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“The Witch of the Place”: Miss Havisham’s Relationship to Victorian Spinsterhood in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* is a text that revolves around the idea that "expectations" may not always be what one believes them to be, and that that is a part of the human experience. Throughout the novel, narrator and central character Pip is met with a variety of these "expectations" in multiple different contexts and involving a variety of different people, each individual and experience teaching him something about what expectations truly signify and mean. One character that touches Pip's life in an extremely significant way and through multiple different channels is that of Miss Havisham, who he first interacts with early in the story. Miss Havisham is an older, wealthy woman who was left by her fiancé on her wedding day years before *Great Expectations* takes place, who lives her life in an attempted state of stopped time in her grand house. On paper, Miss Havisham seems to fall in line with the traditional Victorian "old maid" or "spinster" archetype, her oddity and eccentricity as a character leaving her firmly in this caricature-like place. However, upon further examination, Miss Havisham is anything but a one-note archetypal figure; her influence and power extends to nearly all corners of *Great Expectations*, making her an important, unique, and powerful figure in this story, despite her falling in line with some of the markers of the Victorian "spinster" idea. Miss Havisham both aligning with and firmly going against the concept of what an unmarried woman was meant to be in the Victorian period presents an interesting idea regarding the true nature and influence of unmarried women in Victorian society. In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham represents the stereotypical archetype of the Victorian spinster, while also defying the attitude of this stereotype, this dichotomy in her character reflecting a misunderstanding about the power and complexities of an unmarried woman in the Victorian landscape.

In the Victorian period, the spinster—or the unmarried woman—was a very unique figure in society. A spinster was considered a woman who was labeled as being above the typical age to

marry, with no real prospects of becoming married any time in the future. In the Victorian context, the spinster went against the idea of what was "naturally" supposed to happen in a woman's life when they reached a certain age—getting married, having children, and taking care of a family (Lepine 2). In this same vein, the women considered spinsters by society were also often associated with a stereotype of being "plain," isolated, and "unwomanly," but also as an almost "threat" to the ideal society woman because of the unfamiliarity and abnormality of the life of an unmarried woman (Lepine 2-3). Because of this, spinsters lived in an almost "limbo" in the Victorian world, being seen as an incorrect, and unnatural, "anomaly" in society, this figure of the spinster being unable to be placed in a proper Victorian box (Lepine 3).

In Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, the text's resident "spinster" figure lives in the elusive Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham, upon first glance, fits the description of this Victorian idea of a spinster—she is an eccentric, unmarried woman who was jilted at the altar, despises men, and lives her life very differently from the Victorian womanly ideal—however her character greatly extends beyond this narrow stereotype. As per the general Victorian definition of the term "spinster," these unmarried women were generally plain and kept to themselves; however, Miss Havisham directly goes against this idea of a "plain" person. In the text, upon Pip's initial meeting with Miss Havisham, he describes her as "being dressed in rich materials" that are entirely white and having a "long white veil" and "bridal flowers in her hair" in addition to this elaborate all white gown (57). In this description, Miss Havisham directly defies what an unmarried woman in the Victorian period is "meant" to appear as. The clothing she wears and the manner in which she appears in this instance is the very opposite of "plain" and unassuming, with her interesting wedding garb only making her stand out as the clear focal point in this scene. Also, she is dressed in what is arguably the type of clothing that is most directly associated with

femininity, the wedding dress, defying another element of this "spinster" archetype: the assumption that spinsters are "unwomanly." These physical descriptions of Miss Havisham illustrate that her role in *Great Expectations* is to, at least partially, defy "expectations" of what an unmarried Victorian woman is, her character even in a physical sense going against the Victorian paradigm of a "spinster." This clear deviation from the image of the Victorian spinster ties into the idea that referring to Miss Havisham as a "spinster" as opposed to a "single woman" or an "unmarried woman," would be incorrect, despite her status in life technically fitting into the stereotypical Victorian definition of what a spinster is.

