

Excerpt II from *Great Expectations*

In this passage, Pip is introduced to Miss Havisham, a strange, reclusive upper-class woman who has taken an interest in Pip for reasons that are still unclear at this point in the novel. A haughty girl named Estella, who is of about the same age as Pip, guides him to Miss Havisham's chamber and leaves him alone in the darkness outside her door.

This was very uncomfortable, and I was half afraid. However, the only thing to be done being to knock at the door, I knocked, and was told from within to enter. I entered, therefore, and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles. No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. It was a dressing-room, as I supposed from the furniture, though much of it was of forms and uses then quite unknown to me. But prominent in it was a draped table with a gilded looking-glass, and that I made out at first sight to be a fine lady's dressing-table.

Whether I should have made out this object so soon, if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see.

She was dressed in rich materials—satins, and lace, and silks—all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on—the other was on the table near her hand—her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a prayer-book, all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass.

It was not in the first few moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed. But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its luster, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state¹. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under

¹ in state dressed elaborately, as when prepared for burial.

the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.

55 “Who is it?” said the lady at the table.

“Pip, ma’am.”

“Pip?”

“Mr. Pumblechook’s boy, ma’am. Come—to play.”

60 “Come nearer; let me look at you. Come close.”

It was when I stood before her, avoiding her eyes, that I took note of the surrounding objects in detail, and saw that her watch had stopped at twenty minutes to nine, and that a clock in the room had stopped at twenty minutes to nine.

“Look at me,” said Miss Havisham. “You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?”

70 I regret to state that I was not afraid of telling the enormous lie comprehended in the answer “No.”

“Do you know what I touch here?” she said, laying her hands, one upon the other, on her left side.

75 “Yes, ma’am.” (It made me think of the young man².)

“What do I touch?”

“Your heart.”

“Broken!”

80 She uttered the word with an eager look, and with strong emphasis, and with a weird smile that had a kind of boast in it. Afterwards, she kept her hands there for a little while, and slowly took them away as if they were heavy.

85 “I am tired,” said Miss Havisham. “I want diversion, and I have done with men and women. Play.”

I think it will be conceded by my most disputatious reader, that she could hardly have directed an unfortunate boy to do anything in the wide world more difficult to be done under the circumstances.

90 “I sometimes have sick fancies,” she went on, “and I have a sick fancy that I want to see some play. There, there!” with an impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand; “play, play, play!”

95 For a moment, with the fear of my sister’s working me before my eyes, I had a desperate idea of starting round the room in the assumed character of Mr. Pumblechook’s chaise-cart. But, I felt myself so unequal to the performance that I gave it up, and stood looking at Miss Havisham in what I suppose she

² The fugitive Pip meets at the beginning of the novel tells him about a young man who will attack Pip’s heart and liver if he doesn’t help the fugitive.

took for a **dogged** manner, inasmuch as she said, when we had taken a good look at each other:

“Are you **sullen** and **obstinate**?”

105 “No, ma’am, I am very sorry for you, and very sorry I can’t play just now. If you complain of me I shall get into trouble with my sister, so I would do it if I could; but it’s so new here, and so strange, and so fine—and **melancholy**—” I stopped, fearing I
110 might say too much, or had already said it, and we took another look at each other.

Before she spoke again, she turned her eyes from me, and looked at the dress she wore, and at the dressing-table, and finally at herself in the
115 looking-glass.

“So new to him,” she muttered, “so old to me; so strange to him, so familiar to me; so **melancholy** to both of us! Call Estella.”

As she was still looking at the reflection of
120 herself, I thought she was still talking to herself, and kept quiet.

“Call Estella,” she repeated, flashing a look at me. “You can do that. Call Estella. At the door.”

To stand in the dark in a mysterious passage of
125 an unknown house, bawling Estella to a scornful young lady neither visible nor responsive, and feeling it a dreadful liberty so to roar out her name, was almost as bad as playing to order. But, she answered at last, and her light came along the dark
130 passage like a star.

Miss Havisham beckoned her to come close, and took up a jewel from the table, and tried its effect upon her fair young bosom and against her pretty brown hair. “Your own, one day, my dear, and you
135 will use it well. Let me see you play cards with this boy.”

“With this boy? Why, he is a common laboring-boy!”

I thought I overheard Miss Havisham answer—
140 only it seemed so unlikely—“Well? You can break his heart.”

“What do you play, boy?” asked Estella of myself, with the greatest **disdain**.

“Nothing but beggar my neighbor, miss.”

145 “Beggar him,” said Miss Havisham to Estella. So we sat down to cards.

It was then I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago. I noticed that Miss
150 Havisham put down the jewel exactly on the spot from which she had taken it up. As Estella dealt the cards, I glanced at the dressing-table again, and saw that the shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn. I glanced down at the foot from
155 which the shoe was absent, and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged. Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed
160 form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud.

So she sat, corpse-like, as we played at cards; the frillings and trimmings on her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper. I knew nothing then, of
165 the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, which fall to powder in the moment of being distinctly seen; but, I have often thought since, that she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have
170 struck her to dust.

“He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!” said Estella with **disdain**, before our first game was out. “And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!”

175 I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very **indifferent** pair. Her **contempt** for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it.

She won the game, and I dealt. I misdealt, as
180 was only natural, when I knew she was lying in wait for me to do wrong; and she **denounced** me for a stupid, clumsy laboring-boy.

“You say nothing of her,” remarked Miss Havisham to me, as she looked on. “She says many
185 hard things of you, but you say nothing of her. What do you think of her?”

“I don’t like to say,” I stammered.

“Tell me in my ear,” said Miss Havisham, bending down.

190 “I think she is very proud,” I replied, in a whisper.

“Anything else?”

