vargish's claim is that Miss Havisham "was brought up as a lady, with a lady's advantages", raises the question of what it meant to

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be brought up as a lady, in general, or in Miss Havisham's case, in particular. Dicken's probably counted on his readers' ability to answer the term "in general", since he provides only a brief summary of her life offered to Pip by Herbert Pocket. However, her significance in the novel is positively linked to the brevity of details about her background rather than in spite of it. Infact, readers always respond to Miss Havisham with an almost automatic comprehension of her state of mind and her action. Clearly, this sort of reaction depends on the text's evocation, of shared cultural and often literary concepts.

A vivid and lasting image for the reader, which seems to be grotesque because of its convolution of symbolic import of a wedding scene, is her withered bridal gown and half-arrange veil resembling grave-clothes and a shroud, one shoe on, one shoe off. Since human civilization, depictions of betrothal and marriage scenes have been used as literary devices. However, rather than signifying the celebration of a joyous social and personal event in which private lives are endorsed by public ceremony, the result of aborted wedding—the table is still laid for a feast and jilted bride in yellow gown-visibly enact a gap between opportunity and desire which frequently occurred in the lives of Victorian women. The disappointing scene shows Miss Havisham's failure to make her private dream a public reality and create an identity outside her private life.

Surely, Dickens depicts in Miss Havisham's experience a social, historical and in the last analysis political. Fedric Jameson defines the structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and private, maiming our existence as individual subjects and paralyzing our thinking about time and change (1981:20) . Her choice to live reclusively in the inner space of Satis House, enduring in a fetid atmosphere, which threatens to engulf young Estella, repeats the fate of many Victorian women. Elaine Showalter also concludes the situation of women in the analysis of "The Rise of Victorian Madwoman":

The rise of the Victorian madwoman was one of history's shelf-fulfilling prophecies. In a society that not only perceived women as child-like, irrational, and sexually unstable but also rendered them powerless and economically marginal, it is not surprising that they should have formed the greater part of the residual categories of deviance from which doctors drew a lucrative practice and asylums much of their population (1979:73).

The macabre nature of Miss Havisham's environment resists all but the most negative effect of the passage of time. Her existence cannot be connected to other fictional characters of the nineteenth century such as Jane Eyre whose confinement to closed spaces is a metaphor for entrapment in a society that its function depends on women's complicity with their own imprisonment. The report of Herbert Pocket to Pip about Miss Havisham's background that she was a motherless young girl whose father, anxious about his newly-achieved financial status, doted on her and neglected his son, who in turn resented the child so clearly favored over him, recounts the history of a spoiled woman who, when her expectations are sorely disappointed by a jilting fiancé, will spend the rest of her life impotently raging at forces that worked against her. It is here that the readers generally consider Miss Havisham's isolation as self-inflicted, but probing into causes of her tortured manner of living reveals the workings of a complex system which has made her reclusiveness inevitable. Her financial independence has allowed her to escape confinement to an asylum, but a fate one would imagine for a woman such as she, is disconnection from outside world as if she is institutionalized.

The "madwoman", who spends her life, has many fictional counterparts whose thrashing in a world deaf to their cries symbolize the same sort of unsatiated female passion and desire that smoulder in Miss Havisham. For instance, we can connect the faulkner's Emily in "A Rose For Emily" with Miss Havisham who have similar roles as daughters and held a special place in their fathers' imaginations. The world of Great Expectations, like the work mentioned above, refracts complex and changing social values. It concerns with those changes which challenge the privileged status of a family as a surce of identity but at the same time frustrate individual identity. Miss Havisham remained within the privacy of her home, initially filling a role in her social history. "Family Fortune," as common to a young motherless woman: she might serve as emotional focus for her father, protecting him from an ill-considered remarriage while gaining for herself "responsibility, respect and affection without a break from familiar surroundings and the necessity to cope with a new physical relationship"(1987:347).

Indeed, Great Expectations interprets this sort of intimate familial arrangement negatively if we judge by the consequences in Miss Havisham's case and presages fictional work which reflect even more stultifying emotional consequences for women. At the time of writing Great Expectation, the upper and middle class family structures of Victorian society, which had previously offered security against an increasingly unfamiliar outside world,were threatened by the divisive forces of industrialization and capitalism. One consequence of the movement of the work-place away from home was that women's direct participation in the productive aspects of work-other than child. Bearing, of course, diminished. The effect of changes in the economic structure on women is described in the following way by Davidoff and Hall:

Women's identification with the domestic and moral sphere implied that they would only become active economic agents when forced by necessity. As the nineteenth century progressed, it was increasingly assumed that a woman engaged in business was a woman without either an income of her own or a man to support her (272).