Despite these ways in which this introduction to Miss Havisham displays her as going against the "spinster" stereotype, other ways she is described in this very same introductory scene paint her as being precisely what this "spinster" figure is meant to represent. In contrast with these striking descriptions that make Miss Havisham stand out in this scene's context, she is also described as being in a room in which "no glimpse of daylight was to be seen," and that she appeared to be "shrunk to skin and bone" with "sunken eyes" appearing like "waxwork and skeleton" to the eye (57-58). Here, in this very same instance when Pip describes Miss Havisham to be so striking and singular, he also describes her in this way, as an almost faded figure that has become blended into the place in which she resides. This description of a "shrunk" woman with "sunken eyes" goes along with the Victorian imagination's idea of a spinster, tying into the idea of the "spinster" being "past her prime," these physical descriptors aligning with the Victorian mind's idea of what could happen to an unmarried woman due to her not fulfilling what she was meant to do—get married. Additionally, Miss Havisham's residing in a room with "no glimpse of daylight," and even the general description of Miss Havisham being stagnant, alone in a room in a house which she never leaves ties directly into the isolation element of the Victorian spinster

archetype. All of these descriptions of Miss Havisham leave the reader to believe that she lives in an isolated existence as an almost time capsule-esque oddity, thus serving as an extreme representation of the isolated anomaly that is the unmarried Victorian woman.

This dichotomy and confusion that occurs for both Pip and the reader upon meeting Miss Havisham for the first time—her in this introductory scene both directly going against and implicitly representing the Victorian imagination's idea of an unmarried woman—reflect on the general and misunderstood power and influence had by these unmarried women. Miss Havisham's conflicted existence reveals that it is possible for a Victorian woman who is seemingly old, "shrunk," and "sunken," to also spark intimidation, become a spectacle, and wield a powerful presence, just as Miss Havisham does for Pip. Despite her dilapidated appearance and dark, isolated living quarters, Miss Havisham is a character whom both Pip and the reader cannot look away from, displaying that women who are of this seemingly weak and unideal unmarried status can be paired with an immense presence displaying how the Victorian spinster was more complex and interesting than society wanted people to believe that she was. This intentional juxtaposition of Miss Havisham as both representative of and directly against the created idea of the "spinster" in Victorian society exhibits that these unmarried women were not a homogenous group that lived against the societal ideal, but were complex figures who held a social power of their own.

The description of Miss Havisham upon her introduction is not the only instance in which this dichotomy in Miss Havisham's character is present in the text. Even early in its existence in the novel, Miss Havisham's relationship with Estella—her adopted daughter—is also indicative of this conflicted nature of her character and, therefore, of the complex nature of the power held by unmarried women. When Pip first comes to Miss Havisham's house, he soon narrates a scene

of Miss Havisham having Estella play cards with him, and this scene is also the first time that Pip discusses the dynamic between Estella and Miss Havisham. When Miss Havisham tells Estella that she must play cards with Pip, she tells Estella that she "can break his heart," revealing early on her "training" of Estella to hurt and hate men (60). Similarly, a short time later in the story, when Pip's visits to Miss Havisham's house have become regular, Miss Havisham praises Estella's nastiness, saying to her, "break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy," (95).

In these instances of Miss Havisham praising Estella for treating Pip horribly and encouraging her to do so even further Miss Havisham again both represents and directly defies the idea of a Victorian "spinster." In her behavior indicative of hating men, the telling of Estella to break Pip's, and implicitly, other men's hearts, Miss Havisham goes along with this Victorian idea of the unmarried woman being someone who is an oddity living and believing against the typical Victorian way. Victorian society as a whole was a realm that gave men extreme power, and expected women to accept that men held this power. Here, Miss Havisham tells Estella to take this power away from men she interacts with, essentially teaching her to go against this Victorian ideal. This direct going against typical Victorian "womanly" behavior that Miss Havisham displays should place her under the umbrella of the imaginary Victorian "spinster," her behavior following suit with what this idea asserts about the attitude and way of being of unmarried women.

