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Revenge, Compensation, and Character Change in Dickens's *Great Expectations*

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Abstract

Revenge is a theme which has fascinated people for thousands of years and which is present in a wide range of genres. Revenge also plays a central role in the nineteenth-century novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. This essay examines the various effects of revenge in this novel by focusing primarily on the vengeful characters Abel Magwitch, Miss Havisham, and Dolge Orlick. I will discuss the negative impacts of the actions of these three characters, but I will also attempt to show that, for some of them, there is also a measure of compensation and kindness involved, and, as a result, some of the characters' deeds can be said to have positive outcomes as well.

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Introduction

Revenge as a theme can be found in many different works and genres; in fact, it has been referred to as “one of the oldest topics in Western literature” (Hack 277). Whether it be the Greek tragedies of the fifth century BC, the often violent and bloodthirsty Senecan tragedies written in the first century AD, or the many revenge plays written and performed in England during the Renaissance – revenge is a theme which has intrigued people in various ways for thousands of years. For instance, what kinds of revenge there are and why people seek it are some of the questions that Sir Francis Bacon deals with in his fourth essay “Of Revenge” from 1625. When it comes to nineteenth-century literature, the significance of revenge as a theme seems to have changed somewhat. Revenge no longer holds the position it did in the tragedies of ancient Greece or in the plays written during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign (Hack 277); now “[i]t is more often subplot than plot” (Hack 277). However, revenge does still very much occur in nineteenth-century novels.

Revenge is closely connected to the past, but, at the same time, it is also linked to the future, as plotting revenge means making some kinds of arrangements for what is to come. What happens in the future is “conceived of as a direct product of and response to events in the past” (Hack 277). The past, the present, and the future, then, all appear to play an important role in relation to revenge. Another interesting element of revenge, visible in nineteenth-century literature, involves characters turning into “agents of revenge” (Hack 280). Works displaying this kind of feature include *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1846) by Alexandre Dumas, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, and Charles Dickens’s famous novel *Great Expectations* (Hack 280), which was originally published in several parts from 1860 to 1861 in Dickens’s own magazine *All the Year Round* (Kerr 147) and which forms the basis of this essay.

Reverting to the issue of the past, this is central when talking about revenge because “[r]evenge always involves remembering and failing to release past wrongs and injuries” (Christoph 124) – an aspect highly present in *Great Expectations*. People serving as agents of revenge and the bearing of the past on the present are elements equally visible. The plot features several characters that want revenge, albeit for different reasons: Abel Magwitch, Miss Havisham, and Dolge Orlick. This essay will look at the various effects of revenge, and the main focus will be

on these three characters. I aim to examine how the actions of the characters seeking revenge affect the lives of other characters – such as Pip and Estella – as well as their own. For example, I will investigate whether or not Magwitch, Miss Havisham, and Orlick change in any way as the story develops. In addition, I intend to discuss any similarities and differences there might be between them. When it comes to previous research, it is my impression that the focus tends to be mostly on all the negative effects of Magwitch's and Miss Havisham's actions; for instance, Lydia K. Christoph, although she does mention Magwitch's being a victim, his love for Pip, etc., claims that the convict "bears the greatest culpability" (127) for Pip's careless ways. Similarly, John H. Hagan, who does not blame Magwitch as much as Christoph does, argues that Magwitch's actions turn Pip into a version of the wicked Compeyson (172). I, too, will discuss the negative consequences of the revenge seekers' deeds, but I also hope to show that there are aspects that can be said to be positive; that is, I will try to nuance the picture a little by talking about both revenge, an act of aggression, and compensation, a more constructive way of dealing with the wrongs a person has been subjected to.

Compensation appears to have played an important role in Dickens's own life as well. He was an immensely successful writer, whose works enabled him to lead a comfortable life (Tomalin xliii). However, before Dickens became famous, he was quite poor, and this is something which stayed with him throughout his life and which had an impact on his way of writing as well (Tomalin xlii); he often wrote about poverty and "he was personally generous with his time and his money" (Tomalin xlii). A good example of Dickens's generosity is Urania Cottage, which was established by Dickens and financed by a very wealthy Miss Coutts in 1847 and which served as a home for young prostitutes, but also for women who, for various reasons, were at risk of becoming prostitutes (Tomalin 203-205). Dickens was very involved in setting the place up, and "he gave his time and energy happily" (Tomalin 204). He had great sympathy for the young women (Tomalin 203) and wanted to save them by giving them a chance at a fresh start in life – "these girls were his sparrows, and he wanted to make them fly" (Tomalin 210). Therefore, at Urania Cottage, the women were taught how to read, write, sew, cook, and do laundry, and Dickens intended for them to emigrate to the British colonies in Canada, Australia, or South Africa within approximately one year, and hopefully get married there, which several of them actually did (Tomalin 205-206).