The protection a father offered his daughter from the world outside was sometimes an ironic gesture: the unfamiliar world outside the home might well have been the place where she could have established a sense of self-worth. This is indeed the place from which she was shielded, a social reality Dickens reveals. In fact, women's role in the nineteenth century became more narrowly defined throughout, this is why fictional depiction increasingly sensitive to the inner lives of characters plumb the depth of despair experienced by women whose growth is arrested at the stage of daughter.

Although Miss Havisham has the privilege that Vargish associates with a "lady", the prerogatives she enjoys essentially limit her exchange value to the market-place she has created in Satis House. Her worth to Compeyson and even to her relatives and Pip is measured by the monetary gains they believe they can realize from her. It is a matter of surprise for the readers that a woman, who had no dealings with the public world in her years of growing up, had received preferential treatment at the hands of her father who himself had stature in his community.

Mr. Havisham and his daughter are described by Herbert Pocket as "very rich and very proud" (1965:146). In casting Mr. Havisham in the role of a brewer, Dickens suggests that his pride may have been a compensation for feelings of inferiority in comparison with upper-class rich men. Herbert explains that one may not be a baker and be a gentleman nor he and Pip agree, may one keep a public house and be a gentleman. It seems that a brewer enjoyed only a marginal status in the gentleman class, and Mr. Havisham risked this, when after Mrs. Havisham's mother's death, he privately married his cook (146). For years he did not acknowledge the son born to him by his second wife while he indulged his daughter in keeping with both his class aspirations and her physical requirement. She, in turn, learned to be proud and to expect to do little to earn her reward as a result of which she adopted the attitudes common to some Victorian women belonging to upper-class. She is virtually useless and unthreatening in the market-place, while she supports and embellishes with her home-bound presence the role of the males in her life in the public sphere. What we learn of Miss Havisham's upbringing suggests at least that it intentionally disempowered her. This would not, of course, make her an unseemly bride for the greedy Compeyson.

H.P. Sucksmith points out that Compeyson is one of Dickens's characters who is "calculated to repel with a plain variety of evil" (1970:186). This does not take much analysis on the reader's part to wholly abhor him, yet very quickly as our understanding may be of his actions, we are nevertheless responding to the complex machinery of a society in which individuals are dehumanized. By identification, Compeyson is a public-school educated man, who has become a forger, a treacherous person that Dickens asserts to show that treachery knows no class distinctions. Herbert Pocket judges Miss Havisham's response to Compeyson with a degree of sympathy that she "passionately loved (Compeyson) with all the susceptibility she possessed" (1965:143). This is a noticeable remark that she loved him not with a strength of passion, but with susceptibility. In fact she was susceptible to her passion's potential in order to make herself vulnerable to the plots arranged by the members of a homosocial alliance.

Miss Havisham's marital plans refer to the traditional modes of arrangement of marriage at that time which can help to explain her position, specially the male alliance between her step-brother and Compeyson. Indeed, the alliance between children of propertied families had been arranged by their families until eighteenth century. Since the move toward arranging one's own courtship and marriage was in harmony with other social movements toward autonomy, Miss Havisham's choice to marry someone may be interpreted as a response to new social possibilities. However, the self-determined woman, often associated in popular culture with witch-like oldmaids, would have good cause to feel vulnerable to social criticism and to potential rejection from her object of desire. When Herbert Pocket reports that his father warned her of placing herself in Compeyson's power, she replies in an angry rage response that may be interpreted as a sign of fear that he was right and a sign that she behaved explosively as a young woman, too. Thus, Miss Havisham's half-brother while hardly an upstanding member of the family pretentiously protects her in two ways. He provides a socially acceptable context by introducing a friend to marry his sister. At that time, it was the custom that a male family member used to arrange a marriage when parents were deceased. This kind of custom follows the pattern which was somewhat in its place; and Miss Havisham's intermediary status reflects the passion with which she approaches this relationship. Thus the homosocial alliance finds its strength in norms which reflect women's subordination in legal, social and emotional affairs.

