

The Monstrous Women in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*:  
"For God's Sake," They're Human Beings

by

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## Abstract

During the Victorian era, two images of women were prominent in novels and reflected the disparity between the womanly ideal and the reality of women's lives: angels and monsters. Angels, such as Charles Dickens's Rose Maylie, Agnes Wickfield, and Lucie Manette, affirm domestic ideology and lead lives of piety and purity, and they are delighted to assume their places as submissive and subservient wives and mothers. In contrast to the angels, their monstrous literary sisters fail to live up to the womanly ideal: not only do they often lack a virtuous and maternal nature, but they are also aggressive, passionate, sexual, immoral, amoral, violent, and mad and branded as witches, fiends, and hysterics. The unruly women actually have traits that would have been appropriate and desirable for a Victorian man in the public sphere of commerce and industry, but would not have been appropriate for a delicate, innocent, and virtuous woman. Although novelists continued to preserve the angel's sanctity and purity, the monstrous female characters were a creative outlet for authors to depict the Victorian women with a wide range of realistic experiences and emotions that dismantle assumptions of femininity.

Like his fellow Victorian authors, Dickens in *Great Expectations* creates a cast of monstrous women who deviate from the womanly ideal and ultimately pay a high price for their transgressions. Mrs. Joe, Molly, Miss Havisham, and Estella lack female virtue, tenderness, and nurture and, therefore, demonstrate behavior that would have been considered unfeminine during the Victorian era. Because they thwart acceptable gender norms and threaten patriarchal order, they are severely emotionally and physically punished. By the close of the novel, the narrative is littered with the broken bodies and spirits of all the monstrous women. However, despite their punishment, these unruly creatures expose the womanly ideal as an impossible model for women to live up to because it failed to accommodate their particular situations, needs, and desires.

Although Dickens in *Great Expectations* follows the Victorian literary convention of punishing women for their transgressions, he also reveals a great deal about the lives of women, especially the circumstances that compel them to deviate from established gender norms. Moreover, rather than just slapping on excessive tendencies and raw emotions onto a stock female character, Dickens, instead, individualizes the portraits of the monstrous women to depict the complex and realistic motivations that result in unfeminine behavior—but real nonetheless. Subsequently, the monstrous women make it difficult for the readers of the novel to remain complicit in their punishment because they challenge their audience to understand that the etiology of their unruliness emerges from oppressive conditions in a masculine world. Hence, what emerges from the novel is not a didactic lesson on appropriate female behavior, but a richly textured and complex depiction Victorian womanhood.

Not only are the portraits of the monstrous creatures realistic, but the female characters in the novel also resist their objectification and victimization to reveal that Victorian women could be independent, aggressive, passionate, intelligent, and powerful in a patriarchal world. Even though the novel ends with the angelic Biddy rewarded with a happy marriage and children and the unruly women beaten, broken, and silenced, *Great Expectations* is not a simple affirmation of the womanly ideal and domestic ideology; instead, the novel fails to reach closure on the Woman Question because what has been exposed can not be effaced: rebellious and powerful women whose life experiences gave them no choice but to dare to journey where angels fear to tread.

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## Table of Contents

	Page
Section 1. Introduction: The Victorian Womanly Ideal.....	1
Section 2. Bidy: Nobody's Angel but Her Own.....	7
Section 3. Mrs. Joe: Suppressed and Raging Housewife.....	14
Section 4. Molly: Violent Murderess and Dehumanized Woman.....	24
Section 5. Miss Havisham: Broken Hearted Angel and Avenging Recluse.....	32
Section 6. Estella: Abused Ice-Princess and Strong Survivor.....	48
Section 7. Conclusion: Failure to Reach Closure.....	60
Section 8. Works Cited.....	65

*Dedication*

*À ma mère*

*qui me donna l'amour des romans du 19ème siècle  
et commença ma fascination pour les monstres littéraires  
quand elle me fit connaître Meduse, Bertha Mason, et Quasimodo*

*and*

*For my father*

*who instilled me with a sense that nothing is impossible  
if you are willing to work hard*

The Monstrous Women in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*:

"For God's Sake," They're Human Beings

**Introduction: The Victorian Womanly Ideal**

In the opening scene of Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, Pip sits in the churchyard reflecting upon the epitaphs on his parents' tombstone: "Philip Pirrup, late of the parish" and "also Georgiana wife of the above" (Dickens 24). The tombstone reflects that even in death, Victorian men and women maintain traditional gender roles: Philip Pirrup is remembered as a parishioner, signifying that his place was outside the home and in the public sphere of church and community; in contrast, Georgiana is only remembered as a wife and an afterthought to her husband's dominant position above her. The tombstone does not even provide her with a last name, as if she had no individual identity other than spouse to her husband. Even in death, Georgiana cannot transcend her subordinate wifely role.

However, that same evening in the churchyard, Pip is accosted by the criminal Magwitch, and he does not ask Pip "Where is your father?" or "Where are your brothers?" Instead, he asks, "Where's your mother?" (25). When Pip points to the grave and replies, "There, sir!" (25), Magwitch misunderstands Pip and believes that his mother is alive and nearby. Magwitch is startled and takes off running before he realizes that Pip is pointing to the grave. Although Magwitch is a hardened criminal and is quite capable of frightening a little boy and pummeling Compeyson, he is threatened by an imagined, yet powerful, female who may deviate from the passive and docile Victorian womanly ideal to protect her son. The angry and confrontational Georgiana whom Magwitch fears is a reality he knows all too well since he has fathered a child with a murderess. Similar to the fierce mother Magwitch imagines, the female characters in *Great Expectations* deviate from the womanly ideal to reveal that Victorian women

could be aggressive, passionate, independent, intelligent, and powerful. Not only do they thwart the womanly ideal, but they also resist their objectification and victimization to demonstrate that they are not resigned to their subordinate position in a patriarchal world. Although the novel ends with angelic Biddy rewarded with a happy marriage and children and the unruly women beaten, broken, and silenced, *Great Expectations* is not a simple affirmation of the womanly ideal and domestic ideology; instead, the novel fails to reach closure on the Woman Question because what Dickens exposes cannot be effaced: rebellious and powerful women whose life experiences gave them no choice but to dare and journey where angels fear to tread.

Dickens's portraits of female characters who rebel against the constraints of the womanly ideal reflect that middle-class women had experienced a significant shift in their social and economic roles during the Industrial Revolution which confined them to domesticity. Philippa Levine, in *Victorian Feminism*, explains that prior to the nineteenth century, although women performed domestic functions, they also "shared a role in the family economy which had often taken them beyond the provision of purely domestic duties" (12). A woman who was a helpmeet to her husband not only assumed her role in the home as a wife and mother, but she was also actively involved in her spouse's work, such as managing a large estate, working on a farm, or assisting in artisan and trade work. However, as England industrialized, factories replaced agriculture as the leading employer, and the home became delimited from the workplace (Levine 12). Two separate spheres subsequently emerged: the feminine private sphere of domesticity where women were expected to preserve their homes as havens from the corruption and cruelties that plagued the Victorian world, and the masculine public sphere of commerce and industry. Levine asserts that the two spheres developed "as a fusion of values and assumptions culled severally from religion, economic need, biology and tradition" (12). Although there was an

ongoing debate on the Woman Question during the Victorian era, the predominant perception that women were biologically and intellectually inferior to men had an impact on the separation of spheres: as the weaker sex, women were assumed to be ill-suited for a life outside the home because they required protection from predatory men and from the inhumanity and immorality that marked industrial England. Ultimately, the separation of spheres privileged men who went out into the world to work, earn a living, and forge identities distinct from their roles as fathers and husbands. In contrast, women stayed home to care for their children, and, as a result, they were confined to their roles as wives and mothers and remained economically dependent upon and subordinate to their husbands.

Although women were treated as the weaker and inferior sex during the Victorian era, they were, however, perceived as morally superior to men and natural nurturing, and these assumptions continued to confine women to the home because they were expected to act not just as caregivers to their children but also as moral guardians of their families. As a result, a proliferation of idealized images of loving and virtuous women emerged in conduct manuals, magazines, art, and literature that codified their place in the home as wives and mothers. The *Angel in the House*, named after Coventry Patmore's popular book of poems published in 1854, became the middle-class icon of female goodness and domesticity. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that the collection of poems became the model of the virtuous woman who uplifted her husband to "greatness" with "unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility" (22-23). The angel may have been a noble creature, but all her good deeds were done in subservience to her husband and devotion to her family, as if she had no needs and desires of her own. This self-sacrificing angel, who did for others and not herself, was, as Nina Auerbach points in *Woman and the Demon*, "[o]fficially, the only woman



worthy of worship” and had “no existence beyond the loving influence she exuded as daughter, wife, and mother” (185). But this official pattern of normalized female behavior could not be easily dismissed: gender norms demanded that women adhere to the angelic model of selfless subservience by marrying, pleasing their husbands, raising children, and, as Susan Walsh explains in “Bodies of Capital,” saving the men in their lives from the immoral trappings of commerce and industry (89). Furthermore, the womanly ideal was not restricted to the middle class because, as Mary Poovey points out in “Speaking of the Body,” women from all classes were represented as being generally much the same: “innately moral,” “asexual, self-sacrificing, and passive” (33-34). Hence, while men were defined by more than just their gender as they assumed their positions in the public sphere of work and community, gender norms defined women purely by their sex and imposed an identity upon them as wives and mothers and nothing more.

Not surprisingly, women often found the womanly ideal burdensome. In “The Perfect Victorian Lady,” Martha Vicinus argues: “The main difficulty with the perfect lady as a model of behavior even in the middle classes (and it came to be accepted in altered form, in other classes) was the narrowness of the definition. Few women could afford to pursue the course laid out for them, either economically, socially, or psychologically” (x). Most women, other than “the very bottom” were “sufficiently socialized to feel pangs of guilt” and “overwhelming remorse” if they failed to live up to the womanly ideal (Vicinus xiv). Hence, because of the rigidity and restrictiveness of Victorian femininity, the model of female perfection failed women from all classes, even the middle class from which the Angel in the House was actually constructed. Without a doubt, the lower classes, in particular, certainly felt enormous guilt for not measuring up to the standards of the womanly ideal since, as Anna Clark points out in *The*

*Struggle for the Breeches*, the housebound angel was an impractical model for working-class wives who had no choice but to work to contribute to the family income (2). But predominant discourse on female behavior did not just affect how women felt about themselves, it also had the power to shape and perpetuate perceptions of women. For example, as Levine points out, no matter how far from reality domestic ideology may have been, it was "effective in dismissing unmarried and working women alike as society's failure" (13). The womanly ideal was, in fact, so pervasive, perhaps invasive, that angelic behavior was normalized while any deviancy, such as passion and aggression, was labeled as unnatural and unfeminine. Clearly, domestic ideology could not be escaped, even if a woman's particular situation, needs, or desires gave her reason not to follow established gender norms.

As literature is not immune to prevailing ideology, two images of women are prominent in Victorian novels and reflect the disparity between the womanly ideal and the reality of women's lives: angels and monsters. Angels, such as Dickens's Rose Maylie, Agnes Wickfield, and Lucie Manette, affirm domestic ideology and lead lives of piety and purity, and they are delighted to assume their places as submissive and subservient wives and mothers. In contrast to the angels, their monstrous literary sisters fail to live up to the womanly ideal: not only do they often lack a virtuous and maternal nature, but they are also aggressive, passionate, sexual, immoral, amoral, violent, and mad and branded as witches, fiends, and hysterics. These unruly women have, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, traditional masculine characteristics that were appropriate and even desirable for a man of "significant action" in the public sphere but were considered "unfeminine" and, therefore, inappropriate for a Victorian woman's "gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (28). However, since a gentle life was not the reality for many women, according to Richard Altick in *Victorian People and Ideas*, authors created these

hideous women as an "outright or covert attack on the unrealities and perversions of the prevailing womanly ideal, the myth of domestic accommodation and tranquility" (56). Although novelists continued to preserve the angel's sanctity and purity, the monstrous female character was a creative outlet for authors to portray the realistic nature of woman. Hence, the monstrous women dismantle Victorian assumptions of femininity because they demonstrate viable female experiences and emotions that the innocent and spiritual angel could never accommodate.

Similar to his fellow Victorian authors, Dickens creates a cast of monstrous women in *Great Expectations* who ultimately pay a high price for deviating from the womanly ideal. In "Gender and Class in Dickens," Peter Scheckner argues that when women become too unruly in the novel, they are brutally punished for threatening the "social status quo" (245). The punishment and suffering of deviant women is a traditional literary convention in Victorian novels, and *Great Expectations* certainly follows this violent pattern as the narrative is littered with the broken bodies and spirits of all the monstrous women. However, rather than just didactically teaching a lesson on the consequences of transgressive behavior, *Great Expectations* can be read as a realistic depiction of Victorian womanhood that ultimately counters and exposes the myth of female perfection. In *Literature and Feminism*, Pam Morris asserts we should read as a woman when reading novels authored by men because they have misrepresented women throughout history by "not seeing 'us as we really are'" (13-14). Reading as a woman uncovers the "inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in ideological fantasies" and can reveal a breakdown in traditional male power and male insecurities (Morris, *Literature* 16). Hence, reading *Great Expectations* as a woman challenges the notion that the model of female perfection was an accurate reflection of Victorian femininity. Moreover, although the female characters in the novel are punished for their deviancies, they are so provocative that the text

simply cannot contain them. Explaining how a monstrous woman refuses to stay in her “textually ordained ‘place,’” Gilbert and Gubar state that a powerful female character “generates a story that ‘gets away’ from its author” (28). And the stories that take on a life of their own in *Great Expectations* are the portraits of women whose experiences attest to a desire for a life free from the constraints of the womanly ideal.

