

‘I stink and remember.’ Duffy, Dickens and the scent of solitude.

Janet S. Lewison

‘In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see. She was dressed in rich materials –satins, and lace, and silks-all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table....She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on-the other was on the table near her hand-her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a Prayer-book, all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass. It was not in the first moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed. But I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago...I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress...I saw that the dress had been put on the rounded figure of a young woman...’

I first met Miss Havisham at the age of six, when my mother let me watch the black and white David Lean film one afternoon when I was off school. I can remember being completely terrified at Pip’s meeting with the manacled convict Magwitch in the graveyard, and I ended up behind the couch. I was then transfixed alongside Pip, at the sight of Miss Havisham, still wearing her faded wedding dress, incarcerated in the room where her bridal feast was to have taken place. Reading the novel later as a teenager, I was just as mesmerised and terrified by this wilful, jilted figure, who had not ‘seen the sun’ since before Pip was even born.

A question dogged me then, as it has puzzled me many times since. In Pip’s careful recollection of Miss Havisham (as evidenced in the passage above) why does Pip never comment upon the stench of Miss Havisham when he first meets her? After all, she has locked herself away from society and daylight for many years. She has worn the same clothes that she intended to get married in, and is surrounded by the remnants of her rotting wedding banquet. Obviously this was not an age of great sanitation. It was a malodorous age as Peter Ackroyd acknowledges in both his biographies of **Dickens** and **London**. Pip would be used to unsanitary conditions, living as he did by the marshes and spending time with Joe at the forge. Not to mention reading head-stones in a dank grave yard where the novel famously begins. However, even so, the very claustrophobic space of Satis House would be highly unsavoury. It would be fetid and airless. Truly stagnant.

Yet he fails to acknowledge Miss Havisham in any developed or sustained physical way in the passage above. He ‘sees’ her repeatedly, almost ritualistically, suggesting

her utter incredibility to him, and perhaps in her incredibility he keeps her and her message at bay.

In our current age of popular psychology it is seductive to attribute Pip's omission to repression. The highly developed 'sighting' of Miss Havisham in the first meeting seems excessive and even compensatory. Pip 'sees' Miss Havisham as he cannot afford to 'smell' her and thus endow her with a physicality that would make her betrayal of his hopes and 'great expectations' too powerful for him to deal with.

Therefore he keeps her a spectre, a revenant (and thus at bay) through repressing ritualistically ('I saw') the very horror of her physicality. Even years later he cannot risk 'knowing' her in any looming physical way. He denies her a body. He tries to suppress her presence. She can therefore remain his (unlikely) fairy godmother and thus Pip can keep out the truth, that she is in reality his nemesis, and has been using him to extract a bitter revenge on men after being jilted at the altar by her fiancé, Compeyson, years earlier.

Carol Ann Duffy by contrast releases Miss Havisham from the straitjacket of Pip's repression in her poem 'Havisham.' Gone is the spectral, timeless figure of love betrayed, (which is after all a mirror image of Pip's own illusory attachment to the unobtainable Estella.) In place of Pip's sexless creation, we have sexual fantasy, and even possible castration as an act of ultimate revenge. Duffy allows Miss Havisham to speak her loss in dangerously cathartic and physical terms. 'I stink and remember.' She 'earths' her protagonist, where Pip had only managed to 'unearth' her. Thus Duffy makes Miss Havisham a sexual being; she makes her all too real to the reader, and makes us reassess the original version of Miss Havisham in new and far reaching ways.

In an interview in the Guardian, Duffy says of her recurrent interest in revising old stories: 'You had to find something hard and truthful....' in order to make the act of retelling worthwhile. Duffy's poem 'Havisham' confronts something 'hard and truthful' in Dickens's lonely figure. She reveals the constraints of Pip's solitary spectatorship on his ostensible benefactor. Rather than relying on the censoring version of the sexually inexperienced Pip in **Great Expectations**, Duffy 'earths' her character through her concise exploration of frustrated sexual passion. For **Great Expectations** is essentially a virgin's story: Duffy's 'Havisham' is by contrast a tale of explicit sexual longing and desire. Hatred makes Duffy's protagonist wanton. It makes her want to kill:

*'Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then
I haven't wished him dead. Prayed for it...'*

Duffy's poem 'Havisham' begins with a vehement outcry: 'Beloved sweetheart bastard.' This oxymoronic, explosive beginning embraces the doomed degeneration of many a love affair and of course Miss Havisham's in particular. The very compression of these three terms suggests passionate intensity and longing. Duffy condenses time telescopically just as Dickens's narrator Pip had done years before when he says: 'the strangest lady I have ever seen or shall ever see.' We only ever compress time so intensely when we are aware of the extreme significance of an event or feeling.