In the first sections of this essay, the characters that I have chosen to focus on will be discussed in terms of their motives, how they carry out their revenge, and what the effects are. After that,

I will move on to compare them, and the final part of the essay will sum up the main points dealt with in the previous sections.

Magwitch's Revenge

Vengefulness can be described as the desire to hurt people who have previously injured us in some way (López 290), and Trudy Govier identifies revenge as “one way . . . to attempt to get relief from the hurt and humiliation of being wronged” (2). A character who has been hurt and wronged in several ways, and who can be said to be vengeful, is Abel Magwitch, the scary-looking convict that Pip meets in the churchyard out on the marshes as a young boy. In this scene, Magwitch, as Hagan points out, is portrayed as someone whom it may be easy to sympathise with (171); he has “broken shoes”, he has been “soaked in water” and “stung by nettles”, and he “limp[s] . . . and shiver[s]” (Dickens 4). Magwitch's appearance seems to indicate that he has been and is very much still suffering, and his miserable, aggressive, threatening state of mind is shown to the reader by one of the very first things he says to the terrified Pip: “Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!” (Dickens 3).

That Magwitch has led a hard life and that he has reasons for wanting revenge – on his malicious partner Compeyson as well as on society – is revealed to the reader in the second and third parts of the novel. We learn, for example, that Magwitch has been in and out of prison for the larger part of his adult life and that Compeyson has had a hand in most of it: “[T]hat man got me into such nets as made me his black slave” (Dickens 296). Christoph calls Magwitch “a thief by necessity rather than by choice” (124). In the novel, we are also told that Magwitch once had a child (which later turns out to be Estella) that was lost to him as a result of the mother's desire to get back at him for having been romantically involved with another woman. The passage describing the court trial, however, seems particularly important when it comes to understanding some of the injustices that Magwitch has suffered. Here, Magwitch is betrayed by Compeyson, who, although the mastermind behind the crimes for which both of them are on trial, gets a much milder punishment because he talks and carries himself like a true gentleman:

I noticed first of all what a gentleman Compeyson looked . . . and what a common sort of wretch I looked . . . And when the verdict come, warn't it Compeyson as was recommended to mercy on account of good character and bad company, and giving up all the information he could agen me, and warn't it me as got never a word but Guilty? . . . And when we're sentenced, ain't it him as gets seven year, and me fourteen, and ain't it him as the Judge is sorry for, because he might a done so well. (Dickens 296-297)

Not only is Magwitch stabbed in the back by his partner in crime, but he is also let down by the system of justice. The link between the legal system and the desire for revenge is something which Bacon concerns himself with in his essay “Of Revenge”, arguing that “[t]he most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy” (51), and Erin A. Dolgoy, in her article on Bacon, points out that the justice system is something which may be “subject to human error” (7). That the system is flawed becomes very visible in the passage about the trial. Magwitch and Compeyson are, of course, both criminals and can therefore expect to be punished by society. However, the great injustice here lies in the discriminatory treatment of Magwitch – he is never really given a fair chance due to his inarticulateness, his lack of sophistication and fine clothes, etc. Hagan declares that “impartiality in the courts is often a myth” (170) and that the section dealing with the trial is significant because it shows us exactly that (170). In Magwitch’s case, then, the law, which is there to govern various wrongs, instead ends up being the cause of one, thereby turning the convict into a victim with a sense of animosity towards both Compeyson and society. Christoph claims that Magwitch’s impulse to retaliate does not come straight away (125), but I would argue that his vengefulness is, in fact, made clear very quickly, at least in matters concerning Compeyson: “I says to Compeyson, ‘Once out of this court, I’ll smash that face o’ yourn?’” (Dickens 297). This anger towards his former partner is also what drives Magwitch to catch Compeyson when he learns that the man has escaped from the prison ships. Magwitch gives up his chances of freedom in order to deprive Compeyson of his – an unselfish act which, I would suggest, can be seen as an attempt to get even, as an act of revenge. Later in the novel, Magwitch finally manages to get back at his nemesis for good when the two of them fall overboard and fight each other under water, which results in Compeyson’s drowning.

Magwitch’s revenge on his second wrongdoer, society, does not seem to be quite as straightforward. His attempts to turn Pip into a gentleman by providing him with a fine