### **Biddy: Nobody’s Angel but her Own**

Although Biddy is not a monstrous character, she is the closest to the Victorian womanly ideal in the novel and can provide further insight into the deviancies of the unruly women because she demonstrates female innocence, virtue, and domesticity that the monstrous women lack. Even though she is poor and never can be a middle-class angel, she, for the most part, adheres to domestic ideology and the womanly ideal. Victorian authors frequently portrayed women from the lower classes as angelic to counter middle-class perceptions. In *Dickens’s Class Consciousness*, Pam Morris explains that the middle class assumed that the lower classes were “vulgar” and “essentially immoral, improvident, and lazy” (8). But as Vicinus points out, Dickens and other authors such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell had a large audience of working-class readers and often “wrote about the moral purity of the reputable working class and the deserving poor” (xviii). Dickens and his fellow authors “presented a moral ideal which they hoped society would recognize—and to which many working-class families adhered” (Vicinus xiii). And specifically with Biddy, the moral ideal actually emerges from the womanly ideal. However, although Biddy is undeniably a model of selflessness and goodness, she, like her unruly sisters, also challenges the notion of women as passive and inferior to demonstrate how even the most virtuous and angelic creature could not adhere to the model of female perfection. Moreover, Biddy is rewarded not just because she is angelic, but because she also leads a life of

moderation in comparison to the excessive passion, desire, aggression, and coldness of the monstrous women. A life of moderation provides her with ample opportunity to deviate from the womanly ideal to actively pursue her desires and govern her life without ever forsaking her humanity or her morals, which the monstrous women tragically fail to do.

When Bidy is introduced into the narrative, her lower-class status is established immediately. Like Pip, she is an orphan and has “been brought up by hand” (59). In addition to the beatings she endures, she also suffers from neglect and abandonment because no one seems to care that she is untidy and dirty: as a child, she is “most noticeable” in “her extremities” because “her hair always wanted brushing, her hands always wanted washing, and her shoes always wanted mending and pulling up at heel” (59). Not only does her physical appearance reveal her class, but it also reflects that Bidy really has no one to look after her, unlike Pip who has Mrs. Joe to ensure that his basic needs are met and Joe who loves him. Bidy’s grandmother is as incapable of properly caring for her as she is of running the shop, having “no idea what stock she had, or what the price of anything in it was” (59). However, despite Bidy’s waif-like appearance during the week, “[o]n Sundays, she went to church elaborated” (59). Her desire to dress up and attend church reflects her innately moral nature that neither poverty, abuse, nor neglect can diminish. In her Sunday dress, little would separate Bidy from the middle-class angel. Even though she has no mother to act as her moral guardian, Bidy needs no instruction because, despite her coarse and unkempt appearance, she is like all angels: naturally good and virtuous.

Bidy’s virtuous nature becomes apparent as she matures and blossoms into a pleasing young lady who catches Pip’s eyes: “[h]er shoes came up at the heel, her hair grew bright and neat, her hands were always clean. She was not beautiful—she was common, . . . but she was

pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered, . . . she had curiously thoughtful and attentive eyes; eyes that were very pretty and very good" (130). And when Pip returns home for his sister's funeral, he notices that Biddy looks "very neat and modest in her black dress" (263). Even though Pip demotes Biddy's prettiness to commonness in comparison to his star Estella, and she lacks what Patricia Ingham, in *Dickens, Women and Language*, describes as the "slight" and "delicate" beauty of the middle-class angel (19), her description places her close to the womanly ideal. Hence, Biddy is endowed with enough understated prettiness to reflect her virtuous nature. As Ingham points out, the Victorian reader would have had an understanding of physiognomy (24), so Biddy's pleasant and wholesome prettiness, though not beautiful, would have been a clear indicator to her audience that she was good and kind.

In addition to looking the part, Biddy also adheres so closely to the code of conduct of the Angel in the House that even Coventry Patmore would not be able to find fault. Biddy not only manages the domestic life at the forge efficiently after she moves in, but she selflessly and lovingly comforts and counsels Pip and Joe, she teaches them to read and write, and she nurses Mrs. Joe. With a kind and gentle touch, she restores domestic bliss back to the Gargery home, ending the bleak days of tyranny under the despotic rule of Mrs. Joe. Describing how helpful Biddy is at the forge, Pip states:

Biddy . . . became a blessing to the household. Above all, she was a blessing to Joe. . . . Biddy instantly taking the cleverest charge of her [Mrs. Joe] as though she had studied her from infancy, Joe became able in some sort to appreciate the greater quiet of his life, and to get down to the Jolly Bargemen now and then for a change that did him good. (128)

Under Bidley's reign, the Gargery home becomes a tranquil and peaceful sanctuary, a haven from the chaos and disorder of Satis House and London.

Because she fits the angelic pattern, much of the criticism on Bidley's character has focused on her undeniable goodness, which critics often argue reflects Dickens's stereotypical submissive and virtuous women. For example, in "From Outrage to Rage," U. C. Knoepfelmacher points out that Bidley is the embodiment of the "static 'womanly ideal'" (75). Similarly, Scheckner suggests that Bidley, in comparison to the other female characters in the novel, is "bland, like most 'good' women in Dickens" (237). Although he acknowledges her kindness and goodness, even Pip describes her as having a reliable and even temperament, which he fails to find appealing in comparison to his moody star Estella: Pip remarks, "Bidley was never insulting, or capricious, or Bidley to-day and somebody else to-morrow; she would have derived only pain, and no pleasure, from giving me pain; she would rather have wounded her own breast than mine. How could it be, then, that I did not like her much better of the two?" (134). However, although she is good and mild, Bidley should not be dismissed so easily as just a Dickensian stereotype because she is quite active as she progresses from the neglected child to a happy and contented wife and mother. Describing how angelic characters are not necessarily static, Auerbach remarks that even the perfect "selfless minister" can be viewed as a "mobile creature who defines herself in verbs" (187). And mobile Bidley can be characterized by many verbs as she pursues her own great expectations: she helps, teaches, nurses, counsels, manages, mediates, and solves, to name a few. Hence, demonstrating depth and texture, rather than stasis and blandness, Bidley's portrait reveals a woman with agency who is driven toward self-governance.

Although Pip may see Bidy only as virtuous and docile woman, she directly challenges his assumption to demonstrate that she certainly knows her life is more significant than what he perceives. When Bidy moves to the forge, Pip, surprised by her cleverness and ability to learn quickly, observes, "Theoretically she was already as good a blacksmith as I or better" (130). And he remarks, "You are one of those, Bidy . . . who make the most of every chance" (130). But then Pip patronizes her by stating: "You never had a chance before you came here, and how improved you are!" (130). His remark causes a subtle, yet discernable, reaction in Bidy that indicates she does not concur with Pip's assessment of her. Pip observes, "Bidy looked at me for an instant, and went on with her sewing" (131). Rather than agreeing with Pip, Bidy, as if she desires for Pip to see her as his equal, reminds him, "I was your first teacher though; wasn't I?" (131). Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, notes that when the woman returns the gaze, she "contests the place and authority of the masculine position" (xxvii-xviii). Hence, Bidy's tactful comment and female gaze challenge Pip's musing that the Gargerys have rescued her from what he describes as the "hopeless circumstances by which she had been surrounded in the miserable little shop" (131). Though dire and difficult, Bidy's life never has been hopeless because she always has been determined to improve herself, starting when she taught herself to read and worked at her grandmother's shop. Pip simply could not be more wrong in thinking that she is a susceptible creature whom the Gargerys have improved, when, in actuality, she has improved the Gargerys.

Pip erroneously perceives Bidy, with only her "small speckled box containing the whole of her worldly effects" (128), as a helpless female who simply journeys from her grandmother's shop to the forge, when her trajectory is actually more complex and marked with self-reliance and ingenuity. Auerbach remarks that "Womanliness is not an emotional state, but a series of



difficult journeys and passages” and the virtuous and moral woman’s “journeys are not a mere motion from place to place, but a remaking of herself” (187). Bidy refashions herself from the neglected and unkempt orphan to the girl who dresses up to attend church, to the girl who takes over her grandmother’s class when she falls asleep, to the girl who seizes the opportunity for a better life at the forge, to the young lady who fends off Orlick, to the woman who finds employment as a teacher when she can remain no longer at the forge, and to the woman who chooses to marry a man whom she loves and respects. Bidy’s trajectory is, indeed, a journey profoundly marked with self-reliance and agency, not dependence and passivity. Although, Pip may misread her, Bidy asserts her subjectivity into the narrative to challenge Pip’s attempt to define her as a defenseless female in need of protection.

In addition to her agency and self-reliance, Bidy also demonstrates an awareness and knowledge of the world around her that she has gained from her experiences as a woman from the lower class, challenging the notion that she is an insipid creature who needs protection from the public sphere. For instance, Bidy explicitly asserts herself when Pip asks her to help Joe improve his manners and learning because, as Pip assumes, his unpolished and unrefined ways will “hardly do him justice” after Pip comes into his fortune (150). Catherine J. Golden, in “Late-Twentieth-Century Readers in Search of a Dickensian Heroine” states that a Dickensian angel is usually depicted as “standing by her man” (7). But Bidy does not do this; instead, rather than blindly supporting Pip’s snobbish request, she provocatively asks him, “And don’t you think he knows that?” (150). She goes on to further remark, “He may be too proud to let any one take him out of a place that he is competent to fill, and fills well and with respect” (150). Of course, because she is angelic, Bidy certainly can be perceived as teaching Pip a moral lesson on not judging others, including herself, by their coarse and unrefined exteriors. But as a

woman who understands from her own experiences how social and economic distinctions confine, isolate, and separate, she seems to be teaching Pip a life lesson, which he, too, will experience firsthand. Clearly, she has not led a sheltered existence and comprehends the complexities of her Victorian world.

As Bidy matures, she comes into herself as an autonomous being. Rather than pining away for the fickle boy who could never appreciate her, Bidy decides to marry Joe, demonstrating that she is nobody's angel but her own because she makes decisions to please herself first before pleasing others. Some critics argue that Bidy is in love with Pip, such as Schneckler who writes, "Bidy . . . rather passively falls in and out of love with Pip and then effortlessly moves on to Joe" (242). However, she never actually indicates that she is either in love with Pip or that she suffers from unreciprocated love. When Pip pours out his anguished heart to her over Estella, he asks Bidy: "I should have been good enough for you; shouldn't I, Bidy?" (132). Even Pip notices that her response "scarcely sounds flattering" as she keeps looking at the ships, sighs, and remarks: "Yes; I am not over-particular" (132). Bidy's response is not self-deprecating, but an insult because she hints that Pip would be good enough for her since she is not particular. Clearly, she is not trying to win Pip's heart or ingratiate herself to him. And after Pip tells her that he wishes he could fall in love with her, Bidy replies, "But you never will, you see" (134). Bidy simply knows that she and Pip are not right for each other because of his desire for Estella. Bidy's relationship is more sisterly and motherly than ever romantic. Because she does not wait around for Pip to make up his mind and marries Joe, Bidy demonstrates a depth of insight into the realities of her world: who she is, what her options are, whom she will find happiness with, and how to govern her life wisely. Moreover, although Bidy becomes a wife and mother, these roles are not forced upon her; instead, she chooses

them. Hence, rather than having an identity imposed upon her, she decides what roles she will assume to make her way into the world.

Biddy's agency and autonomy are most evident at the close of the novel when she demonstrates that she is not as biddable as her name may indicate. When Pip returns after working abroad, Biddy is happily settled at the forge with a son and a baby daughter. With no children of his own, Pip suggests to Biddy that she give or lend her son to him one day. But Biddy graciously refuses and encourages Pip to marry. By not yielding to Pip, she exudes a confidence in herself and Joe as parents who can provide for their son everything he will need to make his way into the world. Her portrait reveals a wise woman who makes her own decisions and who will not defer to male authority. Hence, even though Biddy is the noblest and most virtuous female character in the novel, she still deviates from the womanly ideal because she refuses to be dependent upon and subordinate to men. Of course, Biddy is rewarded by the close of the novel with a happy home and family, but without ever compromising her values or relinquishing her independence, she actively pursues these rewards rather than waiting for her rewards to come to her. Therefore, since she is good and kind, Biddy is indeed *angelic*, but she also demonstrates the impossibility of being an actual *angel* because she does not live her life as a passive and inferior female.

#### **Mrs. Joe: Suppressed and Raging Housewife**

Contrasting with Biddy is Mrs. Joe, who is as monstrous as her successor at the forge is angelic. While Biddy is delighted to assume the motherly and wifely duties in the Gargery home, Mrs. Joe is miserable as a working-class housewife. The only similarity that Mrs. Joe shares with Biddy is that she is a good and industrious housekeeper. Unlike her husband Joe who finds time to go and smoke his pipe at the Jolly Bargemen, Mrs. Joe is seldom off her feet as

she manages her home: she sweeps, scrubs, washes, sews, cooks, and serves. And the Gargery household certainly looks like a model of domesticity. For Christmas, Mrs. Joe works diligently preparing for the festivities: “Mrs. Joe put clean white curtains up, and tacked a new flowered-flounce across the wide chimney to replace the old one, and uncovered the little state parlour” (40). And the feast is elaborate: a “superb dinner, consisting of a leg of pickled pork and greens, and a pair of roast stuffed fowls,” a “handsome mince-pie,” and a “pudding” (40). But as appearances are frequently deceiving in the novel, Mrs. Joe plans the gathering to show off to her friends, not to please Joe or demonstrate her love for Pip. Hence domestic strife—not tranquility—lurks inside the orderly and spotless home. Even though Mrs. Joe may be an efficient household manager, she is far from the gentle and loving Bidly because she treats her husband and brother, as Pip remarks, “[A]s if we were two thousand troops on a forced march instead of a man and boy at home” (40).