In Duffy's poem, adulation has yielded to loathing and desolation. Duffy reignites the unstable relationship between love and hatred and allows her heroine to speak unambiguously of her (frustrated) desire. Havisham is speaking out of her self-imposed prison house of solitude and social isolation. She is no longer silenced by being Dickens' 'Miss' Havisham, she is 'Havisham', a figure liberated from the humiliation of her unmarried state and free to speak in any way she likes about her ex-lover, or men in general.

Duffy's concern to speak something 'hard and truthful' about a pre-existing text is helpful when we also bear in mind one of the most compelling and ambiguous scenes in the whole of Dickens', indeed of Victorian Literature. This occurs after Pip has met Miss Havisham for the first time in Chapter Eight of the novel and has been fed like a dog in the ruined gardens of Satis House by Miss Havisham's ward, the elusive Estella. .

'It was in this place, and at this moment, that a strange thing happened to my fancy. I thought it a strange thing then, and I thought it a stranger thing long afterwards. I turned my eyes-a little dimmed by looking at the frosty light-towards a great wooden beam in a low nook of the building near me on my right hand, and I saw a figure hanging there by the neck. A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet, and it hung so, that I could see that the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy paper, and that the face was Miss Havisham's, with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call to me.'

This curious sighting of Miss Havisham is never explained in the novel. It is highly ambiguous in its message to Pip and to the reader. However it is true to say that Pip's hallucinatory glimpse of a near dead Miss Havisham is psychologically apt when we think of her cruel intentions towards him. There are good reasons for Pip wanting Miss Havisham dead, particularly with the benefit of hindsight or retrospect. But is this retrospect and is it just Pip's retrospect?

Dickens through his narrator Pip, recreates a scene of execution, strangely involved with the elaborate details of dress: how pitiful and yet macabre is the recurrence of Pip's earlier reference to the 'one shoe' perhaps? This detail reveals a very particular type of imaginative response to the bizarre. Pip has no conscious understanding of why he should see Miss Havisham being 'executed' and later in the novel he even sees her hanging again. Dickens himself found the spectacle of a hanging profoundly disturbing and haunting. He was amongst the thirty thousand witnesses who watched the public execution of the infamous murderess Maria Manning with her husband, at Horsemonger Gaol in 1849, something that gave him waking nightmares. In 'Lying Awake' he refers to a 'fantasy of the mind' where:

That, having beheld that execution, and having left those two forms dangling on the top of the entrance gateway-the man's, a limp, loose suit of clothes as if the man had gone out of them; the woman's, a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed, that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side...

Dickens's imagination seems challenged here by both moral and aesthetic considerations. Whilst aware of the horror and nullity of so public an execution, Dickens clearly appreciates the elaborate artifice of Mrs Manning's wardrobe, and her sexual presence is evident even in death. He eroticises her through the appreciative, lingering awareness of her dress. Miss Havisham by contrast is deprived of such an 'earthy' response; she seems a hideous cadaver, engendering only horror.

Duffy in 'Havisham' reanimates Dickens' imaginative predilection for murder and indeed for murder as an erotic act, through her protagonist's vengeful fantasies.

**...I've dark green pebbles for eyes,
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.**

Duffy's Havisham is thus 'a hard and truthful' resurrection of Dickens' competing imaginative energies. She allows her Havisham the cathartic release of murderous fantasy, the sensory experience of a physical rather than spectral self. Duffy's Havisham utters Dickens' unutterable knowledge: 'Spinster. I stink and remember.' Gone is Pip's sensory amnesia, in its place is Havisham, a woman as intent upon murder as Maria Manning herself, a woman who quite defiantly merges recollection with bodily secretions!