education, plenty of money, etc., could be viewed as having to do with Magwitch's need to get even with the legal system and the Australian colonists for having treated him badly: "[B]last you every one, from the judge in his wig, to the colonist a-stirring up the dust, I'll show a better gentleman than the whole kit on you put together!" (Dickens 281). That Magwitch is deported to Australia, where he, one might suggest, is given a new beginning, seems particularly interesting when one considers Dickens's efforts to give young, socially vulnerable women a new life in the very same place. Magwitch has no love for the colonists, however, and in the quoted passage above he appears to be voicing resentment but also a desire to be good enough to be a part of society, to "come up to its standards" (Hagan 171). As Christoph (123) and Hagan (171) both point out, Pip is used as a tool through which Magwitch can carry out his revenge. However, Christoph (125) also briefly mentions – as does Alan Lelchuk (411-412) – that Magwitch's efforts to help Pip by sending him money also have to do with the kindness that Pip showed the convict that dreary day on the marshes. That this is an equally valid reading is made clear by what Magwitch says to Pip when the two of them meet several years later: "'You acted noble, my boy,' said he. 'Noble, Pip! And I have never forgot it!'" (Dickens 270). Pip helped Magwitch, and now the convict wants to return the favour. In addition, I would like to suggest that it is also about compensation, about giving Pip the kind of life that Magwitch himself never had: "I lived rough, that you should live smooth; I worked hard, that you should be above work" (Dickens 273).

Magwitch's actions have various effects. As Lelchuk emphasises, Pip is able to live the way he wants thanks to the money he receives from his benefactor (414). This money, according to Lelchuk, is "the source of Pip's power" (414); it makes it possible for him to wear nice clothes and hire a servant, whom he treats rather harshly, but it also eventually results in both Pip and his good friend Herbert Pocket becoming heavily indebted (410-411). Further, Pip's financial difficulties result in his almost getting arrested. Christoph adopts a somewhat similar view, saying that the "dirty" (127) money from Magwitch has a corrupting effect on Pip and that the convict, more so than anyone else, is to blame for Pip's careless ways, in part because he does not teach Pip to use the money that he has been given in a sensible way (127). According to Christoph, the means from Magwitch result in Pip's becoming "an upper-class snob" (125), and Humphrey House claims that "Magwitch is . . . a power-lover and a snob, whose specious generosity all but corrupts Pip" (qtd. in Christoph 125). I agree with Christoph and House to some extent; when it comes to Pip's risking corruption, Magwitch is not without blame – after all, he is the one who provides the money – but I would not call him a snob.

Another aspect of Magwitch's deeds which must be considered to have a quite negative effect has to do with Pip's not really knowing, for several years, the true identity or aim of his benefactor. He believes it to be Miss Havisham, but he does not know for sure, and just how trying and frustrating this is for him is something he expresses when talking to Herbert:

I cannot tell you how dependent and uncertain I feel, and how exposed to hundreds of chances. Avoiding forbidden ground, as you did just now, I may still say that on the constancy of one person (naming no person) all my expectations depend. And at the best, how indefinite and unsatisfactory, only to know so vaguely what they are!
(Dickens 212)

That Magwitch chooses not to reveal himself until Pip is, in fact, a grown man does strongly contribute to Pip's feelings of uncertainty. However, it needs to be pointed out that some of the blame in this matter must be shared by Miss Havisham, who implicitly encourages Pip's belief and whom Magwitch, of course, has no way of knowing about.

Magwitch's actions do not all bring confusion and misery; for example, the path which Pip has been set on (by Magwitch) leads him to meeting the kind, unselfish Herbert, whose friendship means the world to Pip and whom Pip is able to help out financially, using the money from Magwitch: "I did really cry in good earnest . . . to think that my expectations had done some good to somebody" (Dickens 255). Another positive effect worth mentioning here is the education that Pip receives from Herbert's father, Matthew Pocket. If Magwitch had never become Pip's benefactor and Pip had stayed on as Joe's apprentice, it seems reasonable to assume that Pip would never have been able to acquire any kind of education on his own. Moreover, his education is most likely of great use to him when he, towards the end of the story, goes abroad to work for Clarriker & Co., which is something that Christoph, too, briefly mentions (128). The Pockets (mainly Herbert and Matthew) are important for other reasons as well; for instance, Lelchuck suggests that they – together with Mr Wemmick and his father – function as forms of safe havens for Pip and that they represent comfort, love, and a sense of belonging (417). I agree with Lelchuck here; these relations are very significant to Pip, and Mr Wemmick also seems to become one of Pip's father figures, someone whom Pip can confide in and who helps Pip as much as he can when he is in his "private and personal capacity" (Dickens

248). Pip's meeting these kind, important people is a positive result of Magwitch's plans for him.

Magwitch's actions affect himself as much as they do others. His decision to leave Australia to see Pip, his gentleman, results in his being captured and put in prison, where he is treated very poorly. He is sentenced to be executed but dies in prison before the sentence can be carried out. However, he dies having found a beloved son in Pip (Christoph 128) as well as a certain amount of meaning and comfort. He tells Pip: "[Y]ou've been more comfortable alonger me, since I was under a dark cloud, than when the sun shone. That's best of all" (Dickens 390). He also appears to have found some kind of peace (Christoph 127), which, one might suggest, has to do with Pip's now being able to return the love that he receives from Magwitch. Pip's affection for his benefactor – which is something also mentioned by Hagan (174) – becomes very visible in the scene where he chooses to tell Magwitch about Estella right before the convict passes away. This is clearly an act of love and kindness, but I would like to propose that there is also a certain amount of guilt involved; Pip feels bad about his earlier dread of Magwitch and wants to make amends somehow. He feels the need to be kind and true to Magwitch to the very end, and tells him: "Please God, I will be as true to you, as you have been to me!" (Dickens 380). In the end, then, it would seem that both characters learn things through knowing the other.