The violent and domineering Mrs. Joe is a monstrous woman because she lacks traditional feminine characteristics; in fact, she is depicted as masculine because she is aggressive, violent, and even ambitious: all traits that would have been well-suited for a man in the public sphere, but not suited for Victorian domesticity. Mrs. Joe detests being a working-class wife to Joe and adoptive mother to Pip, roles that were forced upon her the day her mother died and left her to raise her brother and find a home for him. Mrs. Joe actually tells Pip how much she hates her confinement at the forge: “I’d never do it again! I know that. I may truly say I’ve never had this apron of mine off, since born you were. It’s bad enough to be a blacksmith’s wife (and him a Gargery) without being your mother” (29). Mrs. Joe simply does not have the personality, temperament, or nature to be a selfless, kind, and virtuous mother and wife, roles that, according to Victorian domestic ideology, should have left her happy and content.

Marrying Joe and raising Pip have been the source of her embitterment and frustration, not joy and satisfaction, because she had to give up her own desires for a more lucrative marriage. Hence, Mrs. Joe dismantles the cornerstone of domestic ideology by demonstrating that women were not necessarily naturally maternal or virtuous.

Mrs. Joe's unfitness as a wife and mother are apparent with Pip's physical description of her, which strips her of all feminine softness and tenderness:

My sister, Mrs. Joe, with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap. She was tall and bony, and almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops, and having a square impregnable bib in front, that was stuck full of pins and needles. (28)

Her inflamed skin, her lanky body, and her apron barbed with pins and needles are uninviting and render her hard, cold, and impenetrable. Pip is skeptical of Joe's claim that his sister was ever a "fine figure of a woman" and presumes that "she must have made Joe Gargery marry her by hand" (28). Captured in Pip's gaze, Mrs. Joe is deemed undesirable because she physically has no feminine attributes that would hint at a kind and loving nature, such as Biddy's pleasant smile or warm eyes. Even her apron, which she wears as a "powerful merit in herself, and a strong reproach against Joe" (28), is not worn lovingly as a testament of selfless domesticity; instead, Mrs. Joe resentfully wears it to send a message to Pip and Joe that she hates her burdensome life as a housebound wife. Like the apron, the pins and needles also take on a similar significance of thwarted domesticity. Helena Michie in *The Flesh Made Word* explains that sewing is "perhaps the most common feminine occupation," but sewing, in addition to needle, thread, and scissors, often connotes repressed female desire, sexuality, and energy (41-

44). The pins and needles that pierce her apron certainly may indicate that the fiery tempered Mrs. Joe and her mild mannered husband may be as incompatible sexually as they are temperamentally, leaving Mrs. Joe frustrated in the bedroom, but her suppression and anger are more complex. Going beyond sexual frustration in "Taming to Improve," Lucy Frost asserts that Mrs. Joe feels imprisoned by her domestic duties so she rages physically and emotionally against Joe and Pip (60-64). Hence, Mrs. Joe's anger emerges from an unfulfilled desire for anything else but her life at the forge, a life her bony body, domestically bound in aprons, pins, and needles, may never escape, but which she will continue to use to protest her confinement.

Unfortunately for Pip and Joe, they must bear the brunt of Mrs. Joe's protest as she violently breaks domestic codes. Steven Mintz, in *A Prison of Expectations*, asserts that Victorian public sentiment on child rearing assumed that parental love should positively shape the characters of their children and nurture their "moral faculties" and "self-restraint," not by force, but via "silent and imperceptible influence" in a "beneficent environment" (29-31). Because women were assumed to be moral and submissive, "female influence was believed to be particularly useful in . . . enticing obedience from children" (Mintz 33). But Mrs. Joe rejects these family norms by bringing up Pip by hand and also slapping, beating, and thumping her husband as well. For instance, when Pip returns home late after his confrontation at the cemetery with Magwitch, Mrs. Joe is on the rampage and beats her brother with the Tickler before throwing him like a "connubial missile" toward Joe (29). And her acid tongue is just as cruel as the Tickler because she constantly demeans and emasculates both Pip and Joe. During the Christmas dinner, Pip listens as Mrs. Joe recounts a list of his offenses as a child:

My sister . . . entered on a fearful catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had

tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave, and I had contumaciously refused to go there. (45)

Rather than regaling her guests with stories on the joys of motherhood, Mrs. Joe makes it clear that Pip has been an inconvenience and disturbance in her life and she would have preferred him dead, rather than tied to her apron strings. Because her desires for a different life are unfulfilled, her aggressive behavior erupts and is released upon Pip, whom she terrorizes. Like Molly, she is nothing short of a monstrous mother as her depiction borders dangerously on the taboo of filicide.

As if the beatings are not enough, Mrs. Joe maltreats every person and everything she lays her hands on, such as when she pounces on Pip “like an eagle on a lamb” and runs her hand with the ridgy wedding ring like a rasp over his face while she bathes him (66). She lacks what William Cohen, in “Manual Conduct in *Great Expectations*,” refers to as the “woman’s touch” (41). Similarly, Tyson Stolte points out, in “Mightier than the Sword,” that Mrs. Joe’s “infrequent acts of mothering that she performs for Pip are abusively perverted” (181). The list of her offenses is long: as she serves Pip and Joe their bread-and-butter in a “trenchant” manner, Pip remarks, “First, with her left hand she jammed the loaf hard and fast against her bib—where it sometimes got a pin into it, and sometimes a needle, which we afterwards got into our mouths” (30); when Pip has a new suit of clothes made, he says, “[T]he tailor had orders [from Mrs. Joe] to make them like a kind of Reformatory, and on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs” (41); and even though she is a “clean housekeeper,” she has “an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself” (41). Mrs. Joe may go through the motions of mothering Pip by keeping him fed, clothed, and clean, but in

performing these seemingly maternal acts, she does not selflessly and gently nurture him; instead, she resists the domestic norms by making Pip as miserable and uncomfortable as possible, treating him like a prisoner rather than a boy.

Because mild-mannered Joe refuses to challenge or lay a hand on his wife, Mrs. Joe's aggressive and violent behavior goes unchecked, and as a result, she becomes, as both Pip and Joe admit, "all powerful" (34), a "master-mind" (64), and "given to government" (63) at the forge. She punishes and tortures Pip by beating down on his body for his singular and unforgivable offense—his birth. And Pip grows up acutely aware that he has offended his sister: "I was a young offender whom an Accoucheur Policemen had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born, in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends" (42). Pip's very existence is an affront to Mrs. Joe, so she abuses her brother to exact her revenge. Although Mrs. Joe is, as Laurie Langbauer points out in "Women in White, Men in Feminism," a bad mother because she abuses the "totalizing power" she has over her brother (224), her control over Pip is still undeniably pervasive and inescapable because it leaves him suffering from guilt his entire life.

However, despite gaining mastery over her family, Mrs. Joe has no power anywhere else but at the forge. The coercive and brutal force she wields over Pip and Joe cannot translate into the power to effect any changes in her life that would give her the freedom she so desires or provide her with a release for her energies. Ultimately, she is actually disempowered because she is denied the freedom to choose her course in life and has no identity other than mother and wife, an identity she simply cannot bear. But even though her power is limited to the forge, Mrs. Joe still threatens patriarchal order because she demonstrates the possibility that not only could



women actually desire and wield power over men but that they also might be left unfulfilled and miserable as wives and mothers.

For threatening male dominance and not conforming to the womanly ideal, Mrs. Joe is severely punished. Her bridling is a direct result of challenging Orlick, a man she fails to gain mastery over. Frustrated that Joe has given the scoundrel a half holiday, Mrs. Joe maliciously tells Orlick that she wishes she were his master. Not intimidated, Orlick taunts Mrs. Joe by first calling her "Mother Gargery" and a "foul shrew" and then remarking that she needs to be held "under the pump" to "choke it out" of her (120). Subsequently, Mrs. Joe erupts into a "mighty rage" (120) because Orlick, the patriarchal voice, has had the audacity to remind her of her subordinate position, her powerlessness, her role as mother that she detests, and her unflattering image: a shrewish woman who should be controlled for upsetting male dominance at the forge. Watching Mrs. Joe become "blindly furious," Pip observes: "[M]y sister . . . beat her hands upon her bosom and upon her knees, and threw her cap off, and pulled her hair down" (120). Mrs. Joe, a "perfect Fury" (120), dances the tarantella, which Catherine Clément, in "The Guilty One," describes as a traditional dance in southern Italy in which spider bitten women dance hysterically and madly, "expelling the foreign body, the venom, through a violent and irksome action" before collapsing cured of the poison (19-20, 22). Clément explains that to be cured is to end the celebration of "the marvelous freedom that is animal and desiring" and "to return to the men's world" of family and marriage (22). The venomous spider certainly has bitten Mrs. Joe and inflames her desire for power over Orlick, so she must dance the tarantella to get rid of her poisonous nature. After the poison is expelled, Mrs. Joe collapses insensible to the ground and "singular calm and silence" are restored to the forge (121). The crisis over, Mrs. Joe returns to the men's world when Joe picks her up and carries her into the house where she continues to

hold on to him, clenching her hands into his curly locks. Until the day of her death, this is the only time that she actually touches her husband without aggression and violence. Dancing the tarantella has purified her of her cold and harsh nature, and she is briefly returned to her husband's arms, as a quiet and docile wife.

However, soon after the fight with Orlick, Mrs. Joe is found completely cured of all her desires as she lies "without sense or movement" after receiving "a tremendous blow on the back of the head, . . . destined never to be on the Rampage again" (125) and never to dance the tarantella. Even though she lingers on, Mrs. Joe's punishment for daring to challenge and usurp male authority is poetically harsh: rather than aiming her Tickler at Pip, she now can grasp only at "visionary teacups and wine-glasses" (127); her caustic tongue has been silenced, and she is capable of mostly unintelligible speech; her vision and hearing once used for surveillance are impaired; her rampages have disappeared, and her temper is "greatly improved, and she was patient" (127); and her mental capacity is so diminished that Pip doubts if she can comprehend that he has come into a fortune. Mrs. Joe is a mere shell of her former powerful self; therefore, she is no longer the woman who loomed large in Pip's psyche. Her beating and taming essentially purge her of every aspect that the male Victorian gaze would have found offensive, and all that is left is her tall and bony body. Mrs. Joe, indeed, has returned to her family as the gentle wife and mother—but only by brutal force.

As if punishing her physical body and beating her into submission are not enough, Mrs. Joe humbles herself before her assailant Orlick. Mrs. Joe communicates to Biddy by drawing a hammer on her slate that she wants to see Orlick, which turns into a daily request. And it is Mrs. Joe's behavior toward Orlick that is particularly odd because she shows no signs of distress in the presence of her assailant; instead, describing Mrs. Joe's reception of Orlick, Pip writes:

She manifested the greatest anxiety to be on good terms with him, was evidently much pleased by his being at length produced, and motioned that she would have him given something to drink. She watched his countenance as if she were particularly wishful to be assured that he took kindly to his reception, she showed every possible desire to conciliate him, and there was an air of humble propitiation in all she did, such as I have seen pervade the bearing of a child towards a hard master. (129)

Mrs. Joe's bizarre behavior is often read as her getting a just punishment for beating Pip: Mrs. Joe, the cruel and violent master must now submit to her new master Orlick. For example, describing the inversion of power relations in the novel, Langbauer observes that Mrs. Joe's humbling herself before Orlick "puts her in the place of the child Pip once was" (225). But going beyond Mrs. Joe just receiving a befitting punishment for her abuse of Pip, Jeremy Tambling asserts, in "Prison-bound: Dickens and Foucault," that "she seems to enjoy" that Orlick has beaten her and gained power over her (23). In other words, Mrs. Joe is not only punished for her violent rampages, but her desire to please Orlick indicates that she is grateful to him for hitting her over the head and rendering her an imbecile. Reflecting a traditional female stereotype, this reading seeks to explain Mrs. Joe's strange behavior by implying that she secretly desires a man who will dominate and bridle her. Her humbling certainly may have been Dickens's intention for such an unlikable creature and suitable payback for abusing her brother, but suggesting that the domineering Mrs. Joe actually enjoys being beaten into submission is an oversimplification of the horrible punishment she endures for defying norms on femininity and motherhood. Therefore, only analyzing her humbling as her getting what she deserves fails to read Mrs. Joe not just as a woman, but as a complex character as well.

To read as a woman is to observe that the humbled creature who ingratiates herself toward Orlick, whose dying wish is to put her arms around Joe's neck and seek his and Pip's forgiveness, and who smiles and laughs at Pip is not the hardened and bitter woman who thwarted the womanly ideal. The woman who danced the tarantella danced off the pages of the novel when she was struck in the head, and the woman who is left is little more than a feeble-minded imposter of Mrs. Joe. Her displacement renders Orlick's mastery over her rather disingenuous; after all, he only has gained power over an addle-brained woman. Hence, Mrs. Joe's portrait is not a tale of defeating female deviancy and transgression; instead, she reveals how difficult, if not impossible, it is to suppress powerful women. In Mrs. Joe's case, Orlick could only silence her by taking her from behind and inflicting a brain injury with a leg iron that eventually killed her. Although, violence and murder may destroy Mrs. Joe's physical body, her rebellion, which was not so easily overcome, has lasting resonance.

