

Miss Havisham:

The Skeleton in The House

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From 1860 to 1861, Charles Dickens published his novel, *Great Expectations* in *All The Year Round*, an English newspaper.<sup>1</sup> *Great Expectations* has since been widely read as a novel that brought attention to the struggles of those living during the Victorian era. Dickens was highly critical of the class system and large wealth gap of the time. However, Dickens also seemed highly critical of women who did not fit in their expected role as the “angel in the house.” In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens often portrays women who do not fit into this mold in a negative light. Most of the female characters, such as Mrs. Joe, Mrs. Pocket, Estella, and Miss Havisham, are women who are not nurturing or maternal. However, Miss Havisham in particular stands out as a troubled and dark character who wishes to take revenge on all men. Miss Havisham seems to represent the antithesis of the “angel of the house,” and therefore Dickens utilizes gothic elements surrounding Miss Havisham to further dramatize and bring attention to this point.

Before we move forward, we must establish what the “angel in the house” role was during this time and why Miss Havisham does not fit this narrative. Following the viewpoint of Queen Victoria, many English citizens believed that a woman’s place was subordinate to their husband and their place within the private sphere was “divinely willed.”<sup>2</sup> Anyone who chose to engage within the public sphere outside of the home and without the direction of their husbands were then considered to be going against the will of God. Women then were seen as an “angel in the house.” This term comes from Coventry Patmore’s poem, *The Angel in the House*, which reflected the common belief of women’s expected nature and role within society.<sup>3</sup> John Ruskin shared the beliefs portrayed in this poem, saying, “the powers of a ‘true wife’... made the home a ‘sacred place.’”<sup>4</sup> These women therefore were expected to hold characteristics such as, “tenderness of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), LIV-LV.

<sup>2</sup> “The ‘Woman Questions,’” in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature; The Victorian Age*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2018), 654

<sup>3</sup> Coventry Patmore, “From The Angel in the House” in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature; The Victorian Age*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2018), 659

<sup>4</sup> “The ‘Woman Question,’” 654

understanding, unworldliness and innocence, domestic affection, and in various degrees, submissiveness.”<sup>5</sup> However, there was some debate over this viewpoint. For example, some writers that opposed this included Mary Wollstonecraft, Mona Caird, and John Stuart Mill. Charles Dickens, on the other hand, displays in his novels that it is better for women to remain in the private sphere and fulfil a nurturing, maternal role.<sup>6</sup> As pointed out by Curt Hartog, Dickens seems to require his women characters to love their family in a way that is “protective, selfless, and self-sacrificing.”<sup>7</sup> For example, Biddy, the only positively portrayed main female character in *Great Expectations*, holds these characteristics and is seen as an almost savior for Joe. However, women characters who are not self-sacrificing in this way are seen as villainous and unruly.

As stated previously, Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* does not fit the model of an “angel in the house” that is expected of women. She is a woman who lives in seclusion and instead of fulfilling her nurturing role as a mother for Estella, has aimed to make her the vehicle of her revenge. Sharon Marcus mentions in “The Narrator’s Shame: Masculine Identity in *Great Expectations*” that “Miss Havisham... fails to model maternal behavior, and instead perverts it, ‘damaging Estella.’”<sup>8</sup> Charles Dickens then utilizes gothic elements, especially that of the uncanny, in order to draw more attention to her as a woman who is out of control and to highlight the flaws of her nature. These gothic elements then portray her as the antithesis of the “angel in the house.”