The Magwitch that Pip meets as a young boy is different from the old man who presents himself as Pip's benefactor many years later. Some of his old traits do still seem to be present – for example, he is referred to by Herbert as "an ignorant determined man" with "a desperate and fierce character" (Dickens 290), an assessment that could equally be applied to the convict's younger self. However, the discussions between Pip and Herbert also reveal certain changes in Magwitch: Herbert tells Pip that the convict "improves", and Pip replies that "[Magwitch] was softened when I last saw him" (Dickens 343). Magwitch appears calmer and more agreeable, and Pip talks of his being docile and quite ready to do whatever Pip tells him to. This change in Magwitch can, to some extent, be explained by the fact that he is now an old man who has been through a great deal of hardship and who, especially after being injured and ill-treated in prison, is simply exhausted, which is something that Pip himself also realises (Dickens 387). Nevertheless, Magwitch, as noticed by Pip in the following passage, does seem to have gained some kind of insight regarding his own character, as a result of all the things he has done and endured: "I sometimes derived an impression from his manner or from a whispered word or

two which escaped him, that he pondered over the question whether he might have been a better man under better circumstances” (Dickens 387).

Miss Havisham’s Revenge

Miss Havisham is a character that has fascinated people ever since *Great Expectations* was published (Ciugureanu 352), and she seems to have a similar effect on the young Pip, who first describes her as “the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see” (Dickens 48) and then goes on to compare her with “waxwork” and “skeleton[s]” (Dickens 49). Her house is a sad, gloomy place which looks half deserted; there are bars on several windows, it is very dark and dirty, and all the clocks have been stopped at exactly twenty to nine. As readers, we learn early on that Miss Havisham is a deeply unhappy woman; at their very first meeting she tells Pip that her heart is broken, and later in the novel we are told by Herbert that it is because of Compeyson. Together with Miss Havisham’s half-brother, he tricked her into giving away a large part of her fortune and then left her on the day of their wedding, something which she has never got over and which causes her to exact revenge on all men by instructing her adopted daughter Estella to “break their hearts and have no mercy!” (Dickens 80). Adina Ciugureanu calls Miss Havisham a “[v]ictim and aggressor in one” (353), and I would agree. Another interesting perspective as regards Miss Havisham’s anger is provided by Camilla Nelson, who suggests that capitalism and the suppression of women in the Victorian era (during which women’s rights were extremely limited in matters concerning money, society, and the law) are at the bottom of it (225).

When it comes to vengefulness, Govier – as well as Bacon (50-51) – talks about the possibility of pleasure being involved: “When we seek revenge, we do so in order to take pleasure in the fact that *the offender has been made to suffer* and *it is we who have brought this about*, as a response to the fact that this person once wronged us” (13). The connection between revenge and pleasure appears highly relevant when it comes to Miss Havisham and the ways in which she carries out her revenge, which is something also observed by Julie Anne Levine and Alison Beth Levine (65). When she realises that Pip is taken with Estella, she is greatly satisfied and encourages his affection for her as much as she possibly can: “Miss Havisham would often ask me . . . ‘Does she grow prettier and prettier, Pip?’ And when I said yes (for indeed she did),

would seem to enjoy it greedily” (Dickens 80). That the tormenting and teasing of Pip is something that gives Miss Havisham pleasure is made even clearer when Pip goes to visit her and is told that Estella has gone abroad. Miss Havisham, knowing full well that Pip has feelings for Estella, is careful to mention that her daughter has never been more beautiful and that her absence means that she is indeed far away from Pip. On being asked whether or not Pip feels that Estella is now lost to him, Pip tells the reader that “[t]here was such a malignant enjoyment in her utterance . . . and she broke into such a disagreeable laugh, that I was at a loss what to say” (Dickens 99). To return to Govier’s reasoning, Pip is no “offender” – he has done nothing to hurt Miss Havisham – but, like Compeyson, he does belong to the male sex, and that is enough to make him guilty in Miss Havisham’s eyes. At Satis House, which Lelchuck refers to as a “school of cruelty” (408), Pip is told many hurtful things by Estella; for instance, she lets him know that he is “a stupid, clumsy labouring-boy” (Dickens 51) whose hands and shoes are all wrong. She calls him a “coarse monster” and a “little wretch” (Dickens 70) and treats him generally very cruelly, all in accordance with her adoptive mother’s vengeful instructions.