Although Mrs. Joe's behavior before the beating is, according to Victorian standards on femininity, unnatural, and her abuse of Pip and Joe is certainly inexcusable, her portrait opens up the possibility of women having drives and urges that do not reflect the womanly ideal. Mrs. Joe's desires are not as crystallized as Pip's, but they are essentially the same. Mrs. Joe wants another life other than that of a blacksmith's wife and mother to her orphaned brother, which she asserts is the same thing as "a slave with her apron never off" (40). In comparison, Pip does not want to be a blacksmith's boy, and, describing the burden of a working-class life, he remarks: "[A] thick curtain had fallen on all its [life's] interest and romance, to shut me out from anything save dull endurance" (114). Likewise, this thick curtain fell for Mrs. Joe, never to be raised again, the day her mother died and orphaned Pip. However, even though Mrs. Joe and Pip have similar desires, their opportunities to realize their dreams are quite different. Pip is allowed to go

out into the world to pursue successfully his great expectations; in contrast, Mrs. Joe has no constructive outlet for her desires, only violent outbursts, and she becomes the shrewish villainess for daring to consider a life where she might remove her apron. Hence, Mrs. Joe may be written out of the novel, but her silence cannot conceal the woman who dared to rage against her confinement at the forge for being denied access to her own great expectations.

### **Molly: Violent Murderess and Dehumanized Woman**

Similar to Mrs. Joe, Molly is depicted as a monstrous mother who has no traditional feminine traits. But unlike Mrs. Joe, the miserable working-class wife who has the security and stability of a respected and honorable husband, Molly is a violent murderess who has led an unstable and impoverished life. Dickens provides little background information on her life, except that she was acquitted of murdering her rival in love and is rumored to have murdered her daughter Estella to avenge herself against Magwitch, the child's father. Because of her shady and criminal past, Molly is an object of male fascination in the novel, reflecting the allure murderesses had during the Victorian era. In "Women Murderers in Victorian Britain," Judith Knelman explains that even though murders committed by women were rare, reports of their crimes helped to sell newspapers and broadsides (11). The reading public was completely enthralled with women who killed, and the press sensationalized the reports of murders committed by women to keep readers satisfied. Similar to Dickens who relied on the monstrous female to portray deviant women, Knelman notes that the press never described a murderess as bearing any resemblance to a woman and actually "condemned [her] as a hideous perversion" by labeling her a witch or monster to protect the image of the "delicate" woman who could not possibly commit such a heinous act (10, 14). The female murderer's condemnation in the press was also effective in influencing public sentiment concerning her fate. Because the murderess

was described as inhuman, readers were not very sympathetic to her plight, and the consensus usually leaned toward punishment and execution so that she would be “made an example of” for threatening male dominance and patriarchal norms (Knelman 10). Hence, the horrified and mesmerized male response to the murderess Molly is much the same as the public reaction to actual murderesses during the Victorian era. However, Molly’s portrait is not the monster’s tale, which the press, without a doubt, would have reported to sell papers; instead, her characterization is a poignant depiction of a woman desiring to be seen as she is: not as a monstrous beast, but as a woman who has gravely sinned, yet is human nonetheless.

Captured in the male gaze, Molly is never described as remotely human. Instead, Wemmick calls her a “wild beast tamed” (195), and Pip sees her as a hybridized image of a witch, rodent, and disease. Describing Molly, Pip observes:

Rather tall, of a lithe nimble figure, extremely pale, with large faded eyes, and a quantity of streaming hair. I cannot say whether any diseased affection of the heart caused her lips to be parted as if she were panting, and her face to bear a curious expression of suddenness and flutter; but I know that I had been to see Macbeth at the theatre, a night or two before, and that her face looked to me as if it were all disturbed by fiery air, like the faces I had seen rise out of the Witches’ caldron. (204)

According to Pip’s description, Molly is clearly no angel and even appears as though she just ascended from hell. Conditioned by prevailing sentiment on murderesses, Pip and Wemmick can see Molly only as an inhuman creature because any hint of her femininity would threaten the image of women as virtuous and moral. Therefore, Molly must appear monstrous so that she does not contaminate the womanly ideal.

Although she is certainly human, Molly's heinous act is, without question, monstrous. She stands trial for murdering a woman "ten years older, very much larger, and very much stronger" and "more a match for the man" in a jealous and furious rage over her "tramping man" (360). The murder was gruesome as the victim "was bruised and scratched and torn, and had been held by the throat at last and choked" (360). But during the trial, Molly's strength is concealed: recounting the events Wemmick reports, "[S]he was so very artfully dressed from the time of her apprehension, that she looked much slighter than she really was; in particular, her sleeves are always remembered to have been so skillfully contrived that her arms had quite a delicate look" (361). Despite the physical evidence of lacerations on the back of her hands, Molly tricks the jurors into seeing a woman, not a monster; as a result, she is acquitted of the murder charge because she appears slight and delicate, words befitting an angel, not a violent and vengeful murderess. But hiding her powerful body does not purge her of her strength. Hence, Molly still affirms the possibility of women being physically equal to men, which threatens the dominant social order, especially considering that her strength can be camouflaged. Therefore, because she is acquitted of the murder charges, Molly must still be contained and not allowed to roam free.

Molly's acquittal does not reflect that Dickens was soft on criminals, not even if they were women. Even though he understood human motivation and behavior, he was actually not particularly sympathetic toward convicted murderers. As Edgar Johnson points out in *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, even when he supported the abolition of the death penalty, a position he changed later in life in favor of private executions, his protest did not emerge from a sense of cruel and unusual punishment (672). Instead, Dickens not only questioned whether the death penalty actually deterred crime, but he also was horrified by the sensational notoriety

criminals received in the press and the mob mentality at the executions (Johnson 300, 569, 672). In a letter to the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* in which he outlined his position opposing the death penalty in preparation for an article he planned to write, Dickens asserted that rather than executions, society should “substitute a mean and shameful punishment, degrading the deed and the committer of the deed” (qtd. in Johnson 569). And lifelong degradation and suffering is Molly’s sentence because, although she is saved from the gallows and prison, she will still endure a severe punishment in Jaggers’s home.

Although Molly deserves a suitable punishment for murdering another woman, her portrait hints at enough mitigating circumstances to humanize her. Ruled by her passionate nature, her jealousy compels her to react with rage and violence when another woman threatens to steal Magwitch from her; however, her crime may be more than a lack of emotional self-control. Knelman points out that in reporting the crime, the press failed to consider the circumstances that may have driven a woman to kill, “such as the desperation of poverty and the remedy of murder” (11). But novelists, unlike the press, “could come close to justifying the destructive impulse by showing through characterisation and plot how it developed” (Knelman 13). The circumstances that may have contributed to Molly’s murderous rage may have been her economic situation. Wemmick describes Molly as a young mother who “had been married very young over the broomstick” and leading a “tramping” life in the streets of London with the criminal Magwitch (360). For Molly to lose Magwitch to another woman would leave her and her daughter Estella economically devastated. Even threatening to murder her daughter may have been an act of desperation because, as Knelman asserts, for many impoverished young mothers, “infanticide seemed the only possible answer” (13). Hence, Molly most likely murders the other woman in Magwitch’s life and threatens to murder Estella so that he will not leave her destitute



and alone. Without the protection of Magwitch, Molly and Estella would have had little hope of surviving London's criminal underworld. Although these circumstances certainly do not condone Molly's actions, understanding the etiology of her rage creates a more sympathetic portrait.

Molly's portrait also indicates that she suffers tremendously for her sins. After the trial according to Jagger's description, Molly does not seem well mentally: the "passion and the terror of death had a little shaken the woman's intellect" instilling her with a fear "of the ways of the world" (378). Jagger believes that the stress and shock of being a defendant in a death penalty trial has shaken her. But Molly, perhaps, also suffers not only from the horror of what she has done—killed a woman in a violent rage—but the loss of her daughter as well. Molly is clearly a broken woman with a great deal to bear for her sins, not a calculating fiend or wild beast, because she neither rejoices in her freedom after her acquittal nor does she even return to her tramping life; instead, she seeks sanctuary in Jagger's home and becomes his housekeeper. In "The Rape of Miss Havisham," Curt Hartog points out that she accepts "servitude for the protections it affords" (252). But her servitude turns into enslavement as Jagger sets out to tame the wild beast with the "gipsy blood" (360). Although Molly certainly escapes the horrors of spending the rest of her life in an actual Victorian prison cell, she still suffers immensely because she is always under Jagger's watchful gaze.

Because Jagger does not want Molly's violent nature to erupt, he watches her as closely as a prison guard. And to train and discipline her, Jagger reveals that "he kept down the old wild violent nature whenever he saw an inkling of its breaking out, by asserting his power over her in the old way" (378). Exactly what Jagger means by the old way is not quite clear, although it certainly hints at physical abuse. But in "Fictional License," Randall Craig suggests that the old way "refers to the fact that Jagger's clients must sell themselves, 'soul and body' in

order to obtain his services" (117). And Jaggers certainly seems to have total control of Molly during the dinner because she waits on her master and his guests with, as Craig describes, "a servile demeanor and strict obedience" (117). Pip states:

I observed that whenever she was in the room, she kept her eyes attentively on my guardian, and that she would remove her hands from any dish she put before him, hesitatingly, as if she dreaded his calling her back, and wanted him to speak when she was nigh, if he had anything to say. I fancied that I could detect in his manner a consciousness of this, and a purpose of always holding her in suspense. (Ch 26)

Because Molly is always on edge and acutely alert and suspenseful to the whims of her master, she demonstrates that she has internalized what Morris refers to as "a sense of perpetual surveillance" (*Dickens's Class* 109). Even though Jaggers keeps his eyes purposefully off of her, Molly behaves as though she is constantly under his gaze—hesitating, dreading, and never sure of herself—as if she fears Jaggers will be sharp with her or discipline her for any infraction. Because she aims to please her master with a fearful intensity, Molly's body and soul seem to belong to Jaggers

Molly has every reason to self-monitor her behavior because during dinner Jaggers grabs her wrist, much like a snake striking its prey. Pip states: "[M]y guardian, taking no heed of her, but with the side of his face turned from her, . . . Suddenly, he clapped his large hand on the housekeeper's, like a trap, as she stretched it across the table. So suddenly and smartly did he do this, that we [dinner guests] all stopped in our foolish contention" (205-206). By grabbing her wrists, Jaggers exercises the tremendous power he has over Molly, demonstrating, as Craig observes, that she is "manacled as effectively as a prisoner in the Hulks" (117). But Molly is not just imprisoned, she is humiliated as Jaggers orders her to display her powerful wrists to his

guests. When she capitulates to his demand, Jaggars scrutinizes her wrists like a scientific specimen:

“There's power here,” said Mr. Jaggars, coolly tracing out the sinews with his forefinger. “Very few men have the power of wrist that this woman has. It's remarkable what mere force of grip there is in these hands. I have had occasion to notice many hands; but I never saw stronger in that respect, man's or woman's, than these.” (206)

Jaggars is completely enthralled by her sheer strength. Because he describes her as a female perversion whose hands and wrists are so powerful that they have no comparison in the natural world, Jaggars seems to have no awareness that he is touching the body of a woman. Cohen asserts that Jaggars “exhibits a sadistic pleasure in displaying . . . the ‘wild beast tamed’” (65). Considering that Jaggars cannot bear the touch and taint of the criminal element and constantly washes his hands after he has contact with his clients, the manner in which he leisurely and luridly strokes Molly's wrist certainly suggests that he derives some erotic pleasure in having gained mastery over her. Cohen also notes that Jaggars's “delight at showing her off derives not from admiration of her strength but from pride in having controlled it” (66). Hence, Molly is Jagger's greatest conquest—a boost to his masculine ego—as he has subdued and enslaved a woman who has the strength to kill a man. Molly may have been acquitted, but she has lost her freedom because Jaggars now possesses her to do with as he pleases, including satisfying his fetish for subduing women who kill with powerful hands.

However, despite Molly's imprisonment in Jaggars's home, she still has the resolve to resist him, demonstrating that he fails to dominate her completely. When Jaggars latches on to her wrist, Molly quickly puts her free hand behind her waist. This is not the slow moving,

hesitant woman with a shaken intellect who waits to act when her master speaks. Her reaction to Jagers's grasp demonstrates that Molly is quite capable of rebelling against him. Furthermore, her reaction electrifies the scene as she seems one step away from striking Jagers with the hand she has held back from him. She not only resists, but she verbally protests: looking with "eyes attentively and entreatingly fixed upon" Jagers, Molly asserts, "Don't!" (206). When Jagers refuses to release her, she murmurs, "Master . . . Please!" (206). The moment she dares to utter *don't*, Molly becomes the subject of resistance, rather than only an object of Jagers's victimization.

Even as Molly succumbs to Jagers's coercion and holds out both her wrists for observation, she continues to thwart her objectification with her powerful gaze. Pip observes: "When she held her hands out, she took her eyes from Mr. Jagers, and turned them watchfully on every one of the rest of us [dinner guests] in succession" (206). Although Molly is objectified as the male guests scrutinize her, with her streaming hair, staring eyes, and powerful body, she challenges them by returning the gaze as the Medusa figure. In "The Situation of the Looker-On," Beth Newman explains that the "dominance" and "pleasure" the male achieves through gazing becomes "unsettling" and "disturbing" when the Medusa looks back because she "evokes the terror of castration in the male spectator, a terror that turns him to stone" (1031). Molly's gaze freezes and silences Pip and the male guests, who had been in the middle of their "foolish contention" of "baring and spanning" their arms to prove their physical prowess. And by his own testimonial, Pip is terrorized by Molly's image: "I always saw in her face, a face rising out of the caldron. Years afterwards, I made a dreadful likeness of that woman, by causing a face that had no other natural resemblance to it than it derived from flowing hair, to pass behind a bowl of flaming spirits in a dark room" (205). Revealing his fears of a powerful woman who

neither looks nor acts according to gender norms, Pip sees Molly as the witch rising from the cauldron threatening to engulf and annihilate him. Even though he cannot fathom the woman who returns his gaze, he also cannot dismiss her easily because she is profoundly unforgettable. The creature Pip imagines—witch, monster, fiend, or the Medusa—is a testament to how powerful Molly actually is simply because she disturbs Pip's perceptions of women.