However, this relationship that Miss Havisham has with Estella, specifically this training her to manipulate men and being successful in this tutelage, also goes against expectations and beliefs about the capabilities of single Victorian women. Despite Miss Havisham's attitude regarding men going against the ideal of a Victorian woman's behavior falling in line with

Victorian society's thoughts about "spinsters," her successful execution of teaching Estella how to wield manipulative power over men goes against what was assumed about the Victorian single woman. Though Miss Havisham's teaching Estella to be cruel, manipulative, and hateful towards the men that she meets is morally unideal, she is very successful in this teaching, allowing both herself and Estella to hold immense dominance, power, and agency in social interactions, something that could not be said for many of the women of the Victorian period. Unmarried women were often considered to be in a "weak" social position, and therefore, "weak" in general, due to their marital status, but here, Miss Havisham directly goes against this idea, her ability to wield power in social situations as well as her success at teaching her adopted child to do so displaying this. Miss Havisham ensures that Estella will never be viewed as weak, just as she has made sure that she herself is never perceived in such a way. This intentional taking of power by Miss Havisham for both herself and Estella is always understood by those around them, as is seen in Pip in this scene, this constant holding of social power operating directly against the idea that the unmarried Victorian woman was an inherently "weak" figure.

This relationship that Miss Havisham has created with Estella is again indicative of an extreme dichotomy in her character. Again, by simultaneously fitting into and defying a stereotype surrounding the unmarried Victorian woman, Miss Havisham's character demonstrates that this figure of the single woman in Victorian society was not simply an archetype, but representative of a complex sect of Victorian personhood that was not so defined by societal ideas as they were thought to be. Miss Havisham's character holding such palpable social power and influence, while also fitting into some aspects of the "spinster" stereotype at the same time, reveals that Victorian single women could not truly be placed in a single social

category and that they were nuanced figures with their own unique sets of complexities, who also had the ability to hold serious power, despite their marital status.

Additionally, Miss Havisham's relationship to money and the power it holds in this story also reflects upon her difference from the idea of the Victorian "spinster," again representing the complexity of the unmarried Victorian woman. Around the time that Pip finds out from Mr. Jaggers that he has inherited money and will go to London to become a gentleman, Sarah Pocket, one of Miss Havisham's relatives, visits her home. Pip happens to come to her house at the same time to inform her of the fortune he has suddenly inherited, and in response to Pip, Miss Havisham asks him questions regarding this mysterious inheritance, saying that "[*she* had] heard about" this great fortune in Pip's life (157). This interrogation of Pip by Miss Havisham in this scene is accompanied by Pip's descriptions that, during this questioning of him, Miss Havisham "gloated on these questions and answers" and that "so keen was her enjoyment of Sarah Pocket's jealous dismay" at finding out about Pip's great inheritance (158). Also in this instance, when Pip enters Miss Havisham's house, he states that he suspects Miss Havisham of being his mysterious benefactor—or benefactress—saying that her behavior towards him was akin to if "the fairy godmother who had changed [him], was bestowing the finishing gift." (157).

This instance involving Miss Havisham's role in Pip's fortune is a particularly complicated element in terms of Miss Havisham as fitting or not fitting into the stereotype of the unmarried woman. Here, the behavior that Miss Havisham exhibits, as is noted by Pip in the narrative, is very spiteful and even intentionally nasty in some ways, Miss Havisham literally taking pleasure in seeing another person, Sarah Pocket in this case, being visibly jealous and put off by a situation. This "gloating" and "enjoyment" by Miss Havisham in this situation reflects a sense of pride on Miss Havisham's part, this pridefulness tying into the idea of the unmarried

Victorian woman having a penchant for “unwomanly” or “unladylike” behavior. Even the fact that Miss Havisham continually questions and interrogates Pip regarding his fortune ties into this, this directness and blunt questioning also falling under the category of “unwomanly” behavior that a “spinster” may be expected to execute. This consistent display of Miss Havisham acting in a way starkly different than a “good”—and most likely married—Victorian woman would seemingly places her underneath the stereotypical umbrella of spinster-like behavior, her way of being in this scene satisfying the Victorian idea regarding an unmarried woman’s behavior.