When talking about Miss Havisham’s revenge, it is also important to mention her relatives Camilla, Sarah, and Georgiana Pocket. They come to visit her on her birthday, but Miss Havisham believes that all they really care about is her fortune. As observed by Hagan, this is something they have in common with Compeyson (171). Therefore, to make them jealous, she is more than willing to let Pip think that she is his benefactress. As a result, Pip becomes an instrument that Miss Havisham uses to agitate and provoke her relations (Kerr 156). The fact that the Pockets, perhaps mainly Sarah, come to strongly dislike Pip seems to indicate that their main interest in Miss Havisham is, indeed, money, and it is also stated in the novel that the Pockets are, in fact, both “poor and scheming” (Dickens 155). Once more, Miss Havisham’s pleasure comes into play: “She quite gloated . . . so keen was her enjoyment of Sarah Pocket’s jealous dismay” (Dickens 134). In this respect, Miss Havisham’s treatment of her relatives resembles her treatment of Pip – she enjoys tormenting them for her own amusement.

The effects of Miss Havisham’s actions are plentiful. The constant insults regarding Pip’s character and appearance, delivered by Estella and encouraged by Miss Havisham, make poor Pip question himself and feel extremely bad about himself:

I set off . . . pondering . . . on all I had seen, and deeply revolving that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse, that my boots were thick . . . that I was much

more ignorant than I had considered myself . . . and generally that I was in a low-lived, bad way. (Dickens 55)

Furthermore, Pip's experiences at Miss Havisham's make him rethink his plans for the future; they make him want something more, something that will enable him to live up to Estella's standards. Other "side effects" of Pip's spending time at Satis House involve his becoming "ashamed" (Dickens 86) of Joe and wanting to "make Joe less ignorant and common" (Dickens 93). This kind of attitude comes off as superficial and snobbish. As previously mentioned, Christoph uses the term "upper-class snob" (125) when discussing the effects of the money that Pip receives from Magwitch, but one could argue that the expression is equally pertinent in this context. Pip's feelings of shame also result in him neglecting both Joe and Biddy by not coming to see them as frequently as before (Christoph 126-127). Another factor which further complicates things for Pip is the fact that Miss Havisham lets him think that she is his benefactress. She does this, as already pointed out, to hurt her relatives, but by not telling Pip the truth she also contributes to making his life more difficult.

Miss Havisham's deeds affect Estella as well; in fact, they result in her becoming cold, harsh, unsympathetic, and unable to feel love. She toys with men, including Pip, but does not appear to think that there is anything wrong with her behaviour. Nor does the fact that she "ha[s] no heart" (Dickens 202), as Estella herself makes perfectly clear, seem to bother her – she is Miss Havisham's design (Hagan 172) and simply does what she has been told. Levine and Levine write that Estella "become[s] the extension of her [adoptive] mother's vengeance" (65). While it is certainly easy to consider Miss Havisham the villain here, it should be stressed that there is also a measure of compensation involved, since Miss Havisham adopted Estella with the initial desire to do good (Lelchuk 421). She meant to love and cherish her, to give her what she herself was once deprived of, and to save Estella's heart from being broken like her own, but instead she let her bitterness and desire for revenge take over, creating an "ice queen" incapable of loving anyone. The fact that Estella, as a result of her upbringing, cannot even love her adoptive mother is something which causes Miss Havisham great pain. Govier comments that revenge "is harmful to the one who pursues it" and that "[c]ampaigns for revenge can easily become obsessive" (10). This is very true in Miss Havisham's case as her actions end up having just as disastrous effects on her as they do on other people, an observation also made by Christoph (127). By shutting out the world, by always wearing the dress she was supposed to get married in, by trying to freeze time and not wanting to know what day it is, etc., she does

not give herself a chance to make peace with her past but instead, as Pip tells the reader in the following passage, condemns herself to a life of misery:

That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment . . . found vengeance in, I knew full well. But that, in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased . . . I knew equally well. (Dickens 338)

Miss Havisham holds herself prisoner and ultimately pays a very high price for her commitment to revenge.

Levine and Levine, who discuss Miss Havisham from a psychological point of view, suggest that her way of living has to do with how she was brought up: her father spoiled her and gave her everything she wanted, which led to her becoming self-absorbed and unable to deal with the “defeat” (63) that her ego suffered when Compeyson betrayed her (63). Ciugureanu adopts a similar position, saying that learning the truth about Compeyson had such a powerful, negative impact on Miss Havisham’s ego that she was simply not able to move on (353). She got stuck, and as a form of defence mechanism she chose to hold on to “the ideal self that was perfectly happy in the past” (Ciugureanu 353). Ciugureanu writes that Miss Havisham is “[t]rapped in her own imaginary world” (354), and I would agree. In addition, Levine and Levine mention the views of other people playing an important role as regards Miss Havisham’s seclusion; Compeyson’s treatment left her mortified and disgraced, and she hides from the world because she is worried about how it will perceive her (63). The points made here appear very relevant when it comes to explaining Miss Havisham’s behaviour. It can be argued that she is driven by anger and resentment – which Roger G. López says is often the case when people become vengeful (290) – and that she does not want to let go of the past, but, as Ciugureanu and Levine and Levine all suggest, there also seems to be a certain degree of self-preservation involved.