However, as the Medusa figure, Molly does more than reveal male insecurities. As Newman observes, when a woman returns the gaze, she “asserts her ‘existence’ as a subject, her place outside the position of object to which the male gaze relegates her and by which it defines her” (1032). Molly may be trained and disciplined to wait on Jaggers and can cope with his sharpness and any other mental, physical, and perhaps sexual tortures he may put her through, but she challenges the male gaze that attempts to define her as a subhuman freak of nature. Molly is undeniably strong, but her strength does not make her any less human. And to assert herself as a subject with a human identity, she gazes back as the figure from “The Laughing Medusa” whom Hélène Cixous presents as laughing at men for fearing her: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing” (885). Molly can laugh because she is not the castrating and annihilating monster that the men in the novel fear or speculate about; instead, she is an erring and broken woman who lashes out defiantly when pushed to extremes. Her experiences certainly attest to a life of debauchery and horrible sin, but as her indignation and defiance under the male gaze indicate, even sinners desire to be viewed as human.

#### **Miss Havisham: Broken Hearted Angel and Avenging Recluse**

Like Molly and Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham is another monstrous mother. But unlike her lower-class counterparts, Miss Havisham had the most potential to be a proper angel because the

women from the middle class were the inspiration for the womanly ideal. However, rather than cultivating an angel, her wealth and privilege actually contribute to her downfall because she is raised, not in a spiritual haven, but in a lavish and opulent home where materialism and carnality have displaced morality and piety. Miss Havisham's father is "very rich and very proud" (176) and spoils and indulges his motherless daughter, denying her nothing and inciting her prideful and willful nature. His pride also forces him to hide his second marriage to the family cook until after she passes away and leaves him to raise their son. The son, Arthur, grows up, like his half-sister, with every economic and social advantage, but he still turns out "riotous, extravagant, undutiful—altogether bad" (176). Hence, Miss Havisham's home environment appears to have done little to encourage any angelic traits. Moreover, because she fails to become an angel amidst the negative influences in Satis House, she also shatters the myth that women were naturally prone to goodness and virtue.

Not only does Miss Havisham's upbringing suggest that a middle-class birth is no guarantee that a woman will mature into a proper angel, but her childhood at Satis House also most likely disempowered her. In "A Re-Vision of Miss Havisham," Linda Raphael observes that as the daughter of a wealthy brewer, Miss Havisham would have grown up with a sense that she was essentially "useless—and unthreatening—in the marketplace" and her destiny was to "support and embellish with her home-bound presence the role of the males in her life" (404). In addition to preparing her only for a mere ornamental and subordinate position within her family, gender norms also would have set up Miss Havisham for victimization by teaching her subservience to men, thereby leaving her extremely vulnerable to predators (Raphael 404-405). Moreover, because society placed so much pressure on women to marry, they, like Miss Havisham, were at risk of entering into bad relationships in the rush to find a spouse (Raphael

405-406). Hence, Miss Havisham's upbringing at Satis House leaves her ill-suited to confront the corruption and evil that she eventually encounters.

Miss Havisham's disastrous romance with Compeyson indicates just how inadequately prepared she is to cope and thrive in the real world. After her father's death, Miss Havisham as an heiress is vulnerable to anyone who might try to take advantage of her youth and wealth. Unfortunately, she falls passionately and madly in love with a charming, yet evil swindler, Compeyson. Recounting the events of how the "showy-man" who "made love to Miss Havisham" victimizes her, Herbert states:

[A]ll the susceptibility she possessed, certainly came out then, and she passionately loved him. There is no doubt that she perfectly idolized him. He practised on her affection in that systematic way, that he got great sums of money from her, and he induced her to buy her brother out of a share in the brewery (which had been weakly left him by his father) at an immense price, on the plea that when he was her husband he must hold and manage it all. (177)

Miss Havisham's desire for Compeyson is reckless and beyond reason as she is "too haughty and too much in love, to be advised by any one," even Matthew Pocket, who sincerely has her best interest in mind when he tries to warn her that she is doing too much for Compeyson and making herself "too unreservedly in his powers" (177). Miss Havisham's relationship with Compeyson is no innocent romance, but clearly a torrid love affair that brings her to the brink of economic, social, and sexual ruin. Although her passionate and willful nature certainly compels Miss Havisham to love with no self-restraint, her utter idolization, submission, and desire to please Compeyson would have been exactly what gender norms would have taught her: subservience and subordination to men. Moreover, Compeyson most likely easily sways Miss Havisham into a

union because marriage and children would have been what society expected from her. Hence, because Miss Havisham is a victim of her burning passions, her class, and her gender, her fall is complex.

Because Miss Havisham is so helpless under Compeyson's power, the romance ends badly. Miss Havisham is left humiliated and broken hearted after she discovers on her wedding day that Compeyson has schemed with her brother to swindle her. Miss Havisham retreats to her home and rages as a recluse as much as she did a woman in love. She not only withdraws from the world, but she attempts to freeze time by laying waste to her entire estate at the exact moment that all her hopes and desires were crushed when she received the letter from Compeyson at twenty minutes to nine. The once thriving brewery and lavish home are derelict and dilapidated, and the vibrant gardens are a rank and overgrown wilderness of weeds and deformed fruit and vegetation. The estate resembles an amalgamation of both cemetery and prison with images of impenetrable barricades and rot and decay. When Pumblechook brings him to Satis House to visit, Pip observes: "[W]e came to Miss Havisham's house, which was of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up: of those that remained, all the lower rustily barred" (68). The brewery stands open, "empty and disused" (69), and "in a by-yard, there was a wilderness of empty casks, which had a certain sour remembrance of better days lingering about them; but it was too sour to be accepted as a sample of the beer that was gone" (76). As the jilted bride, Miss Havisham vents her pain and humiliation by destroying the lucrative estate that made her such an easy target for victimization. Moreover, by retreating from the world and allowing her estate to become as uninviting, unproductive, and barren as her spinster's body, Miss Havisham puts an end to the hopes she once had of presiding over Satis House as a wife to a loving husband and mother to a



brood of children. And she certainly has no intention of preserving her home in proper angelic fashion as a moral sanctuary against the ills of society. In other words, Miss Havisham will never allow herself to become what society expects from her—the Angel in the House.

By abandoning her estate, Miss Havisham is also rejecting her economic duty to her family as a wealthy woman. Walsh observes that Miss Havisham's portrait establishes her as a *femme sole*, so she can conduct her financial affairs, such as closing the brewery, without approval from a male figure (74). During the Victorian era, wealthy women were expected to become the benefactresses of their male relatives; however, Miss Havisham, who has the freedom to dispose of her income as she chooses, not only does not offer financial assistance to her male relatives, but she also refuses to allow them any opportunity to profit from the brewery by ceasing operations (Walsh 89-96). Hence, Miss Havisham thwarts not just the womanly ideal but also the norms on spinsterhood.

Similar to her neglected estate, Miss Havisham also lays waste to her body as she becomes the grotesque and perverted bride. She has never once removed her bridal dress, veil, jewels, or the one shoe she was wearing at the exact moment her heart was broken. Describing the "strangest lady" he ever has seen, Pip states:

I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, 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. (71)

Miss Havisham is a corpse-like spectacle entombed in Satis House because even though she attempts to freeze time, time cannot stop for her. However, although her pain is physically and emotionally devastating, her monstrous image still remains a powerful testament to the reality—the experience—of her broken heart. Within her death-in-life existence as a recluse is a woman still passionately furious and very much alive, despite her wasted appearance. In “Beating and Cringing: *Great Expectations*,” A. L. French observes that the world “has let her down” (158), and by closing the brewery, retreating to Satis House, and refusing to remove her bridal dress, Miss Havisham rejects the very source—the Angel in the House—of what has let her down.

Miss Havisham’s perversion of the angelic bride extends to the wedding feast that stands entombed in an airless and sunless room decaying and feasted upon by spiders, beetles, and mice. Describing the horror of the feast that was never celebrated, never consumed, Pip states:

The most prominent object was a long table with a tablecloth spread on it, as if a feast had been in preparation when the house and the clocks all stopped together. An epergne or centrepiece of some kind was in the middle of this cloth; it was so heavily overhung with cobwebs that its form was quite undistinguishable; and, as I looked along the yellow expanse out of which I remember its seeming to grow, like a black fungus, I saw speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies running home to it, and running out from it. (94)

Similar to her ruined gardens that continue to sprout weeds and deformed vegetables and her frail and decrepit body that is still energized by a raging and mad mind, the images of life and death inside the bridal chamber are just as ambiguous: though long moldered into a mountain of rot no longer fit for human consumption, the hideous bridal cake fuels Miss Havisham’s fury,

just as it feeds a host of vermin. Explaining the symbolism of the wedding feast, Shuli Barzilai, in "Dickens's *Great Expectations*, the Motive of Moral Masochism," asserts:

Miss Havisham is represented by the many spiders running in and out of the wedding cake which is an image of her thwarted expectations of nourishment. This conspicuous failure of consumption—the cake that was not eaten, the marriage that was not consummated—brings out the 'ravenous intensity,' . . . the oral aggression or spider hunger in Miss Havisham. (60)

All that Miss Havisham wished for in her youth—to become Compeyson's wife and bear his children—is represented in the image of the diseased mass of the uneaten bridal cake. And Miss Havisham feasts upon this image of her heartbreak to strengthen her resolve to continue spinning her ghastly web of plots to curse all men for the pain and humiliation she has endured.

Miss Havisham is unarguably a monstrous spinster, but her portrait also reveals a woman who is fiercely determined to govern the course of her life. Escaping from the world and attempting to freeze time does not reflect that Miss Havisham has lost control of her life. Instead, as J. Hillis Miller, in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* asserts, she is ultimately responsible for her life because she "chooses to make her betrayal the central event" of her entire life (257). Miss Havisham refuses to respond to her heartache stoically and sears her pain on her body and soul so that she will never forget because, as Miller asserts, "she does not want to escape the harsh reality of her betrayal, and return to the time when she was living in an illusory world of innocence, security, and as she thought, reciprocal love. She wants, rather, to crystallize her grief and bereavement into an eternal moment of shock and sorrow" (256). Her retreat from the world is not a sign of weakness, but as Miller notes, her escape demonstrates "a will strong as iron" to shut out any possibility of change in her life (258). Hence, Miss

Havisham is determined after her heartbreak to secure her position as the victimizer, not the victim, and she attempts to order and shape her world as a constant reminder of the day her heart was broken so that she will never risk losing her self-governance again. Her methods may appear mad and monstrous, but her portrait reflects a powerful resistance to return to the young woman she was under the romantic spell of Compeyson: inferior, susceptible, submissive, and weak.

Into her macabre world, Miss Havisham brings her adopted daughter Estella, and just as she rages as a recluse, she rages as a monstrous mother. Because Estella promises to be very beautiful, Miss Havisham schemes to avenge her broken heart by teaching her adoptive daughter to break the hearts of men. Subsequently, Estella becomes the object of emotional abuse and manipulation: a pawn in her adoptive mother's plot to wreak havoc on men. Miss Havisham's shaping of Estella into a *femme fatale* is nothing less than tampering with creation, which is, as Iain Crawford points out in "Pip and the Monster," similar to Victor Frankenstein creating his monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (631). But unlike Victor, Miss Havisham does not reject her creation; instead, she is a lurid and ghastly mother who consumes and savors her creation's every word, gesture, and expression. When Estella returns from Paris more beautiful and dazzling than ever, Pip states:

[Miss Havisham] was even more dreadfully fond of Estella than she had been when I last saw them together; . . . for there was something positively dreadful in the energy of her looks and embraces. She hung upon Estella's beauty, hung upon her words, hung upon her gestures, and sat mumbling her own trembling fingers while she looked at her, as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she had reared. (282)

Resembling the fidgety spiders that feast upon her bridal cake, Miss Havisham seethes with agitated and twisted anticipation at having a younger version of herself to do her bidding and to relive her youth as a predatory female. Becoming an adoptive mother fails to arouse in Miss Havisham any propensity to gently and selflessly nurture; instead, her rearing of her daughter is perverse because she desires nothing less than to devour and possess Estella, to own her body and soul.

Miss Havisham believes she can possess Estella by ensuring that her adoptive daughter never loves anyone, so she teaches her that love is: “blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter” (229). Hence, Miss Havisham does not teach Estella the selfless and virtuous love that, as Mintz explains, Victorians “identified as the essence of the Christian life, a palpable expression of Christian principles” (146). Nor does Miss Havisham instill in Estella the traditional Victorian belief that the love of a woman, as Mintz notes, is a source of “altruistic emotion and consolidation that could be found nowhere else” during an era “characterized by selfish greed” (103). Instead, Miss Havisham perverts the Angel in the House—the beacon of love and virtue—by teaching Estella that to love is to risk destruction and annihilation. Obviously, Miss Havisham’s power over Estella is immense since she is able to brainwash Estella into believing love—a deep and tender emotion—is an evil force.

Because Miss Havisham perverts the Angel in the House, she is severely punished. Things begin to fall apart when she realizes that her teachings have backfired and she has “created a monster” (French 148) who is incapable of loving anyone, not even her adoptive mother. Indeed, Miss Havisham is guilty of monster making because, by her own admission, she

has stolen "Estella's heart and put ice in its place" (366). Although she certainly has a list of perversions, stealing Estella's heart is Miss Havisham's most egregious and unnatural act as a woman because it reflects that she is a selfishly bad mother. Pip affirms this when he remarks, "That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride, found vengeance in" (365). Miss Havisham put her desires to protect herself and seek vengeance above Estella's need for love and nurture. This is an unpardonable sin for Dickens who, as Hartog asserts, "demands" that his female characters demonstrate a love that is "protective, selfless, and self-sacrificing" (248). And for this singular, yet enormous transgression, Miss Havisham suffers her second heartbreak when she is faced with the consequences of her actions: a daughter with a frozen heart. Miss Havisham's pain is devastating, and she is a "miserable sight to see" as she moans and sways herself on her chair and eventually is prostrate upon the floor, her "grey hair . . . all adrift upon the ground, among the other bridal wrecks" (286). Her trajectory from the powerful and monstrous creature to an abject and pitiful woman is tragically ironic because all her plotting and scheming to protect herself and seek revenge have backfired and caused her more pain and suffering. However, since the disaster of her life is her own doing, Miss Havisham's downfall still reflects her agency and autonomy because, although misguided, she is responsible for the decisions she has made in reaction to her victimization.