Despite this, however, there is one major, glaring element of this scene’s conversation that reflects Miss Havisham as being far and away from the expectations of an unmarried Victorian woman: the fact that she has an incredible amount of money and that she is the person who everyone else involved in this scene thinks gave Pip his fortune. In the context of this interaction between Miss Havisham, Pip, and Sarah Pocket, it is heavily implied in the text that the reason why Sarah Pocket is so jealous here is because she is made to believe that Miss Havisham gave Pip a fortune, as opposed to herself, seeing as she is one of Miss Havisham’s blood relatives. Additionally, Pip clearly states that she believes Miss Havisham to be his benefactor, his note about her being his “fairy godmother” giving him a “finishing gift,” confirming this.

In the Victorian context, a respectable marriage was considered the key way for a woman to establish financial stability in her life, this financial element being one of the key reasons why marriage was considered so incredibly important for Victorian women (Haskell 23). Miss Havisham, both in this scene and in *Great Expectations* as a whole, is the figure most directly associated with clear wealth and financial stability, and, as is made abundantly clear in the text,

she is far from a married woman, all of her money truly belonging to her, and not a husband figure. This direct association between Miss Havisham, wealth, and financial stability displays her as operating starkly against the Victorian idea of the unmarried woman, whose "weak" social position was often associated with a lack of financial stability (Levine 168-169). Miss Havisham's awareness of and delightedness in her own wealth is also very telling; she knows that both Pip and Sarah Pocket believe that she is the one who gave Pip the money, reflecting again the true power and importance of her independent wealth to her character. This extreme association by the other characters, as well as herself, of Miss Havisham with having great wealth and financial stability posits her in an entirely different category than that of the Victorian "spinster."

This exceptionally complicated relationship that Miss Havisham has with money, as well as her attitude regarding this relationship, places further importance on her role as a character representative of the deep social complexities of the unmarried Victorian woman. Though her attitude and approach to this situation mirrors that of what might be expected of a "spinster" in the Victorian context, her role in this situation being what it is, the one with all of the financial power, would be impossible if she truly aligned with this stereotype. This extreme sense of financial power that Miss Havisham has in this situation, while still possessing what could be considered an "unwomanly" attitude regarding this power she holds here, reflects that this singular Victorian idea of what an unmarried woman or "spinster" is does not really encompass the personhood and nuance of who unmarried Victorian women really were. Miss Havisham's existence in this text being so contradictory is meant to represent this idea, her complex character exemplifying that unmarried Victorian women were not a common collective of individuals dealt the card of social weakness, but individuals who could hold power in their own fashion.

Another important element of the text that displays the complexities in Miss Havisham's character is her role in the lives of and interactions with the adult versions of Pip and Estella, in which her effect and influence on their lives becomes even more apparent. Following Pip's becoming a gentleman in London, he returns to Miss Havisham's house due to Estella's visiting there, after Estella asks him to accompany her, per Miss Havisham's request. During this time, Miss Havisham expresses distaste for Estella's feelings towards her, with Estella then discussing why she has become that way. Estella tells Miss Havisham "I am what you have made me," in regard to her own cold nature, and further asks her "Who taught me to be proud?" and "Who taught me to be hard?" (304-305). In a similar vein, a short time later in the novel, the effect of the way in which Miss Havisham raised Estella comes up again, this time with Miss Havisham's regret at the forefront of this outcome. After Pip asks Miss Havisham if Estella has married Bentley Drummle, a man she does not care for in the slightest, she cries out "over and over again," saying "What have I done! What have I done!" displaying her regret in how she chose to raise Estella (398).

Here, an interesting idea surrounding the long-term effects of Miss Havisham's raising of Estella, as well as her own reactions to this effect, is presented. Miss Havisham's great regret when she sees how her ways have affected Estella, in a more abstract sense, tie into a portion of the Victorian "spinster" paradigm: that women who remain unmarried will essentially remain alone or "isolated" due to their deviation from what they are "meant" to do. With Miss Havisham's repeated "What have I done," the reader can almost see Miss Havisham forced to face her life choices, with this ending in deep regret. Miss Havisham's teaching of Estella to be cold and unloving result in Estella being incapable of loving or being warm towards anyone, including Miss Havisham, and this realization that her own adopted daughter is essentially

incapable of loving her, due to her own choices and actions, places Miss Havisham further into this world of isolation. This dynamic between Miss Havisham and Estella does not only reflect upon Estella's character and the consequences she faces due to the way she was raised to be, but also reveals that Miss Havisham does not truly have anybody to rely on and to truly care for her. This isolated state that Miss Havisham lives in, due to her own life choices, aligns with the idea that unmarried women in the Victorian period lived isolated, singular lives, whether they liked it or not, displaying how Miss Havisham fit into the Victorian spinster stereotype here.