Miss Havisham starves herself emotionally in several ways; she lives in a dark and dirty house where there is no daylight and almost no life or movement, and she hardly socializes with anyone. However, as Levine and Levine interestingly point out, Mr Jaggers implies that she might also be starving herself physically, that she might be an anorexic (63-64). He tells Pip that Miss Havisham neither eats nor drinks in the presence of others, and then declares that

“[s]he wanders about in the night, and then lays hands on such food as she takes” (Dickens 206) – something which Pip later gets to witness first-hand.

Regarding character, Miss Havisham sets out with one perspective and ends up with another. In the first part of the novel, she is depicted as someone who is clearly very unhappy, incredibly bitter, and determined to inflict pain on others for her own pleasure. These intentions are visible in, for example, her treatment of Pip and the avaricious Pockets, but also in her desire to punish the “innocent” Pockets – Matthew and his son Herbert – by cutting off almost all contact with them. However, when the effects of her actions begin to dawn on her, when she understands just how much pain and destruction she has caused by using both Pip and Estella as tools for her own vengeance and by turning Estella into ice regarding herself as well, she is horrified and appears to experience feelings of deep regret. About her adoptive daughter, Miss Havisham confesses that she “stole [Estella’s] heart away and put ice in its place” (Dickens 338), and to Pip she says: “Until you spoke . . . the other day, and until I saw in you a looking-glass that showed me what I once felt myself, I did not know what I had done. What have I done! What have I done!” (Dickens 338). Christoph, too, brings this up (128), and Calum Kerr says that Miss Havisham “is a changed woman” (158), a claim which I would agree with. This change manifests itself in her agreeing to help Pip aid Herbert financially (Kerr 158) and in her offering to help Pip as well, an offer which Pip kindly declines. In addition, she bequeaths Matthew several thousand pounds, an action which would indicate at least some kind of awareness of having behaved badly and unfairly in the past and a wish to make amends.

Dolge Orlick’s Revenge

The third revenge-seeking character in the novel is the rough, malicious Dolge Orlick. He works with Joe at the forge and, as the reader quickly learns, has very little love for Pip, something which he makes sure that Pip is aware of:

This morose journeyman had no liking for me. When I was very small and timid, he gave me to understand that the Devil lived in a black corner of the forge, and that he

knew the fiend very well: also that it was necessary to make up the fire, once in seven years, with a live boy, and that I might consider myself fuel. (Dickens 95)

Orlick's animosity towards Pip increases as Pip grows older and is apprenticed to Joe in the smithy. Orlick is worried that Joe will no longer have any use for him, and becomes very envious of Pip. His animosity intensifies even further when he loses his job as Miss Havisham's doorkeeper because of Pip, an event also mentioned by Kerr (154-155). Furthermore, Orlick takes a liking to Pip's friend Biddy. Pip strongly disapproves of this and does what he can to prevent Orlick from making any advances. One might argue that Pip's actions are justified since Orlick is such a malevolent character, but in Orlick's mind, he is being mistreated. These events are mainly what causes him to seek his revenge on Pip, and a most violent revenge at that – he sends Pip a letter, playing on Pip's concern for Magwitch, which tricks Pip into coming to an isolated house where Orlick ties him up and tries to murder him. Orlick reveals to Pip that his reasons for wanting to retaliate include the ones mentioned above, but he also emphasises what Pip already knows, namely that there is an old grudge at the bottom of it: "You was always in Old Orlick's way since ever you was a child" (Dickens 360). Kerr brings up an interesting point as regards the relationship between Orlick and Pip, suggesting that Orlick functions as Pip's "double" (154), albeit a rather nasty one: both of them work with Joe, and both of them perform duties for Miss Havisham (154). I agree with Kerr, but would like to add that both of them are also very fond of Biddy, although Orlick's feelings are of a more sexual nature.

Just like in the cases of Magwitch and Miss Havisham, the crooked Compeyson turns out to be involved in Orlick's revenge. Orlick tells Pip that he has "new companions . . . and new masters" (Dickens 362) and that "[t]here's them that can't and that won't have Magwitch" (Dickens 364). It was Compeyson who wrote Orlick's letter, and the two of them collaborated to satisfy their needs for revenge. Orlick would get a chance to get even by killing Pip, and Compeyson, thanks to Orlick, would be able to get back at Magwitch by giving up Magwitch's position to the authorities. The two villains were using each other to get what they wanted.