In addition to her tears and prostration, Miss Havisham is also humbled and softened for her transgressions. When Pip returns to see Miss Havisham after Estella leaves Satis House to marry Drummle, he finds the once steely spinster completely changed because, as she admits, she wants to prove to Pip that she is "not all stone" and has a human heart (363). Miss Havisham attempts to make amends for the pain she has inflicted upon those close to her: she

refers to Pip as “my Dear,” which Pip suggests reflects that she has developed “an earnest womanly compassion” for him (366); she agrees to honor Pip’s secret financial commitment to Herbert’s business adventure; she asks Pip how she can “serve” him (364); and referring to the writing tablet, she asks Pip, “If you can ever write under my name, ‘I forgive her’ long after my broken heart has turned to dust—pray do it!” (364). Describing her as she kneels before him, Pip states, “She . . . dropped on her knees at my feet; with her folded hands raised to me in the manner in which, when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole, they must often have been raised to heaven from her mother's side” (365). And on the ground, Miss Havisham despairingly cries, “What have I done! What have I done!” (365). Her desperate desire to repair the damage she has caused and her raw and anguished admission of guilt and plea for forgiveness are not trite; instead, they show that she sincerely desires to set things aright. French asserts that Miss Havisham’s softening demonstrates “really painful insight” and reflects that she has experienced true growth and development in her “genuinely clearer and more humane understanding of what she has done” (159, 160). Miss Havisham’s attempt to make amends and seek forgiveness, her acknowledgement that her private battle has harmed others, and her awareness that she has done something that she cannot bear—injuring Estella by numbing her emotions—demonstrate her subjectivity as a woman who has reprehensibly erred, but who also accepts responsibility for the tragic outcomes.

Despite her suffering and transformation, Miss Havisham pays the ultimate price for her transgressions: death by a brutal burning. However, just as she rages as a recluse, she rages in her death throes. Pip watches horrified as her dress catches fire by the hearth and recounts: “I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment, I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was

high" (368). Pip's attempt to rescue Miss Havisham is just as violent as the burning because he must tackle her to the ground in an attempt to smother the flames. Pip reports: "[W]e were on the ground struggling like desperate enemies, and that the closer I covered her, the more wildly she shrieked and tried to free herself; . . . I still held her forcibly down with all my strength, like a prisoner who might escape" (368). Hence, Pip must dominate and imprison Miss Havisham in order to save her. Hartog argues that the brutality that Pip exerts in subduing and rescuing Miss Havisham is a metaphoric rape that is indicative of his desire to avenge himself against the women in the novel for failing "to accept feminine identity" (260). However, overpowering Miss Havisham and the flames is not easy because she fiercely resists Pip, shrieking and struggling wildly to free herself from his grasp. In fact, Pip must use all his force to hold her down because the flames, which Hartog argues symbolize Miss Havisham's repressed sexuality and passion, have aroused the frail spinster "like a flaring of erotic desire" (Hartog 260). Therefore, Pip must smother these flames not just to save her life, but to bring her back to realm of the womanly ideal by purifying her of her passion, eroticism, and power. By extinguishing the flames, Pip forces Miss Havisham into submission, but the battle between the two is obviously hard fought because Pip is left injured and swooning. Therefore, the fierce struggle suggests that Miss Havisham rejects Pip's dominance over her as well as the purification process and, thusly, would rather risk physical harm and even death instead of accepting a traditional feminine identity.

Although Miss Havisham rebels against Pip's dominance, her corporeal ruin is complete after the fatal shock of the fire. She lies wounded on the bridal feast table, and "every vestige" of the withered and yellow bridal dress has burned from her body and has been replaced by white wool dressings and a white sheet (369), which evokes the image of a shroud. John Cunningham, in "Christian Allusion, Comedic Structure, and the Metaphor of Baptism in *Great Expectations*,"



suggests that Miss Havisham's white shroud is "the baptismal change of apparel" that reflects her release of her old life (44). The burning flames have essentially purged her of her passion and power; however, although her unrestrained, excessive, and willful nature prior to the fire was certainly diseased and mad, it was still her life-giving force. Hence, she cannot be forced so abruptly into the mold of angelic perfection and survive because the effects are too shocking since she has never been a passive, docile, and passionless female. Moreover, despite her baptism by fire, Pip notices that as she nears death "the phantom air of something that had been and was changed, was still upon her" (369). Even a pristine white baptismal cover fails to conceal the remnants of her powerful and unruly nature, which cling to her and animate the deafening silence of her shrouded body as she lies insensible on the bridal feast table. Hence, to the very end, Miss Havisham continues to rebel against the passive angel by refusing to submit—even to death.

Miss Havisham's silence is also a powerful testament to the struggle she endures to envision a female identity not defined by patriarchal norms. Female passion and power were not normalized during the Victorian era, which leaves Miss Havisham marginalized, but resistant to her lack of subjective space within the dominant social order. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that the marginalized are limited to their specific contexts and situations when they resist; therefore, when they rebel against domination, "[p]eople have to make do with what they have" (18), which women, including Miss Havisham, have turned into an art form and a means of survival throughout history. Miss Havisham's monstrous plotting and scheming to protect herself are the tactics she employs to make do in a male-dominated world in order to establish her subjectivity, autonomy, and identity contrary to established gender norms.

However, Miss Havisham's desire to fashion an identity based upon her experiences clashes with Pip's attempt to define her. The first time Pip visits Satis House, he captures Miss Havisham in his gaze when he looks upon her reflection in her gilded dressing mirror. The image Pip sees is a breathing corpse who nearly makes him cry out in horror. Pip remarks:

Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. 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 the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. (71)

Pip does not see any resemblance to a woman reflected in the mirror; instead, he only sees a monster. Gilbert and Gubar point out that the monstrous image caught in the mirror by the male gaze represents the "mythic masks male artists have fastened over the human face" (17). Hence, Pip cannot remove this mask to see Miss Havisham for the woman she is. In contrast, when Miss Havisham looks into the mirror, she does not see a monster; instead, she sees herself as a woman that the male dominated social order refuses to acknowledge because she perverts the Angel in the House. When the monstrous woman gazes upon her reflection, she is "driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self" (Gilbert and Guber 37). She has "an invincible sense of her own autonomy, her own interiority: she has a sense, to paraphrase Chaucer's Wife of Bath, of the authority of her own experience" (Gilbert and Guber 16). Therefore, Miss Havisham does not gaze upon her image narcissistically; instead, as a reclusive spinster, she has turned inward since she has given up all prospects of ever becoming a traditional wife and mother, and she studies her image in the mirror searching for a self based upon the experiences of her victimization and subsequent empowerment and agency: a self with

an identity she forges herself, rather than having one imposed upon her based upon the womanly ideal.

The tension between the images Pip and Miss Havisham each see in the mirror becomes apparent when she notices him looking at her reflection. She mutters, "So new to him . . . so old to me; so strange to him, so familiar to me; so melancholy to both of us!" (72). The new, strange, melancholic object of Pip's gaze that is trapped in the mirror is a monstrous perversion; whereas, the old, familiar image Miss Havisham sees is the woman she knows herself to be: passionate, furious, powerful, and with a broken, yet beating heart. And years later after their first meeting, Miss Havisham, with much more ferocity than when he was a young boy, lashes out against Pip after he chastises her for being unkind to him because she let him believe that she was his benefactress to punish her self-seeking relatives. Responding sharply to Pip's criticism, Miss Havisham, "striking her stick upon the floor and flashing into wrath," cries out: "[W]ho am I, for God's sake, that I should be kind. . . . What has been my history, that I should be at pains of entreating them, or you, not to have it so" (331). Miss Havisham's angry response indicates that Pip's scolding is an affront to her because it denies all her experiences as the smitten who became the smiter. Her startling fury forces Pip not only to consider her life but to acknowledge that her personal experiences have left her with no desire and no reason to assume the role of fairy godmother or kind benefactress because to do so would once again place her in a position of risking susceptibility and victimization. Miss Havisham absolutely refuses to allow Pip's charges of unkindness either to make her feel guilty or apologetic or even to soften her; instead, her words do not just subvert Pip's reproach, but they provoke his submission because he is forced to admit that he was essentially wrong to have made the complaint: Pip remarks, "It was a weak complaint to have made, and I had not meant to make it. I told her so" (331). Hence,

Miss Havisham certainly knows that the patriarchal voice in the mirror shouts at her witch, monster, freak, but empowered with the authority of her experiences, she demands recognition when she shouts back human being when she dares to ask with anguish not “What am I?” but “Who am I?”

In the end, Miss Havisham’s last wish is for Estella to forgive her and to understand that by teaching her to be proud, hard, and strong, she was trying to protect her from her personal experiences, her “own fate,” of being used for her beauty and fortune (366). She goes to her death muttering repeatedly: “What have I done! . . . When she first came, I meant to save her from misery like mine. . . . Take the pencil and write under my name, ‘I forgive her!’” (369). Miss Havisham desires the pen to tell her story so that she is not misread or misunderstood. In “Calligraphy and Code” Murray Baumgarten points out that “writing is not only a physical actuality in this novel but a metaphor used by the characters to describe and account for their own lives” (228). However, Miss Havisham is denied the pen, and Pip, the male authority, will ultimately tell her story and define her life, and because she cannot author her own life, she struggles to make Pip understand her. During their last meeting before the fire, Miss Havisham tells Pip, “If you knew all my story, . . . you would have some compassion for me and a better understanding of me” (366). Ultimately, although Pip believes he knows her story, he, like her audience, is never really privileged to know her just from the fragments of information gathered from Herbert and Jaggers. Similar to her life, her story is unfinished and never brought to closure because, although the effects of her crippling heartbreak are evident, Miss Havisham takes to her grave her secrets since she really never reveals her version of the failed romance, her self-imposed exile, and her desire for vengeance. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, “a life of female rebellion, of ‘significant action’ is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous

pen tells a terrible story” (36). The last image of Miss Havisham—burned, concealed, silenced—attests to the grueling struggle she faced when she attempted to become the author of her own life in a male dominated world, to tell her story that may admit that she was indeed *monstrous*, but not a *monster*.

### **Estella: Abused Ice Princess and Strong Survivor**

In contrast to Miss Havisham, her adoptive daughter Estella is not born into wealth and privilege. She is the biological daughter of the murderess Molly and the criminal Magwitch. Jaggers convinces Molly that he will do his best to defend her against the murder charges if she agrees to turn her daughter over to him so that his client, Miss Havisham, can adopt her (377). And just as the helpless child Estella is “no party to the compact” (284) when the arrangements are made for her adoption, she is also no party to the compact when Miss Havisham decides that she will coerce her adoptive daughter into avenging her broken heart. Rather than raising an Angel in the House, Miss Havisham rears a foot soldier in her war against men. However, despite her horrendous abuse, Estella demonstrates a remarkable trajectory from victimization to resistance, to freedom in her desire to fashion an identity independent of the domineering Miss Havisham. Hers is, indeed, not a portrait of just an ice princess, as she has often been labeled, but of a young woman whose only option is to freeze her heart in order to survive her horrible abuse without losing her mind.

Although Estella is born into poverty, her upbringing is the opposite of Pip’s, a common blacksmith’s boy. As Miss Havisham’s adopted daughter, she is afforded every opportunity for education and refinement. But Miss Havisham is no fairy godmother who swoops down to save Estella from a life of treachery and doom in London’s criminal world; instead, as Hilary Schor explains in “If He Should Turn to and Beat Her,” Miss Havisham “hired her, as a child, to break

hearts" (550); hence, Estella is dehumanized and treated like a "commodity" to be "exchanged" or "to bring profit" (547-548). The profit Miss Havisham gains is the satisfaction of avenging her broken heart and having Estella's love and devotion all to herself. Subsequently, Estella never experiences the unconditional love that Biddy, Joe, and Magwitch so selflessly bestow upon Pip; instead, she is victimized by Miss Havisham's obsessive, destructive, and conditional love—a love that is measured in the number of hearts she breaks. Miss Havisham actually treats Estella, as Barzilai explains, like "a plaything, a toy to be decked in finery and jewels, wound up and set out into the world . . . to wreak vengeance on men" (55-56). And after Miss Havisham winds up her very own life-size doll, which she has created, Estella marches out into the world to inflict havoc by enticing and ensnaring her potential victims who will find her completely irresistible, only to have their hearts broken. Therefore, men will gaze upon her, admire her, desire her, and even fall in love with her, but she will always remain like the star she is to Pip, totally out of reach and impenetrable

Estella clearly understands that when Miss Havisham adopted her, her freedom was relinquished. She conducts herself, as she admits, never "unfaithful," "false" or "unmindful" to her adoptive mother's lessons and has never been guilty of "giving admission" in her heart to anyone (284, 285). Miss Havisham shapes her into a *femme fatale* rather than allowing her to mature and develop normally. As a result, Estella believes that she has no control over her life and tells her adoptive mother: "I have said that I owe everything to you. All I possess is freely yours. All that you have given me, is at your command to have again. Beyond that, I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities" (284). Estella has nothing to give to Miss Havisham other than her beautiful body to do with as she will. In "Listening to Estella," Margaret Flanders Darby argues that

Estella is so broken and “alienation [is] so complete that self-regard finds its ultimate expression only in self-abandonment” (217). Estella’s fragmentation compels her to see herself only as an empty and icy vessel with no heart, no interiority. After his declaration of love to her, Estella tells Pip: “[T]hat there are sentiments, fancies—I don’t know how to call them—which I am not able to comprehend. When you say you love me, I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there” (333). Clearly, Miss Havisham’s victimization of Estella has not only trained her to fulfill her duty to break hearts, but her methods have enslaved her adoptive daughter and severely compromised her emotional well-being.