Although this isolation and loneliness that Miss Havisham is forced to face in her relationship with adult Estella, the fact that her tutelage had such a lasting power in Estella's life and way of being goes against this stereotype. Despite Estella's coldness and inability to love anyone leaving Miss Havisham in an extremely isolated existence, this effect of how she was raised being so strong ties into Miss Havisham operating against what was expected for an unmarried woman in the Victorian period. As is seen in other areas, Miss Havisham is an extremely powerful figure in *Great Expectations*, and this extreme effect over Estella's entire personality and manner of being is perhaps the most direct and extreme manifestation of this power within the novel. Simply due to Miss Havisham's great influence over her, Estella has literally lost the ability to love other people, even into her adulthood, with Estella being clearly aware that it is Miss Havisham's doing that she is the way she is. This displays the sheer power and influence that Miss Havisham possesses, and this level of power being held by an unmarried woman goes entirely against the idea of Victorian "spinsters" lacking social power and influence. If unmarried Victorian women truly lacked power and served as "weak" figures due to their marital status, Miss Havisham never would have been able to influence Estella the way that she did, again displaying her as against the Victorian spinster stereotype.

Again, this dichotomy in Miss Havisham's character involving her relationship with the adult version of Estella, as well as how she feels about this relationship, is indicative of Miss Havisham's purpose in this story being meant to represent the complicated nature of the unmarried Victorian woman. Miss Havisham simultaneously representing an extreme sense of social power and influence as well as an isolated existence as a result of one's life choices illuminates the great nuance and complexity of the unmarried Victorian woman. This paradox between Miss Havisham's social isolation and social influence further reinforces that the singular definition of a Victorian "spinster" does not truly encompass the complicated human nature of these women's lives. Here, Miss Havisham displays that attempting to place an entire group of individuals into one box of character traits with an extreme lack of nuance does not truly embody who they are as people. This contradiction in Miss Havisham's character between fitting into and completely differing from her fictionalized societal "archetype" highlights that single Victorian women could not accurately be grouped into a singular category, and far more complex, influential, and multi-dimensional as people than their society perceived them to be.

The character of Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* presents the dichotomy of both being representative of and directly going against the archetypal idea of the Victorian spinster. Throughout the various instances in the novel in which she is the focus, Miss Havisham simultaneously acts in line with and starkly differs from the behavior of a Victorian "spinster," her actions and words presenting nuance and complexity that was not afforded to the fictional Victorian creation of the "spinster." This complicated nature that Miss Havisham contains in *Great Expectations* not only allows the reader to see that unmarried Victorian women held much more social power than their own society believed them to have, but opens up an interesting alternative reading of this text and what it ultimately means.

Victorian literature is something often associated with placing its women characters into specific tropes or archetypes, and looking at this literature through lenses that find nuances in these women characters is an important aspect of reading Victorian literature. *Great Expectations* is a novel that is deeply associated with maleness, specifically due to the narrative perspective and clear central character being Pip, who transforms from a boy into a man within the story, but this novel's meaning is not exclusive to that of the male coming of age. This text is not just about Pip's growth and development, but about the idea that one's initial "expectations," in an abstract sense, are not always the correct or best path. Miss Havisham's complexity in the context of Victorian single-womanhood is exemplary of this concept, her not being able to be firmly placed in a single, stereotypical category reflecting this. Miss Havisham being so complicated and even contradictory as a character is meant to defy these "expectations" surrounding what might be expected of an unmarried woman in the context of a Victorian novel. In reading *Great Expectations* through this lens of Miss Havisham representing a misunderstanding of what power and complexity unmarried Victorian women were capable of possessing, one can better understand this novel as symbolic of the idea that Victorian categorizations of personhood based around singular "archetypes," are sets of "expectations" meant to be defied, not just as a story of a boy's personal growth as he reaches adulthood.

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