In making nuptial decisions, Dickens has depicted the role of patriarchy, but at the same time Miss Havisham emerges as a woman who attempts to take advantage of the new potential independence of a woman making a choice based on emotional intuition. The reconstruction of her brief romance explains more about why she would have desired to trust her half-brother and why she would have additional causes besides the obvious one for rage when this arrangement proves to have made her more vulnerable. Another insight Dickens tried with these quick strokes concerns

the brother which collapses the distinction between psychological and social causes. Dickens has created a character who was treated differently within his own nuclear family due to the lower status he shares with his mother. That is why his development into a vengeful man is inextricable from both psychological and class-related factors

While the cultural directives which influence Miss Havisham's behaviour make her a plausible character, the psychoanalytic concepts which underlie our understanding of her make the novel complex in suggestive ways. In *Great Expectations* endless instances of repression counterbalance the dramatized neuroses occurring in such clever narrative oppositions as Pip's descriptions of himself as at once "ferocious and maudlin" or "flaccid with admiration" (254). While repression often signals Pip's general feelings of guilt, repression and passion have worked together in the formation of Miss Havisham's personality. According to the model which John Kucich (1991) develops in "Repression In Victorian Fiction", her inner life may have been unified by these forces (123). While Kucich generally understands repression and passion to be complementary qualities which lead to a positive inner development, he notes that the frightening passions of villainous characters in Dickens's fiction are somehow related to the lack of passion in the heroes and heroines. Another common explanation of the consequences of repression concerns the loss of the necessary other which brings a show of despair. The strategy of the depressive installing the lost loved one into self in order to mitigate the loss—incorporates the image of a partly hated one into the self Miss Havisham's incorporation of her wedding clothes into a permanent part of herself suggests that she has installed the loved one in herself, while all aspects of her behaviour belie a violent self-hatred directed at the lost one who is now part of the self as well as at the self whose fundamental lack concerned the role in which society has placed her. When Stella accuses her of having a steady memory, we notice her memory steadily creates her anguish and bitterness, and when Miss Havisham cries: "Who am I, for God's sake, that I should be kind?" (285) we know that she perceives herself as one who has not been a repository for acts of human kindness.

If we go through the novel, we note about the ways in which repressed material forms identity. This helps to explain how Miss Havisham has repressed desire to punish Compeyson for his rejection of her and has used this energy to create her self-image. Thus she may see herself as powerful, the owner of Satis House and an authority over Stella. In each of her powerful roles, she represents the Victorian male figure rather than the female: she owns property and she possesses a female. In addition to her own female identity, she gains power over Pip, a male. This is the response of a repressed individual which suggests the character of the repressive institution particularly suggestive for greater understanding of the world of *Great Expectations*. This is not the least of which concerns the illusory quality of power relationships. For despite Estella's practical dependence on her adoptive mother, she is forced into the alternately vicious and pathetic woman who pleads for her approval and acceptance. The reversibility of the slave-master relationship reveals itself continually through the novel so that in one of the turns of the screw when Estella turns on Miss Havisham with controlled, but significant anger, the hostile feelings of the reader toward this manipulative witch-like figure is released. Although Estella represents the "angel in the house" image, the reversal of her character remains unconvincing in contrast to the representation of her as an abused and abusing female.

Narcissistic rage which includes converting a passive experience into an active one, identification with aggressor, and seeking revenge for past humiliations becomes the active agent in Miss Havisham. In acting out the ambivalent passion for Compeyson which she has repressed through Stella and thus against Pip, Miss Havisham converts her pitifully passive role in the fate of her betrothal into an active one, while her identification with the aggressor allows her endless repetitions of painful wound. Dressing herself as bride and acting as Compeyson the aggressor, she incorporates into one person the potential for continual re-enactment, but her repetition never leads to a satisfying master. It is no wonder that Pip describes her as corpse-like, no character could be more desirous of death than Miss Havisham, for when her repetitions lead to mastery in the sense that she wounds Pip through Estella's marriage, she regrets her act, lights up in flames and moves steps closer to her death.

## Conclusion

There is no reason to suspect that Miss Havisham understands her own misery as a consequence of more than having been jilted. The tragedy of her life is not that Compeyson failed to show up the alter; it is not even that he and her step-brother had plotted against her—it is that she fails to understand the system that works against her. Rather than seeking whatever small, but personally significant change, she seeks to revenge herself against society on its own terms. She acts on the belief that is through dehumanizing and often brutal deceit and abuse that desire can be satisfied to such an extent that it offers no hope for a different future. In his pessimistic approach, Dickens reveals the vicious circularity of individual and social misery. The illusion that Miss Havisham holds onto to sustain the dream through the role she intended to assume was the one that could offer satisfaction. Dickens unmasks this illusion in various ways throughout the novel, but the world he depicts offers no alternative. The repressions as *modus operandi* in the institutions and also characters of *Great Expectations* makes the reader aware how to respond to the familiar signs of the repressions without which the full workings of the novel does not have any appeal. The role of Miss Havisham as a character dramatizes how one's public and private lives might be socially and psychologically divided. Miss Havisham is emblematic of psychological drives, desires and moral principles, the forces which account for her divided-self. Not only does her existence bear a constant reminder of expectations, but it is also a testimony to the necessity for and the effects of

repression under a system which denies individual rights to self-development and undercuts principles of moral conduct with greedy self-interest.

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