Even Pip is guilty of objectifying Estella, which further denies her any opportunity to develop normal social relations. Pip admits that his love for her is inseparable from his desire for economic wealth and social achievement: “Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood” (225). Pip, like Miss Havisham, desires more to possess her than to love her because, as Martina Sciolino argues in “Woman as Object of Exchange,” “winning Estella” will reflect the “social success” he so desperately desires: Estella is the “prize for the gentleman Pip hopes to become” (100,107). Blinded by his great expectations, Pip refuses to acknowledge that the regal and refined Estella is no star and no princess, nor does she ever aspire to be any of these things. Darby points out that even though Pip tries to make Estella his heroine, she is not only “uncomfortable” in this position, but she also refuses “to play the role Pip assigns her in his chivalrous romance” (217, 220). Pip simply cannot fathom that coldness and hardness can reside in such a beauty, and he believes her sleeping heart will one day awaken. After Estella tells Pip that she has no heart, he remarks, “I got through some jargon to the effect that I took the liberty

of doubting that. That I knew better. That there could be no such beauty without it" (226). And when Estella scolds him for not listening to her, Pip states, "I thought and hoped you could not mean it. You, so young, untried, and beautiful, Estella! Surely it is not in Nature" (333). A beautiful woman without a heart is an impossibility for Pip. Because he is in love with what she represents—his great expectations—he fails to acknowledge that she has no heart, and he, therefore, rejects the real Estella: a shattered woman with a sordid history and abusive upbringing. Although Estella is the object of Pip's love, desire, and worship, as long as he continues to see her as his star, Pip will add to the chaos and dysfunction of her life because he will reaffirm for her that people are used for gain and denied their humanity.

Although Estella's victimization and objectification—her experiences—without a doubt shatter her psyche, they also make her stronger as she never resigns herself to her fate and struggles for agency and autonomy. Estella actually deploys tactics to resist her victimization, demonstrating her drive toward independence and her own identity. For instance, Estella follows Miss Havisham's orders to break hearts, but she refuses to break Pip's. Pip certainly falls vainly in love with her, but other than her refinement and beauty, Estella really does nothing to win his heart. As children, she actually treats him cruelly: taunting him for his coarse and unpolished manners, insolently handing his lunch to him as if he "were a dog in disgrace," and slapping him (75). Estella continues to treat Pip treacherously, but she never gives him the slightest indication that she may one day be interested romantically in him. Therefore, Pip essentially falls in love with Estella at his own risk and must bear the responsibility. Estella may be guilty of bad behavior, but she is not guilty of deceiving Pip into falling in love with her. Hence, despite Miss Havisham's attempt to maintain total power over Estella, she is still able to rebel so that she can pursue her desires.



By not breaking Pip's heart, Estella also reveals exactly what she needs from him: his friendship. When she returns from her education abroad, Estella tells Pip that since they are to be thrown together, he must take her warning that she has no heart, "no softness there, no—sympathy—sentiment—nonsense" (227). This is no silly girl talk, but a confession to reveal her true nature to Pip, rather than hiding her monstrosities. Estella obviously trusts Pip and thinks highly of him to expose herself so openly and honestly. Revealing her high regard of him, Estella tells Pip that he does not need to worry that her scheming relatives' scornful misrepresentations of him will ever harm his reputation with Miss Havisham: "[Y]ou may set your mind at rest that these people never will—never would, in hundred years—impair your ground with Miss Havisham, in any particular, great or small. Second, I am beholden to you as the cause of their being so busy and so mean in vain, and there is my hand upon it" (252). Her frankness reveals that Estella is allowing Pip entrance into her strange world. As Darby notes, by seeking Pip's friendship she is offering him a role that is "quite different from her other admirers" (221). Hence, although Estella rejects Pip as a lover, she certainly does not reject him as a friend, a position that no one else is privileged to have—not even Miss Havisham. Even though Pip fails to realize that she is offering her friendship and he continues to believe that she tries to attract him by making herself winning, Estella, nevertheless, demonstrates her subjectivity by asserting her needs: a friend who could have helped her cope with her bizarre life.

Estella not only rejects her mother's demand that she break Pip's heart, but she also acts independently when she attempts to protect him. When the two are together in London, Estella continues to caution Pip that he should not misconstrue their spending time together as anything else than what it is: Miss Havisham's desire. Estella tells Pip: "We have no choice, you and I,

but to obey our instructions. We are not free to follow our own devices, you and I" (250). She also assures him that she has no intention of romantically ensnaring him. When Pip becomes jealous of the attention she throws to Drummle, Estella asks, "Do you want me then . . . to deceive and entrap you?" (291); and when Pip asks her if she deceives and traps Drummle, she replies honestly, "Yes, and many others—all of them but you" (291). Darby suggests that even though Estella may not have a heart for love, she demonstrates toward Pip that "she has a heart for kindness" (224). Hence, although she cannot love him, Estella's heart is not completely frozen because she still has enough platonic feeling for Pip to attempt to shield him from Miss Havisham's schemes. Despite her adoptive mother's efforts to ensure that she will never develop feelings for anyone, Estella demonstrates that Miss Havisham fails to completely shape and mold her adoptive daughter because she continues to forge an identity that is marked by her own willful nature and contrary to her mother's manipulation and teachings.

Not only does Estella's portrait reflect her drive toward her own identity, but she also demonstrates a keen intellect that her adoptive mother cannot suppress. Even though Estella endures a traumatic upbringing, beginning as a child, she is contemplative and reflective; therefore, she is able to make sense of the disorder that engulfs her, which ultimately empowers her and helps her to survive without turning into a mad recluse like Miss Havisham. For example, when Pip first comes to visit, Estella explains to him how Satis House came to be named: "Its other name was Satis; which is Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew, or all three—or all one to me—for enough. . . . [B]ut it meant more than it said. It meant, when it was given, that whoever had this house, could want nothing else. They must have been easily satisfied in those days" (78). As a child, Estella already knows from her experiences what will take Pip nearly twenty years to discover: wealth and materialism do not lead to happiness and fulfillment.

Estella demonstrates an insightfulness and wisdom beyond her years that develop despite Miss Havisham's teachings. Unlike her monomaniacal adoptive mother, Estella is able to examine and analyze the world broadly, rather than focusing on vengeance and breaking hearts. Miss Havisham may have stolen Estella's heart and may have brainwashed her on matters of love, but she cannot completely warp her adoptive daughter's mind.

Estella's intellect does not just help her to understand the world, but it also helps her to develop a self-awareness of how she came to be a heartless creature. Wise to her conniving relatives and scheming adoptive mother, Estella explains to Pip the impact they have had on her life:

For you were not brought up in that strange house from a mere baby.—I was. You had not your little wits sharpened by their intriguing against you, suppressed and defenceless, under the mask of sympathy and pity and what not that is soft and soothing.—I had. You did not gradually open your round childish eyes wider and wider to the discovery of that impostor of a woman who calculates her stores of peace of mind for when she wakes up in the night.—I did. (252)

Estella has no one other than leaching relatives and a monstrous adoptive mother, which contrasts with Pip who has Joe's love to sanctify his home at the forge and Bidley as his moral compass to counter his sister's abuse. Even though he fails to see her as she is, Estella understands why she and Pip are emotionally, temperamentally, and intellectually so far apart: Pip's childhood at the forge cannot compare to Estella's war zone in Satis House. Hence, Estella's astuteness demonstrates that even though she is her adoptive mother's puppet, Miss Havisham cannot prevent Estella from developing her intellectual curiosity, which facilitates her understanding of not just her own nature, but human nature in general.

Because Estella understands herself, she is able to explain to Miss Havisham why her perverse teachings have made her incapable of ever fulfilling her adoptive mother's desire for a loving daughter. Comparing love to daylight, Estella provocatively asks Miss Havisham:

[I]f you had taught her, from the dawn of her intelligence, with your utmost energy and might, that there was such a thing as daylight, but that it was made to be her enemy and destroyer, and she must always turn against it, for it had blighted you and would else blight her;—if you had done this, and then, for a purpose, had wanted her to take naturally to the daylight and she could not do it, you would have been disappointed and angry? (286)

Estella articulates to Miss Havisham with tremendous clarity that she is unable to love her because she has been taught that love will destroy her. She also admonishes her adoptive mother for being so shocked by her admission and tells Miss Havisham that she must accept the monstrous daughter she has created: proud, cold, willful, and haughty. Trying to provoke her adoptive mother to acknowledge the consequences of her manipulation, Estella asserts, "I am what you have made me. Take all the praise; take all the blame; take all the success, take all the failure, in short take me" (284). Estella is not only aware of how her nature has been formed, but she also understands that Miss Havisham must bear the responsibility for shaping her daughter without her consent. Estella remarks to Miss Havisham: "The success is not mine, the failure is not mine, but the two together make me" (286). However, Estella's self-awareness is not a resignation to a life of endless manipulation and victimization, nor does it result in an endless cycle of blaming Miss Havisham or feeling sorry for herself; instead, she is able to move forward as best she can amidst the disorder that marks her life, demonstrating a desire for freedom despite her mother's domination.

Although she is undeniably emotionally scarred, Estella's self-awareness also fosters her self-acceptance of who she is. Despite her monstrous reputation, there is no indication that Estella would look in the mirror and discover rottenness, evil, monstrosity, or even shame trapped in the reflection just because she deviates from the womanly ideal, nor does she despair because she cannot fulfill Pip's and Miss Havisham's desires. Should Estella look into the mirror, she will not hear the patriarchal voice of authority; instead, she will only hear her voice trying to figure out who she is and wants to be. Demonstrating her self-acceptance when Pip tries to convince her that it cannot be possibly true that she has no heart, Estella starkly replies, "It is in *my* nature, . . . It is in the nature formed within me" (333). Hence, Estella, unlike Pip, never deceives herself into believing that she is something that she is not.

Estella's victimization ultimately empowers her as she learns how to dominate and victimize others. Under Miss Havisham's tutelage, Estella learns how to gain mastery over her admirers. Miss Havisham invites Pip to Satis House not to play at childish games, but for Estella to hone her heartbreaking skills. And Estella has been well instructed because she strikes Pip where it hurts him most: his lack of self-esteem because of his humble origins. To Pip's horror, Estella complains to Miss Havisham for having to play with a common blacksmith's boy: "He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy! . . . And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!" (73). Estella gains mastery over Pip by making him feel inferior in comparison to her refinement, a pattern that will mark their relationship all the way into adulthood. And eventually Estella also gains power over her adoptive mother in an ironic case of the slave becoming the master. Tambling observes that when Miss Havisham realizes how she has created a daughter who cannot love her, she is transformed from the powerful "beater" to the "cringer" with a broken heart (27). Miss Havisham rules over her adoptive daughter, her "pride and hope" (103), to

coerce her into breaking the hearts of men with no mercy, but Estella learns her lessons too well because she ultimately breaks Miss Havisham's heart. Hence, because learning how to gain mastery instills her with the will to stand up to Miss Havisham, Estella ultimately turns her victimization to her advantage and gains her freedom.

After Estella's victory in London, Miss Havisham's loss of power over her adoptive daughter becomes apparent. Although Estella complies with Miss Havisham's demand to break hearts, she takes no pleasure in adding names to her roll of conquests. Dissatisfied, Estella ultimately grows weary and realizes that her life holds too "few charms," and she is compelled to make changes (335). Against Miss Havisham's wishes, she plans her escape by agreeing to marry Drummle. Darby argues that Estella has little self-worth after suffering for so long from Miss Havisham's abuse; therefore, she "does not seem to care much whom she marries" (226). However, although she certainly has little regard for herself, she is actually quite cautious when making her decision to marry because she believes that she deserves no better than a brute for a husband: Estella remarks, "I shall do well enough, and so will my husband" (334). Because she believes she has no heart, she deliberately chooses to marry an ogre of a man since he will expect nothing from her, other than her body. To fling herself upon Pip or anyone else who loves her would be disastrous for Estella and her victim because she has nothing to give in return for love: Estella asks Pip, "Should I fling myself away upon the man who would the soonest feel (if people do feel such things) that I took nothing to him?" (334). Estella not only protects Pip by not marrying him, but she also enters into her marriage expecting to gain nothing from the union, except to escape Satis House. She also makes it clear that she has no intentions of changing her nature so that she can assume the role of the Angel in the House to morally uplift her brutish husband: asserting how marriage shall not change her cold nature, Estella remarks to Pip, "Don't

be afraid of my being a blessing to him . . . I shall not be that” (335). All Estella wants is her freedom from Miss Havisham, no matter what the consequences may be. She chooses self-victimization and self-flagellation in a marriage to Drummle to make the changes she desires, rather than a marriage to Pip or any other man whom she would certainly have mastery over. Hence, breaking the chains that bind her to her adoptive mother, Estella ends her heartbreaking days and Miss Havisham’s revenge by marrying a man who has no heart to break. Estella’s decision is certainly tragic, but it is, nevertheless, as she describes, her “own act” (334) to establish her independence.