To return to the Pip's sighting of Miss Havisham hanging from the beam, it is important to notice that once again time is telescopically compressed in this anecdote: 'I thought it a strange thing then, and I thought it a strange thing long afterwards.' Pip doesn't know, or represses what he knows, so that the scene of this hanging is left to speak (or not to speak) for itself. It literally hangs there ambiguously waiting to be interpreted and translated. Miss Havisham is trying to call to him, but we never hear in the novel what this strange message might be. Duffy takes this ambiguity surrounding Miss Havisham's voice and creates her own response. This I will come to shortly.

In the above scene with the hanging Miss Havisham, I think Pip's vision is an intuitive reaction to the repression of his first meeting with her. In his original meeting he bypasses his instinctive understanding of her due to her wealth and status in the village community. Instinct in the hanging passage however overwhelms his earlier version of her in her room. When he sees her hanging, he is significantly outside the world of Miss Havisham's room. In his natural relief to be outside the sterility of Satis House, we 'see' (through Pip's eyes ironically 'a little dimmed') the death-driven ambiguity of Pip's hostess. Like Coleridge's famous idea of an 'underconsciousness,' this scene may hint at 'something' that Pip cannot quite bring to conscious acknowledgement or admission. But Pip cannot afford to 'hear' Miss Havisham as she is such a very destructive figure in his life. Thus he hallucinates a truth that remains unspoken and beyond cognition.

Duffy picks up upon this desire to translate Miss Havisham's unheard voice in her poem 'Havisham.' In doing so, she apparently abjects Pip from her protagonist's monologue. Instead Havisham ruminates to herself, attempting to address the lover who deserted her. Pip has no voice anymore in Duffy's poem. He is banished from Havisham's consciousness. Or is he? For it is quite tempting to try to seek out Pip in 'Havisham' as the poem (like **Great Expectations** itself) is so much concerned with

revenge and surrogacy. And of all human behaviours, perhaps sexual fantasy above all others, lends itself to infinite substitutions.

*'Some nights better, the lost body over me,
my fluent tongue in its mouth in its ear
then down till I suddenly bite awake.'*

Duffy's Havisham finds release in sexual fantasy. She finds an intimacy and catharsis that escaped Pip's Miss Havisham. The endless mourning for her fiancé is temporarily relieved through eroticism. The 'lost' object of love is returned in explicit sexual fantasy and dream, places where human beings often allow themselves uncensored access to desire. The suggestiveness of 'down' is palpable and dangerously taboo. Havisham is exploring her own sexual Netherworld; orgasm and castration are elided in this scene. She literally 'comes' alive.

Havisham's tongue is 'fluent.' Her actions give voice to her feelings and her sexual needs. Havisham's fluency is also interesting as it ironises Pip's inarticulacy surrounding Miss Havisham; his silencing of her 'hard and truthful' voice in **Great Expectations**. In Duffy's poem, by contrast, she is powerful and capable of near castration. The depersonalisation of the 'lost body' through reference to 'its' mouth and ear, reveals the hatred/love tension exhibited in the poem's opening phrase. It may also revel in the indeterminacy of her sexual fantasy. For in Dickens's novel Miss Havisham's betrayal of Pip amounts to emotional castration at the very least and she 'courts' Pip's attachment to her in order to ruin him. Why should she not in Duffy's poem, experiment or 'play' with Pip in another way?

I stated earlier that **Great Expectations** is a virgin's story. Pip fails to convince his love object Estella that they can be romantically happy together; even with the famous revised ending of Dickens novel, the tone of the narrative is unmistakably autumnal and melancholy. Estella remains as unlikely an object for marital and conjugal happiness as any character in literature. Pip's continued attachment to the cold, elusive and damaged Estella seems deeply masochistic. In response to Pip's proclivities, Duffy's poem offers us a version of Miss Havisham whose sexual sadism can easily fulfil such tendencies and more!

*'Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.
Don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks.'*

Pip's thwarted desire in Dickens's novel mirrors the socially enforced impotence of Miss Havisham too. Pip allows himself to be 'castrated' figuratively in the novel by both Miss Havisham and Estella. Miss Havisham renders herself impotent through unresolved mourning. In Duffy's poem, both are brought together in this final meeting, their 'long slow honeymoon' where physical violence ruptures sexual stasis in a fantasy of necrophilia. The 'stiffness' of the male corpse makes Havisham's final 'victim' easier to break off! As Havisham's voice 'breaks' orgasmically in this ecstasy of revenge, so the poem ends in consummation and unfettered desire.