

## An Analysis of Miss Havisham from Feminist Criticism

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**Abstract:** Miss Havisham is one of the special characters in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. She is mad and cruel. However, she actually is a victim under the male center society. This thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of Miss Havisham from Feminist Criticism. In this paper, this tragic character will be analyzed her marriage and family under the male center society from feminist criticism. In this way, we can have an objective and all round understanding of this image.

### 1. Introduction

Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* is the most memorable and vivid creation. Through the portrayal of Miss Havisham, Dickens shows us the female's position and fate in the Victorian England under the male centered society. In Victorian Age, the most agreeable female image should be the "Angel in the house", which means women should be feminine, loyal, virtuous and pure. They were subject to man and needed the protection of man. For women, their husbands and family mean the whole thing in their life and they had no voice in the family. Although Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* has some differences on this point, she is still affected by the traditional image. In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham and her strange dress, life style and behavior attract the readers greatly. Most people regard her as a hateful person. However, she is a tragic person worthy of sympathy. In this paper, this tragic character will be analyzed from feminist criticism. In this way, we can have an objective and all round understanding of this image.

### 2. Literature Review

What does make Miss Havisham become a tragic person? As Tang Wangxia says, the reasons of this tragic character are the society, family and Miss Havisham herself.<sup>[1]</sup> Similarly, a kind of view is that her revenge to man is reasonable. Actually she is a victim of complex forces. These forces not only come from her family, but also come from the bourgeois society.<sup>[2]</sup> Cao Huan analyzes Miss Havisham from Fatalism, which is the thought of predestination. Her subversion of the role of women and men is in violation of the Victorian women's standards, therefore, is bound to result in failure.<sup>[3]</sup> However, in this paper, this tragic character will be analyzed from feminism criticism.

### 3. Feminist Criticism

Feminism incorporates both a doctrine of equal rights for women and an ideology of transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equality. In general, feminism is the ideology of women's liberation based on the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex. Under this broad umbrella various feminism offer differing analyses of the causes, or agents, of female oppression. Definitions of feminism by feminist tend to be shaped by their training, ideology or race. For example, Marxist and Socialist feminists stress the interaction within feminism of class with gender and focus on social distinctions between men and women.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says: "The quarrel will go on as long as men and women fail to recognise each other as equals." "We have seen why men enslaved women in the first place; the devaluation of femininity has been a necessary step in human evolution, but it might have led to collaboration between the two sexes; oppression is to be explained by the tendency of the existent to flee from himself by means of identification with the other, whom he oppresses to

that end. In each individual man that tendency exists today; and the vast majority yield to it.”<sup>[5]</sup>

#### **4. Analysis Miss Havisham from Feminist Criticism**

##### **4.1 Miss Havisham's Dream of Marriage under the Male Centered Society**

In Victorian Age, the ideal women's image should be the “Angel in the house”, which means women should be feminine, loyal, virtuous and pure. They were subject to man and needed the protection of man. For women, their husbands and family mean the whole thing in their life and they had no voice in the family.

However, Miss Hvaisham was born rich and had the right to inherit a large fortune from her wealthy father. As a rich heiress, she was too proud and vain and thus fell into her half-brother's clever scheme of getting her money. The half-brother and Compeyson conspired and then Compeyson suddenly in Miss Havisham's eye became an ideal person to marry. On the scheduled wedding day, everything was in order but the presence of the bridegroom. Later a letter came to Miss Havisham to jilt her. Her fiancé was a showy man, who is ‘the breaker of Miss Havisham's heart’. He met with Miss Havisham intentionally. On the one hand, he pretends to be obedient and ambitious. On the other hand, he does not really love Miss Havisham. The only thing that interests him is her wealth. Therefore, he pursues Miss Havisham closely and professes to be devoted to her. “He practiced on her affection in that systematic way, that he got great sums of money from her”<sup>[6]</sup>  
<sup>[P.159]</sup> When all the things he wants to get come to his hand, he deserts her immediately. He is merciless and gives Miss Havisham the heaviest blow that makes Miss Havisham mad and cruel. He chooses the deserting day intentionally: the wedding day is fixed, the wedding dresses are bought, the wedding tour is planned out, and the wedding guests are invited. All the things develop smoothly. Miss Havisham is deeply indulged in the happy moment when her loved man and she marry. Just when she is dressing for her marriage, a letter comes instead of the bridegroom. She is deserted. The news completely breaks Miss Havisham's spiritual foundation. Love is the best present for a young girl and marriage is the happiest time in a girl's life. However, Miss Havisham loses both of them without any warning or time to make precaution. On the one hand, the man she used to believe and used to give her wealth proves to be a swindler. On the other hand, the guests are invited. That's the greatest shame to her. She must live in other's despise and rumors. Neither of the two parts is acceptable to Miss Havisham. So she stops all her action, remains in her unfinished dressing and begins her revenge. In this sense, Miss Havisham's fiancé Compeyson is the person who distorts her most.

As a representation of the male centered society, Miss Havisham's fiancé gives her the heaviest blow.

##### **4.2 Miss Havisham's Family under the Male Centered Society**

Family also plays a pivotal role in *Great Expectations*, Biddy and Joe's warm and harmony family, Wemmick's castle away from the noise of secular and Matthew's family. Compared with the dark and deserted Satis House of Miss Havisham, this has highlighted Miss Havisham's sad fate.

It is clear that Miss Havisham is born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She is spoiled by her parents. Since her mother died when she was quite young, her father denies her nothing. In this way, she lives in a rich family and is spoiled, which makes her very proud from her childhood. However, the rich family and her proud character do not benefit her. Her father seems to be a gentleman, but he secretly marries his cook and has a son. This is sharply in contrast to his gentle figure. As to Miss Havisham's half-brother, he is ‘riotous, extravagant, undutiful- altogether bad’. Therefore, Mr. Havisham disinherits him and gives his wealth to his daughter Miss Havisham. Although when Mr. Havisham is dying, he is softened and leaves his son part of the wealth to enable him to be off, it is far less than what Miss Havisham gets. As a result, ‘he cherished a deep and mortal grudge against her, as having influenced the father's anger’.<sup>[6]</sup><sup>[P.158]</sup> But her father is not a good example. He pretends to be gentle, but actually does the things immorally. As to her brother, there is no fraternal

love between them. The only thing is wealth. It is wealth that makes him help Compeyson rather than his sister. In this way, Miss Havisham loses the support from her family. She is totally isolated. When the blow comes, there is no consolation, but merciless betrayal. It is also a torture to her.

## **5. Conclusion**

Through the analysis, marriage and family of Miss Havisham reveal the weak position of women. As a representation of the male centered society, Miss Havisham's fiancé gives her the heaviest blow. What's more, Miss Havisham loses the support from her family. She is totally isolated. When the blow comes, there is no consolation, but merciless betrayal. It is also a torture to her.

Of course, Miss Havisham's personality is also a reason of her tragedy. But her eccentric personality is caused by the male center society.

From this paper, it tells that in the male centered society , women should be self-respective, self-confident, self-reliant and self-developed; otherwise women would be in the subordinate status forever , or even suffer from self - deconstruction.

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