“I think she is very pretty.”

“Anything else?”

195 “I think she is very insulting.” (She was looking at me then with a look of supreme **aversion**.)

“Anything else?”

“I think I should like to go home.”

200 “And never see her again, though she is so pretty?”

“I am not sure that I shouldn’t like to see her again, but I should like to go home now.”

“You shall go soon,” said Miss Havisham, aloud. “Play the game out.”

205 Saving for the one weird smile at first, I should have felt almost sure that Miss Havisham’s face could not smile. It had dropped into a watchful and brooding expression—most likely when all the things about her had become **transfixed**—and it looked as if
210 nothing could ever lift it up again. Her chest had dropped, so that she stooped; and her voice had dropped, so that she spoke low, and with a dead lull upon her; altogether, she had the appearance of having dropped, body and soul, within and without,
215 under the weight of a crushing blow.

I played the game to an end with Estella, and she beggared me. She threw the cards down on the table when she had won them all, as if she **despised** them for having been won of me.

220 “When shall I have you here again?” said Miss Havisham. “Let me think.”

I was beginning to remind her that today was Wednesday, when she checked me with her former impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand.
 225 “There, there! I know nothing of days of the week; I know nothing of weeks of the year. Come again after six days. You hear?”
 “Yes, ma’am.”
 230 “Estella, take him down. Let him have something to eat, and let him roam and look about him while he eats. Go, Pip.”

Comprehension Questions

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following words mean?

dependent (line 21)
 but (line 28)
 confusedly (line 33)
 about (line 34)
 comprehended (line 71)
 diversion (line 86)
 done with (line 86)
 sick (line 92)
 fancies (line 92)
 working (line 97)
 assumed (line 98)
 unequal (line 100)
 bawling (line 125)
 liberty (line 127)
 to order (line 128)
 beggar (line 144, 145, etc.)
 arrest (line 157)
 admission (line 169)
 hard (line 185)
 Saving (line 205)
 within/without (line 214)
 checked (line 223)

How does the use of the passive voice on line 3 contribute to the atmosphere and mood of the opening paragraph?

What does the use of the word “but” on line 22 suggest?

What contrasting symbolic meanings of the color white are presented in the description of Miss Havisham in lines 19-54? What symbolic meaning(s) does the color yellow have in this scene?

What does Pip, as the narrator, mean when he says, “Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me” (lines 52-54)? What is the effect of his comment “if I could” (line 54)?

What do you think the watch and the clock (lines 64-66 and 148-149) symbolize?

In context, what does the expression “enormous lie” (line 71) imply about Pip?

Why do you think Miss Havisham’s smile has “a kind of boast in it” (line 82)?

In what sense(s) do you think Miss Havisham is “tired” (line 85)?

Explain the meaning of the sentence on lines 88-91.

What does Miss Havisham’s description of her own desires as “sick fancies” (line 92) suggest about her attitude toward her current state?

What rhetorical device is the use of the term “working” (line 97) an example of?

In what sense does Pip fear he has “[said] too much” (line 110)? What is the effect of Miss Havisham’s response to his comments (lines 116-118)?

In what sense is calling Estella a “dreadful liberty” for Pip (line 127)? What literary device is this an example of?

What literary device is used on line 130, and what is its effect? What double meaning might the expression “her light” have in this context?

What do you think Miss Havisham means when she says “you will use it well” (lines 134-135), and what is “it”?

What deeper meaning might Miss Havisham’s command to Estella to “beggar [Pip]” (line 145) have? What clues are there in the context of the passage to suggest this deeper meaning?

What is the “arrest of everything” (line 157) and what effect does it have on Pip’s perception of the scene?

What does Pip’s comparison of Miss Havisham to a corpse (lines 159-170) imply about both her physical and her psychological state?

What is implied by Estella’s remark that “[Pip] calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy” (line 171)?

What is the significance of Pip’s comment that “[Estella’s] contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it” (lines 177-178)? What rhetorical device(s) is this an example of? For what reasons do you think Pip is attracted to Estella?

What do you think is the “crushing blow” to which Pip refers in line 215, and what rhetorical device is this an example of? Discuss the effect of Pip’s use of this description on the reader’s perception of Miss Havisham.

Why does Estella “despise” the cards she wins (lines 217-219)?

Why does Miss Havisham “know nothing of days of the week” or “weeks of the year” (lines 225-226)? What is the effect of this statement?

Why do you think Miss Havisham tells Estella to let Pip “roam and look about him while he eats” (lines 230-231)?

Questions for Discussion and Writing

Discuss the tone and mood of the passage. What aspects and details of the narrative establish this tone and mood?

What clues are there in the passage about the nature and cause of Miss Havisham’s “eccentricity,” and what can be inferred from these clues? Discuss your insights into Miss Havisham’s desires, motives, and plans.

What does this scene suggest about the “psychology of class”—the effect of one’s social status on one’s personality, character, beliefs and perceptions, and state of mind?

SAT-Style Essay Prompt

Consider the following quotation carefully, then read the prompt below.

“Revenge is sweet but not nourishing.”
—Mason Cooley

(Source: *The Columbia World of Quotations*)

Assignment: The desire to seek revenge for an injury one has suffered is a common and natural human instinct, but do the psychological costs of revenge outweigh the satisfaction it often brings? Is there a better way to deal with such situations?

Decide whether you think seeking revenge is worthwhile or not, and write an essay in which you use specific examples from your own experiences, your observations, or your studies to support your opinion.

AP-Style Essay Prompt

In a well-organized essay, analyze the language Dickens uses to develop the mood and atmosphere of this scene. Discuss the effect of his stylistic choices, including diction and imagery. What emotions do they evoke, and how do they affect the readers’ perceptions of the characters in the scene?