For Pip, the effects of Orlick's revenge are both physical and mental. Being tied up is both frightening and painful, especially since Pip has a severely burnt arm which feels as if it is "being boiled" (Dickens 358) – the pain is excruciating. Being faced with death, Pip is also filled with immense remorse at having treated, for example, Joe and Biddy unfairly, and the

thought of not being able to say goodbye to them or making amends scares him more than the fact that Orlick might end his life.

What happens to Orlick is not known to the reader until he is heard from again through Joe: “Old Orlick he’s been a-bustin’ open a dwelling-ouse” (Dickens 396). It would seem, then, that Orlick moves from one crime to the next – a destructive path which ultimately leads to him being imprisoned. He shows no signs of regret or of wanting to change for the better but instead commits one bad deed after another. The Orlick described in the first part of the novel is in many regards the same as the Orlick of the third part; he starts out as an envious, cruel, and violent character and that is also how he ends up. There are no indications that he has gained an understanding or some kind of awareness along the way.

A Comparison

Magwitch, Miss Havisham, and Orlick are all connected through one man, namely Compeyson, whom Hagan rightly calls “the prime mover” (170). It is because of his deeds that many people suffer – it is he who brings misery and ruin to Magwitch and Miss Havisham. He manipulates and backstabs the former and seduces and deceives the latter. According to Christoph, Magwitch and Miss Havisham both try to carry out “an impossible revenge on Compeyson” (124). This is a statement which I do not entirely agree with when it comes to Magwitch, because, as discussed earlier, the convict does manage to get back at his enemy once and for all when they fight each other and Compeyson drowns. As for Orlick, he is linked to Compeyson in a different way; for him, Compeyson is not an offender but someone who facilitates the revenge on Pip.

An interesting aspect when it comes to Magwitch’s and Miss Havisham’s past is that – before they embarked on their vengeful journeys – they themselves were once victims of revenge. Magwitch was robbed of the opportunity to get to know his daughter, Estella, due to his involvement in a love triangle, and in Miss Havisham’s case, the business with Compeyson was actually initiated by her half-brother, who was envious of her wealth and therefore wanted to punish her.

Another similarity between Magwitch and Miss Havisham lies in the ways in which they use other people to achieve their goals; both Pip and Estella are used as tools, as “agents of revenge upon society” (Christoph 123). According to Hagan, Pip thus “becomes society’s scapegoat” (171), adopting, in several regards, the same kind of behaviour that caused both Magwitch and Miss Havisham so much pain and suffering, such as being self-absorbed, unappreciative, and snobbish as well as taking on costly habits (171-172). This view is supported by Christoph (123), but Hagan then seems to be taking it one step further by claiming that, as a result of both Magwitch’s and Miss Havisham’s actions, Pip turns into “something of an impostor like Compeyson himself” (172). This is a rather harsh evaluation which I do not agree with. It is true that Pip gets in trouble with the law and is almost arrested for not paying his debts, and it is equally true that he starts behaving in a way which one might consider both snobbish and unthankful, but to compare him with Compeyson, a man who, as Christoph writes, “lies, cheats, and steals simply because he wishes to” (124), who seems to have no conscience, and who knowingly brings about so much destruction in so many ways, does seem unfair.

A further aspect which appears relevant to bring up when comparing the three revenge-seeking characters of the novel has to do with compensation and the willingness to do good. Although Magwitch is indeed driven by a need for revenge, which he tries to carry out using Pip, he also displays both kindness and decency; for instance, when he chooses not to expose Pip as a thief after being caught on the marshes, an incident mentioned also by Kerr (151). As previously referred to, the convict’s becoming Pip’s patron does not appear to be just about revenge but also about giving Pip a better life than he himself ever had. The aspect of compensation and the desire to do good come into play in relation to Miss Havisham as well, as has been shown earlier and as pointed out by Lelchuk (421). The old lady tells Pip that she initially “meant to save [Estella] from misery like [her] own” (Dickens 338). Further, her willingness to help both Herbert and Pip may be motivated by remorse, but, at the same time, it is also an indication of kindness. Orlick, however, seems to completely lack the ability to be kind. He does express a romantic interest in Bidley, but he never performs a single good, unselfish deed. He is a violent character, driven partly by envy, who does not hesitate to commit murder to satisfy his vengeful needs. While the other two revenge seekers can be said to have both good and bad qualities, Orlick seems to be evil to the core. He tries to take Pip’s life, but he is also responsible for what happens to Pip’s sister, Mrs Joe, and in telling Pip that he “left her for dead” (Dickens 361), he shows just how much ruthlessness he is capable of.

Being driven by feelings of envy is something that Orlick has in common with the avaricious Pockets; for example, Pip describes Sarah Pocket as “a blandly vicious personage” (Dickens 74) who, in his presence, “turn[s] from brown to green and yellow” (Dickens 133). The Pockets are not as malicious as Orlick, of course, but they do seem to be of a similar frame of mind.