Estella suffers tremendously as Drummle’s wife because he “used her with great cruelty” and became “quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness” (437). But Estella finds the courage to leave Drummle, bringing her victimization to an end. Dickens never discloses what causes Estella to break the cycle of abuse and violence, but the effects are clear when Pip and Estella meet by chance in the garden where Satis House once stood. Estella tells Pip, “I am greatly changed. I wonder you know me” (438). Pip observes that she has, indeed, lost her freshness, but still retains her majesty and charm. But seeing something new, Pip remarks, “the saddened softened light of the once proud eyes; what I had never felt before, was the friendly touch of the once insensible hand” (438). Clearly, Estella has been softened through her suffering, and she admits as such when she remarks: “[S]uffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends” (439). Estella acknowledges that her experiences have not only made her strong, but they also have helped her to understand and sympathize with the suffering of others, which Darby suggests demonstrates that she has experienced true moral awareness

(40). Hence, rather than a mere taming to bring her closer to the womanly ideal, her softening, similar to Miss Havisham's, indicates growth and transformation. Estella's trajectory from victim to subject, from heartless monstrosity to moral human being is complete, and contrasting with the other deviant women in the novel, she survives her journey and gains her freedom.

The ending of the novel has garnered a great deal of debate over whether Dickens hints at a possible marriage between Pip and Estella. The debate arises from the fact that in the original ending Dickens makes it clear with Estella's remarriage to a country doctor that Pip and Estella will never marry. Friend and author Edward Bulwer-Lytton convinced Dickens to change the original ending because he felt that it was too melancholic and needed a happier tone. The consensus is that the original ending is generally better than the revised ending because it maintains the dark tone of the novel. However, the revised ending is not necessarily happy either. As Robert R. Garnett explains in "The Good and The Unruly in *Great Expectations*—and Estella," even though Estella is "humbled and softened" in the revised ending, she is not transformed into "feeling light as a feather, happy as an angel and merry as a school-boy," thus closing both the original and revised endings of the novel not on the "usual moral certitudes" of domesticity and happiness, but rather with the ambiguities of Estella's "unknowable" heart that has been tempered through pain and suffering (40-41). Indeed, the ending is uncertain as the depth of Estella's human emotion and sympathy is impossible to speculate. However, although Estella's prospects for the future are uncertain, her survival still remains a powerful testament to her strength and will.

Despite Estella's impenetrable heart, she makes it clear to Pip that she still perceives their relationship as friends and nothing more. However, how Pip sees the beaten and broken Estella conflicts with her desires. Schor points out that Pip assumes that her suffering has "transformed



her into a woman who can love [him]" (553). Although Pip sees her softening, this is not enough to determine whether her heart has changed so much that she is ready to move from friendship to romance. As the two depart from the ruined garden, Pip rises above Estella, bending over her in a dominant position, but Estella rises up to meet him and to assert herself and the conditions of their relationship when she states: "And will continue friends apart" (439). But Pip takes her hand to lead her from the garden and concludes: "I saw no shadow of another parting" (439). Pip's failure to acknowledge her request that they shall remain friends apart indicates, as Schor points out, that he fails to hear her (555-556). Schor further notes that Estella is asking Pip for what he "has always been incapable of—friendship that would give her a separate existence" (556). Similar to his youth when he could only see his star, rather than the shattered woman who only desired his friendship, Pip continues to be blinded and captivated by Estella's rich and elegant beauty, an image that seems rather trite considering the suffering and pain she has endured. Pip's burning and tumultuous passion has certainly waned over the years, but he still seems to desire Estella. Darby observes that the last lines continue to reflect a lack of the meeting of the minds between Pip and Estella, leaving the ending "unreconciled" (227). However, even though an impending marriage between Pip and Estella is not clear, what is certain is that Estella knows and articulates to Pip what she wants—friendship. Despite Pip's misreading of Estella, she has asserted her needs and voice into the narrative as an autonomous being.

### **Conclusion: Failure to Reach Closure**

Estella's desire for friendship—not marriage—and her unknowable heart at the close of the novel is an unusual Dickensian ending. Jenni Calder points out in *Women in Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, that most of Dickens's novels end with a return to normalcy: "a domestic

marriage, a limited serving role for the woman and a kindly, protective role for the man" (102). However, *Great Expectations* does not have this traditional ending. Although Biddy is in domestic bliss and the monstrous women are beaten, burned, tamed, and silenced for their unfeminine natures, a return to normalcy is impossible because the lives of the unruly women are not so easily forgotten. Estella's transformation from heartless to moral human being does not elide the image of her fragmented psyche or her bent and broken body, thereby thwarting the notion that she will ever enjoy a happy ever after. The best Estella can hope for is sanctuary and respite from the torments that she has endured. Furthermore, Estella is not the only female character who disturbs the traditional Dickensian ending: the images of the happy home and hearth at the forge cannot efface Mrs. Joe's imbecility and murder, Molly's inhumane and lifelong punishment for a crime of passion, and Miss Havisham's deadly burning. Their suffering and deaths do not render their rebellion any less potent; in fact, it is their abrupt, unsettling, and chilling silence that resonates and disturbs the ending of the novel, as if the monstrous women stubbornly refuse to release their grip on the narrative as fiercely as they resisted their objectification.

The demise of the unruly women has a powerful impact on the narrative similar to the ghost of the hanging woman that terrorizes Pip. The ghost has garnered little critical attention except as an extension of Pip's imagination and desire to avenge himself against Miss Havisham for his torment. For example, Hartog notes that Pip "fantasizes revenge in his visions of seeing her hung by the neck," which suggests that his "resentment of Miss Havisham" is clearly "not completely repressed" (257). Pip obviously has reason for resenting Miss Havisham since he blames her for tricking him into believing that she was his benefactress, and he may desire that she suffer as he has suffered. But in light of the broken bodies and shattered minds of the women

who thwart the womanly ideal and who all receive nothing short of a physical and psychological hanging, the ghost seems to become more significant than just a manifestation of a male desire to inflict pain upon a powerful woman; instead, the ghost of the hanging woman seems to represent the failure of the novel to actually silence the deviant women. Frantic with fright when he sees the ghost, Pip says, "In the terror of seeing the figure, and in the terror of being certain that it had not been there a moment before, I at first ran from it, and then ran towards it. And my terror was greatest of all, when I found no figure there" (77). This has been Pip's relationship with the monstrous women throughout the course of the novel—he wants to run away, yet he cannot take his eyes off of them. And if he had ever been capable of removing the masks from these women, he would certainly be horrified to discover no monster and no ghost lurking beneath, just a woman. This would certainly send him into a tailspin because he is so conditioned to see women as angels, stars, fairy godmothers, witches, fiends, and monsters, he never sees them as women. However, even though Pip cannot see them as women, the readers of the novel can since their portraits have enough detail to humanize them with experiences, emotions, and behaviors that are undeniably realistic. And it is the humanization of these women that dismantles the womanly ideal as mythic, false, and an unattainable representation of women. Although Pip may order his world by clinging to his images of angels and monsters, the woman hanging from the rafters will continue to terrorize and haunt him until he, too, can dismantle his assumptions of women and see them as they really are: humans—nothing more and nothing less.

Similar to the criticism of Pip, Dickens has often been accused of not seeing women as they really are. Michael Slater reports, in *Dickens and Women*, that Dickens's own daughter once remarked: "My father did not understand women" (Slater xii). This may certainly be true considering his utter adoration of the Angel in the House and the pedestal he placed her on as a

beacon of female virtue, goodness, and perfection as well as the failure of his marriage because his wife could not live up to his expectations of the womanly ideal. However, despite his devotion to the Angel in the House and his personal feelings on women, Dickens undeniably understood both men and women at their most carnal, such as when they are passionate, angry, anguished, guilty, unfulfilled, and tormented. And in *Great Expectations* he does not resort to slapping on these raw emotions onto a stock female character; instead, he individualizes the portrait to depict the complex and realistic motivations that result in what would have been considered extremely unfeminine behavior—but real nonetheless. Dickens, of course, as Garnett points out, explicitly expresses in the *Great Expectations* that a life of moderation, such as Bidley's, will lead to happiness, while excess will only bring heartache and pain (25). And Dickens certainly follows the Victorian literary tradition of rewarding Bidley for her virtuous nature and mild temperament and brutally punishing the deviant women for leading lives of excess. However, although Bidley is rewarded, she offers no solution to the Woman Question because what is right for her and what makes her happy and fulfilled—domesticity—is neither an option nor a desire for the monstrous women. But by punishing the deviant woman, Dickens exposes a great deal about the lives of women during the Victorian era, especially how many women, like Mrs. Joe, Molly, Miss Havisham, and Estella, could not see themselves reflected in the womanly ideal and were burdened with the model of female perfection. Hence, although Dickens relied on the monstrous image and most likely did not approve personally of unruly women, he was able to depict Victorian women as human in spite of their deviancies and transgressions.

Although the monstrous women insist that their audience remove the monstrous masks to see them as they really are, the willingness, or lack thereof, of the readers of the novel to do so

contributes to the failure of *Great Expectations* to reach closure on the Woman Question. Explaining the reader's role in responding to the text and constructing meaning, Gilbert and Gubar assert: "The mad character is sometimes created only to be destroyed. . . . Yet even when a figure of rage seems to function only as a monitory image, her or his fury must be acknowledged not only by the angelic protagonist to whom s/he is opposed, but, significantly, *by the reader as well*" (79). And this is exactly what the monstrous women do in the novel: they demand acknowledgement and make it difficult for their readers to remain complicit in their punishment by challenging them to understand that the roots of their unruliness are born from extremely oppressive conditions in a masculine world, a world that was not quite ready to accept or acknowledge the possibility of such bold and powerful women who desire so much more than what a traditional Victorian feminine identity ever would allow them. And when we read these female characters as women who dare to admit and demonstrate that the Angel in the House was not an accurate reflection of Victorian womanhood and an undesirable imposition upon their lives, only then will death, punishment, and silence fail to have dominion over the monstrous women in *Great Expectations* because they will be remembered more for their rebellion than for their punishment.

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The Monstrous Women in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*:  
"For God's Sake," They're Human Beings

by

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## Abstract

During the Victorian era, two images of women were prominent in novels and reflected the disparity between the womanly ideal and the reality of women's lives: angels and monsters. Angels, such as Charles Dickens's Rose Maylie, Agnes Wickfield, and Lucie Manette, affirm domestic ideology and lead lives of piety and purity, and they are delighted to assume their places as submissive and subservient wives and mothers. In contrast to the angels, their monstrous literary sisters fail to live up to the womanly ideal: not only do they often lack a virtuous and maternal nature, but they are also aggressive, passionate, sexual, immoral, amoral, violent, and mad and branded as witches, fiends, and hysterics. The unruly women actually have traits that would have been appropriate and desirable for a Victorian man in the public sphere of commerce and industry, but would not have been appropriate for a delicate, innocent, and virtuous woman. Although novelists continued to preserve the angel's sanctity and purity, the monstrous female characters were a creative outlet for authors to depict the Victorian women with a wide range of realistic experiences and emotions that dismantle assumptions of femininity.

Like his fellow Victorian authors, Dickens in *Great Expectations* creates a cast of monstrous women who deviate from the womanly ideal and ultimately pay a high price for their transgressions. Mrs. Joe, Molly, Miss Havisham, and Estella lack female virtue, tenderness, and nurture and, therefore, demonstrate behavior that would have been considered unfeminine during the Victorian era. Because they thwart acceptable gender norms and threaten patriarchal order, they are severely emotionally and physically punished. By the close of the novel, the narrative is littered with the broken bodies and spirits of all the monstrous women. However, despite their punishment, these unruly creatures expose the womanly ideal as an impossible model for women to live up to because it failed to accommodate their particular situations, needs, and desires.

Although Dickens in *Great Expectations* follows the Victorian literary convention of punishing women for their transgressions, he also reveals a great deal about the lives of women, especially the circumstances that compel them to deviate from established gender norms. Moreover, rather than just slapping on excessive tendencies and raw emotions onto a stock female character, Dickens, instead, individualizes the portraits of the monstrous women to depict the complex and realistic motivations that result in unfeminine behavior—but real nonetheless. Subsequently, the monstrous women make it difficult for the readers of the novel to remain complicit in their punishment because they challenge their audience to understand that the etiology of their unruliness emerges from oppressive conditions in a masculine world. Hence, what emerges from the novel is not a didactic lesson on appropriate female behavior, but a richly textured and complex depiction Victorian womanhood.

Not only are the portraits of the monstrous creatures realistic, but the female characters in the novel also resist their objectification and victimization to reveal that Victorian women could be independent, aggressive, passionate, intelligent, and powerful in a patriarchal world. Even though the novel ends with the angelic Biddy rewarded with a happy marriage and children and the unruly women beaten, broken, and silenced, *Great Expectations* is not a simple affirmation of the womanly ideal and domestic ideology; instead, the novel fails to reach closure on the Woman Question because what has been exposed can not be effaced: rebellious and powerful women whose life experiences gave them no choice but to dare to journey where angels fear to tread.

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## Table of Contents

	Page
Section 1. Introduction: The Victorian Womanly Ideal.....	1
Section 2. Bidly: Nobody's Angel but Her Own.....	7
Section 3. Mrs. Joe: Suppressed and Raging Housewife.....	14
Section 4. Molly: Violent Murderess and Dehumanized Woman.....	24
Section 5. Miss Havisham: Broken Hearted Angel and Avenging Recluse.....	32
Section 6. Estella: Abused Ice-Princess and Strong Survivor.....	48
Section 7. Conclusion: Failure to Reach Closure.....	60
Section 8. Works Cited.....	65

*Dedication*

*À ma mère*

*qui me donna l'amour des romans du 19ème siècle  
et commença ma fascination pour les monstres littéraires  
quand elle me fit connaître Meduse, Bertha Mason, et Quasimodo*

*and*

*For my father*

*who instilled me with a sense that nothing is impossible  
if you are willing to work hard*