

Different portrayals of women in Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations" essay sample...

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In "Great Expectations", the virtuous/vixenish dichotomy is mainly explored through Estella, one of the main female characters in the novel, and also through Miss Havisham, who brought her up from the age of 3, and Biddy, a simple country girl.

Estella begins the novel as "vixenish" character, brought up by Miss Havisham to be so. She is cold, cynical and manipulative, trained to grow up to break the hearts of men. She hurts Pip and crush his feelings continuously, and the audience picks up on these qualities and dislikes her. Unlike the warm, honest and kind heroine that readers would sympathise with, Estella is the exact opposite, and viewed as "vixenish".

Miss Havisham also begins as a "vixenish" character, who trained Estella to be the girl she's growing up to be, and delights in the way Estella break Pip's heart. Dickens justifies her actions by later explaining that Miss Havisham was jilted by her lover minutes before their marriage, and from then on hated men, wishing to hurt them as they did her, and although we dislike her actions and see her as vixenish, the audience is positioned to feel sorry for her.

In contrast to the pervious two, Biddy is plain and simple, but she is also kind-hearted and befriends Pip, helping him better his education. Although she comes from the poor, labour class, she is kind and moral, the opposite of

Estella, who is beautiful and cold. Because of her admirable qualities, the audience is supposed to like Biddy, the virtuous one.

However, Dickens shows that all is not so clear-cut and that the virtuous/vixenish dichotomy is not so clearly defined as the novel draws to a close. Estella, after an abusive and unhappy marriage, repents of her former sins and realises her mistakes. Although we were originally positioned to dislike Estella and her vixenish qualities, we also sympathise with her struggles, and we see that through her experience, she breaks free of her upbringing and becomes someone more morally desirable. The audience can see that Estella, realising her vixenish qualities, has repented, and might eventually achieve the virtuous ideal.

Miss Havisham, with her single-minded pursuit of revenge against men, her selfishness and cruelty as she raises Estella to hurt others as she was hurt herself, is definitely not a likeable character. Her qualities, even more so than Estella's, is tied to the view on vixenish women, and not until the end of her life did she redeem herself, and our opinion of her, in any way. She realises that she has hurt Pip in the same way as herself, and finally sees how cruel she has been in her usage of people. Instead of getting revenge on the man who jilted her, she has only hurt others, and she begs Pip to forgive her. In this way, she gains the sympathy of the audience, and although she is still considered vixenish, she is viewed in slightly better light. Biddy, from the start to the end of the novel, has been blessed with qualities linked to the virtuous.

By the end of “ Great Expectations”, Dickens shows us that while one can be vixenish, contrition and sympathy can redeem someone, and that it is not impossible to become the virtuous woman.