

The characterisation of miss havisham in "great expectations" essay sample



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Miss Havisham is perhaps one of the most striking characters in Dickens' novel – “ Great Expectations”. She is a manipulative, bitter and twisted woman who is completely out of touch with the real world – and Dickens reinforces this by associating props, gestures and images to fix her character and nature in our minds. In an issue of ‘ The Saturday Review’ written July 20, 1981, Miss Havisham is described as ‘ one of Mr Dickens’ regular pieces of melodramatic exaggeration.’ – and it becomes clear why once we are introduced to her.

Dickens takes up a lot of space in his novel to describe characters, places and events in great detail. In describing one room in Satis House he uses half a page (page 81) to show what Pip can feel, smell and see:

‘ The daylight was completely excluded, and it had an airless smell that was oppressive... The reluctant smoke, which hung in the room, seemed colder than the clearer air... Wintry branches of candles on the high chimneypiece faintly troubled its darkness’.

Dickens achieves his goal of making the room seem dim and smothering by using words and phrases such as ‘ an airless smell that was oppressive’, ‘ reluctant smoke’, ‘ wintry branches of candles’ and ‘ faintly troubled its darkness’ This relates back to Miss Havisham’s desire to be an outcast from the real world, which she achieves by shutting herself up in dark dusty rooms.

We are first introduced to Miss Havisham through the eyes of the young Pip when he has been sent for to play with Estella. Of course, in the long run, Miss Havisham intends for Estella to break Pip's heart but at the time neither Pip nor ourselves knows this. We are first given a brief description of the room Pip enters and we are told there is 'no glimpse of daylight'. Pip says that his eyes are immediately drawn to a lady's dressing table and explains that this object was most prominent in the room because of the lady sitting at it, whom he goes on to describe as 'the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see'. From then on in the story we scrutinise everything Miss Havisham says or does because we have seen enough evidence by now to suggest that she is not overly normal.

However, before we even enter into the house, we are given an idea of what the resident of Satis House will be like because of the imagery used in the description of the garden and the house itself which Dickens describes as being 'made of old brick... dismal... [and having] a great many iron bars to it'. As for the garden, Dickens shows that it is clearly abandoned. He says the 'gates stood open away to the high enclosing wall' and 'all was empty and disused'. Words such as 'enclosing' reflect Miss Havisham's choice to hide herself away from the outside world. The same is true where the garden is described as being empty and disused which merely reinforces the idea that Miss Havisham refuses to set foot outside. Most description of Satis House either links directly to Miss Havisham herself, or is used as imagery showing how dark and empty her life is. There is a chance that Miss Havisham's character could have changed early on in the novel if she had not stayed locked up in Satis House with only her memories, thoughts and possessions

for company. The fact that she had nothing to do but dwell on her most destructive emotions contributes greatly to the fact that Miss Havisham's character does not change during the novel.

Pip doesn't say much about Miss Havisham's actual appearance and spends more time focusing on his surroundings, which is natural for a young boy. However, what we do hear about Miss Havisham only seems to make her seem older and somehow more intimidating or deranged. Pip says that 'the bride [Miss Havisham] within the bridal dress had withered like the dress', that she 'is waxwork and skeleton' and that she sat 'corpse-like' while he and Estella played cards. These points show the effect she is having not only on her mentality but also her appearance by refusing to move on with her life. Pip also says that he 'felt almost sure that Miss Havisham's face couldn't smile' and that she 'had the appearance of having dropped, body and soul'.

The fact that Pip narrates the story could mean that our viewpoint of Miss Havisham becomes biased. Pip is bound to find Miss Havisham puzzling when he first meets her because he is only a young boy. As he grows up and realises that Miss Havisham has been manipulating Estella, he isn't going to have any sympathy for Miss Havisham and will describe her as being even stranger because he has found out first hand how twisted she is. But is it really fair to say that she is twisted? Like I said, the fact that Pip has been manipulated by Miss Havisham will make him bitter towards her, therefore his viewpoint could be biased. Because we only ever hear Pip's opinions on her, we are never one hundred percent sure if Miss Havisham is really as crazy and twisted and she is made out to be.

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Out of all the characters in Dickens' novel, Estella and Pip are the two most affected by their encounters with Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham adopts Estella - she is actually Magwitch's daughter - and manipulates and uses her. She teaches Estella that she should break men's hearts - because Compeyson abandoned her on her wedding day - and takes advantage of her inability to feel emotions, particularly love. There is a possibility that Miss Havisham chose to adopt Estella over other orphans because she knew that her natural beauty would make more men fall in love with her. Miss Havisham says she 'stole her heart away and put ice in its place' when she is speaking to Pip just before she dies but she genuinely believes that by doing this she helped Estella because she goes on to say that she 'meant to save her from misery like her own'. Eventually Estella ends up with no feelings for others (which was what Miss Havisham intended in the first place) but also has no feelings or sense of respect for herself.

As for Pip, when he is a young boy, Miss Havisham sends for him to come and play at Satis House so that, from a young age, Pip will eventually fall in love with Estella. Pip continues to return to Satis House and one day he informs Miss Havisham that he wants to work as a blacksmith for his sister's husband, Joe Gargery. Pip has been looking forward to becoming Joe's apprentice and knew of no other lifestyles until he visited Satis House. Miss Havisham only allows Estella to fall in love with upper class Gentlemen and now that Pip has met Estella he is determined to stay close to her. Pip changes his mind about wanting to become a blacksmith immediately when Miss Havisham sends for Joe. However Miss Havisham has decided she does not wish Pip to visit again because she thinks that Estella should only break

the hearts of boys who are going to grow up to be gentlemen: "' Good-bye Pip!" said Miss Havisham... " Am I to come again, Miss Havisham?" I asked... " No. Gargery (Joe) is your master now.""

Pip returns home with Joe and grows up to be a blacksmith – but he always remembers his encounters with Miss Havisham and Estella. After a few years pass, Pip receives an invitation from an anonymous benefactor saying that they will pay for him to go to London to learn how to be a gentleman. He assumes that Miss Havisham is his benefactor and that she is paying for him to learn to be a gentleman because he intends him to be married to Estella. Pip thinks that the reason Estella doesn't love him, is that he is from a lower class than her. He doesn't realize that Estella has no say in the matter or that Miss Havisham is making her break his heart.

Miss Havisham's character does not really change throughout the novel. She dies just as she is beginning to see what she has done to herself and Estella. When Pip leaves the room from visiting her for the last time, he hears a scream and turns to find Miss Havisham covered in flames. We never find out whether this was accidental or a suicide. Miss Havisham could merely have tripped as she stood up and fallen into the fire, or she may have felt so bad about mutilating Estella and causing so much damage that she decided to kill herself. If it was an accident, there may have been a chance that Miss Havisham would have changed her ways there and then after talking with Pip. Then again, even if it was a planned death, it shows that Miss Havisham was feeling sorry for everything she has done which is a change from her former self, showing that her character did indeed change in the novel.

In conclusion, Miss Havisham does not have that many facets. She stays the same person the whole way through the novel and we never see a different side to her. Miss Havisham is a two-dimensional character but she is essential in the novel. Another possible reason why her character does not change is that it is the circumstances of her life that make the novel what it is. Dickens never goes into much detail about how she thinks and feels because it is essentially her being there that matters more in the plot of the story.