One gothic element that Charles Dickens utilizes in Miss Havisham’s character and environment is “the uncanny.” Following Sigmund Freud’s definition in “The Uncanny,” the uncanny is defined as “all that is terrible... to all that arouses dread and creeping horror... it tends

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Curt Hartog, “The Rape of Miss Havisham,” in *Studies in the Novel*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1982) 248

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Sell, “The Narrator’s Shame: Masculine Identity in *Great Expectations*,” in *Dickens Studies Annual*, (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1998) 246

to coincide with whatever excites dread.”<sup>9</sup> Freud then goes on to discuss the origins of this feeling. In literature, the reader experiences the uncanny if the character in which we are viewing the story from is experiencing these emotions. Factors such as silence, solitude, and darkness also evoke feelings of the uncanny since they tend to evoke “that infantile morbid anxiety.”<sup>10</sup>

Pip certainly experiences these emotions, inevitably also evoking the same emotion in us as readers. We can see this especially in Chapter VIII when Pip meets Miss Havisham for the first time. As Pip enters into Miss Havisham’s house, he notices the darkness and solitude of the mansion. Pip describes the house as “dismal,” once he notices the old brick and rusty bars in the courtyard and on every window. He also noticed how grass is growing from “every crevice” and the brewery on the side of the house looks to have been unused for a long time.<sup>11</sup> Taking all this in, he noticed how, “The cold wind seemed to blow colder there, than outside the gate; and it made a shrill noise in howling in and out at the open sides of the brewery.”<sup>12</sup> The bars that he also notices alludes to the idea that this mansion is almost like a prison. We then wonder if the bars are meant to keep others out, or Miss Havisham in. The overgrown grass also shows that there are not very many people coming in and out of the house. Then, the large brewery portrays the idea that there once was a lot of life in the house, but not anymore. This environment that Miss Havisham is in creates the feeling of the uncanny in Pip, and therefore us as well. The environment portrayed here all shows abandonment and the solitude of Miss Havisham, which creates that “morbid anxiety” in Pip that is seen in the way that he describes the cold and shrill sounding wind. The environment from inside the house also contains dark elements that evoke the uncanny. Pip narrates that, “the first thing I noticed was, that the passages were all dark, and we went through more passages and

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<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology) 1

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19-20

<sup>11</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 50

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 51

up a staircase, and it was still dark, and only the candle lighted us.”<sup>13</sup> After Estella walks away, leaving Pip in the dark hallway, he says, “This was very uncomfortable, and I was half afraid.”<sup>14</sup> The dark environment and the solitude of Miss Havisham’s house portrays the uncanny by the dread and morbidity that Pip experiences. This feeling is the exact opposite of the environment that is meant to be created by the “angel in the house.” While the perfect wife is meant to create a home that is welcoming, calming, and a “sacred place,”<sup>15</sup> Miss Havisham creates one of seclusion, horror and darkness.

Within *Great Expectations*, we also see the use of supernatural elements surrounding Miss Havisham, which further adds to this feeling of the uncanny. Instead of being viewed as an “angel in the house,” Miss Havisham is described often as a “living corpse,” because of the way she has chosen to dwell on the past. When Pip first meets her, he compares her to “ghastly waxwork” he had once seen at the fair and a skeleton that was dug out of a vault at the church.<sup>16</sup> He thinks, “Now, wax-work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.”<sup>17</sup> Because of this feeling of horror evoked in Pip, he avoids her eyes. However, he still notices her bridal clothes that has decayed with her. Pip then notes that, “not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud.”<sup>18</sup> While bridal clothes normally mark a person stepping into a new life, in this novel, it portrays the idea of stepping into a grave. Miss Havisham is a visual representation of someone who has already died yet continues to breath and move as a living person. This phenomenon seems to defy the laws of nature, since her body continues to live after her soul has died. This imagery of Miss Havisham then causes the reader to see her as the complete

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>15</sup> “The ‘Woman Question,’” 654

<sup>16</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 52-53

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 55

antithesis of “the angel in the house,” and instead a “skeleton in the house.” This imagery therefore further brings attention to the fallen nature of Miss Havisham and how she is not a woman who chooses to conform to the societal role expected of her.