When it comes to character change, Orlick stands out yet again in that he does not do any soul-searching. Magwitch and Miss Havisham, on the other hand, both at some point express a desire to better themselves. Christoph writes that “Miss Havisham . . . is both shocked and remorseful” but that “Magwitch never realizes the effects of his revenge on Pip” (127). This may be true, but I would like to point out that, just like in Miss Havisham’s case, there are indications that Magwitch wants to change. For instance, the once so aggressive convict repeatedly tells Pip, when they meet several years later, that he “ain’t a-going to be low” (Dickens 282). As a result of their willingness to change, Magwitch and Miss Havisham are no longer the persons they were in the beginning of the novel. Orlick, however, shows no such tendencies. He is a much rougher and more one-dimensional character who can be seen as a foil for the other two. The fact that he does not perform any good deeds can perhaps also help explain why he does not change. According to Aristotle, a person’s character is closely linked to the actions that he or she performs; people become good by doing good deeds and bad by doing bad ones (qtd. in Dougherty 294). Furthermore, Aristotle claims that developing a certain personality is, in some regards, “like learning a craft” – it takes “practice and repetition” (qtd. in Dougherty 295). Once people have adopted a certain behaviour, that is how they tend to stay, since ceasing to do something that one has got used to doing is, Aristotle says, normally very hard (qtd. in Dougherty 294). This view seems to fit particularly well with Orlick; he has had extensive practice when it comes to behaving badly, and developed a pattern which it is extremely difficult for him to break.

The opinions on how Miss Havisham meets her end seem to differ somewhat. Kerr writes that she is “allowed to die in peace” after “[h]aving finally given up her life of pain and cruelty” (158), while Christoph argues the opposite, claiming that “Dickens condemns her to die in a fiery inferno despite her repentance” (128). I would argue that Kerr is right in suggesting that Miss Havisham does find some form of peace before she passes away. She may not be able to get over Compeyson’s betrayal, but the fact that she realises and regrets what she has done to both Pip and Estella and the fact that Pip forgives her in the end allow her to die with a slightly

less burdened heart. Finding peace and improving the relationship with Pip are aspects that are equally relevant when it comes to Magwitch, for whom Pip has developed “a selfless love” (Hagan 174) by the time the convict dies in prison.

One last thing which ought to be mentioned has to do with forgiving and forgetting. Bacon says that “in taking revenge a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over he is superior, for it is a prince’s part to pardon” (50). He then goes on to stress that “[t]hat which is past is gone and irrevocable” (50). As mentioned in the introduction and established also by Christoph (124), the events of the past are an important subject matter in *Great Expectations*, and the inability to forgive and forget is something which Magwitch and Miss Havisham have in common. Neither of them makes peace with their past, and, as a result, they both end up seeking revenge. It should be pointed out, however, that there are degrees to this and that the unwillingness to move on in life is more visible in Miss Havisham than in Magwitch. As for Orlick, it can perhaps be debated whether or not he has suffered any real injustices, but in his mind at least, he certainly has, and, like the other two characters, he does not leave it in the past.

Conclusion

This essay has dealt mainly with the three revenge-seeking characters Abel Magwitch, Miss Havisham, and Dolge Orlick, and the aim has been to examine the various effects of revenge – what it does to the people subjected to it but also how it affects the ones who carry it out. I have found that what sets the revenge seekers on their vengeful paths is the inability to let go of painful events of the past. These incidents, in turn, may cause various emotions such as anger, resentment, shame, humiliation, and envy. Both Magwitch’s and Miss Havisham’s actions involve exacting revenge through other people. This definitely has damaging effects; for example, Pip becomes indebted and develops a snobbish and careless behaviour, and Estella is turned into someone cold and cruel who lacks the ability to feel love. However, as I have attempted to show, the revenge seekers’ deeds have positive outcomes as well. Magwitch’s revenge on society, for instance, also involves a measure of compensation and kindness; he wants Pip to have the kind of life that he himself never had, and he sets Pip on a path that results in Pip’s becoming educated and making meaningful friendships. The desire to do good applies

to Miss Havisham as well; although she ends up wounding Estella rather than helping her, her initial intentions were simply to love and cherish her adoptive daughter and to shield her from the heartache that she herself once suffered.

That the effects of revenge may have just as disastrous an outcome for the pursuer as for the victim is made clear perhaps mainly by the ways in which Miss Havisham slowly but surely destroys herself and completely denies herself any chances of having a normal life. As for Magwitch and Orlick, their journeys lead to imprisonment and, in Magwitch's case, ultimately death. However, both Magwitch and Miss Havisham die having found love or forgiveness and having had a change of character. The same cannot be said for Orlick. He does not gain any insights regarding his own behaviour but instead ends up just as he began, ruthless and violent, thereby serving as a foil for the other two.

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