The way in which Miss Havisham is surrounded by supernatural elements also further evokes the feeling of the uncanny. This is especially seen when Pip revisits her after living in London. Miss Havisham wishes Pip to fall in love with Estella, even though Estella does not love him. As Miss Havisham is questioning Pip on if he loves her, she chants, “Love her, love her, love her! How does she use you?”<sup>19</sup> She does not simply do this once, but multiple times saying, “Love her, love her, love her! If she favours you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces – and as it gets older and stronger, it will tear deeper – love her, love her, love her!”<sup>20</sup> She then repeats this several other times. The constant repetition of this statement is extremely unorthodox, sounding like a spell she is trying to put on Pip. He even notes that “it could not have sounded from her lips more like a curse” in the tone of a “hurried passionate whisper.”<sup>21</sup> Later, as Pip is trying to fall asleep, he repeats the phrase over and over in his mind. Eventually he begins thinking, “‘I love her, I love her, I love her’ hundreds of times. Then, a burst of gratitude came upon me, that she should be destined for me.”<sup>22</sup> This instance is where it seems as if Pip is overcome by this “curse” set by Miss Havisham. Before this, he had a simple crush on Estella, but here he becomes even more set and determined in his feelings for her and that he will marry her, despite the fact that he has been given no inclination from Estella of this. Later, in Chapter forty-nine, Miss Havisham seems to almost admit to putting a spell on Pip. As Pip is visiting her after Estella is married, she sees how unhappy he is and she falls to her hands and knees stating, “What have I done! What have I done!” continually.<sup>23</sup> Miss Havisham feels guilty for having any hand in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 219

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 223

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 364-365

Pip's unhappiness; however, she speaks as if she had full control over Pip's emotions regarding Estella. This even furthers the point that Miss Havisham is not an "angel in the house." As is described in "The Angel in the House" by Coventry Patmore, a woman should "teach how noble man should be / ...till both shall soar / With blissful emulations."<sup>24</sup> Through Pip, we see how Miss Havisham does not foster virtue and happiness in those around her. Instead, she leads him into heartbreak and emotional turmoil throughout the novel.

Aside from the spell Miss Havisham seems to place over Pip, he still seems to have a supernatural connection to her. After leaving Miss Havisham when she tries apologizing for making Pip love Estella, he is walking in the garden at Satis House. All of a sudden, he is overcome by "A childish association... and I fancied that I saw Miss Havisham hanging to the beam. So strong was the impression, that I stood under the beam shuddering from head to foot before I knew it was a fancy – though to be sure I was there in an instant."<sup>25</sup> Once Pip reaches Miss Havisham's room, he finds her as she is catching her dress on fire. Here, Pip seems to have had a vision that predicted Miss Havisham is gravely injured.<sup>26</sup> Later, as Pip is having a fever dream, he even hallucinates that Miss Havisham is "talking, laughing, and groaning" and being burned in the furnace in his room.<sup>27</sup> When he discovers that she has died, it seems as if Miss Havisham had appeared to him as a ghost, maintaining that supernatural connection with Pip. Surrounding Miss Havisham's death, instead of appearing to him as an angel, she appears to him as the opposite, a ghost. This blurs the line between Miss Havisham's life and death and further adds to her uncanny, anxiety-inducing, and supernatural nature.

Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations* utilizes gothic elements, such as the uncanny and supernatural, surrounding Miss Havisham's character to portray her as the antithesis of "the angel

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<sup>24</sup> Coventry Patmore, "From The Angel in the House," 43-48

<sup>25</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 367

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 367-368

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 421

in the house.” The gothic dramatized Miss Havisham and called attention to the danger of a woman who is not submissive or nurturing. This then leads to a woman who does not conform to social expectations and becomes completely ruled by emotion and loses all sense of reason. This further shows us how Dickens was critical of not only social class, but gender roles as well. He aimed to show the struggles of the lower class and the upper class and how there must be change in order to allow society to flourish. However, his portrayal of women showed how he wished traditional gender roles to remain the same and for women to fulfill their maternal role in the private sphere. This therefore begs us to question how we analyze the role that gender plays within his novels.



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