Choose a novel or short story in which your attitude to a main character changes as the story progresses. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the writer causes you to change your attitude and discuss how this adds to your understanding of the text as a whole.

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens features Miss Havisham as a main character for whom we initially regard as crazy by the end of the novel we feel sorry for her. In the novel Pip begins his life in poverty before living a life as a gentleman after receiving money from a mysterious benefactor who he believes is Miss Havisham. We can look at how Dickens makes us change our attitude towards Miss Havisham as the story progresses and how she exemplifies his theme of being a good person.

The first time we meet Miss Havisham we realise she is someone with mental health issues. Her appearance suggests this straight away as we are told she is ‘withered’, still wears her wedding dress from years before and ‘had no brightness but the brightness of her sunken eyes’. The word choice of ‘withered’ suggests something that is dying. The continued wearing of the wedding dress shows an inability to move on with her life in a positive way and the ‘sunken eyes’ suggest a lack of sleep. There is still some mental capacity left as we are told there is a ‘brightness’. Altogether this is quite a frightening image to behold. On this first meeting with her she is frightening to behold but we don’t learn about her character yet to know if she is good or bad.

Miss Havisham then continues to prove she is unstable. She whispers to Estella as she watches her adopted daughter play with Pip, telling her, “break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy.” Here repetition is used to emphasise that Miss Havisham wants Estella to emotionally and mentally damage the men she encounters in her life. Her word choice of ‘have no mercy’ also emphasises that she doesn’t want Estella to have an emotional involvement in her actions. Also, the fact that Pip reports this to us shows that Miss Havisham has said it in front of him suggesting that she doesn’t care for Pip. This scene shows that Miss Havisham is a bad person at this point as she is using the people around her to enact her revenge.

Miss Havisham continues to act in a demented and off-putting way by continuing to manipulate Pip and Estella. She commands Pip to feel love for Estella telling him, “love her, love her, love her! If she favours you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces – and as it gets older and stronger, it will tear deeper – love her, love her, love her!” Here we can see that Dickens is making Miss Havisham appear desperate and is making her shout the words. He repeats the phrase ‘love her’ and adds an exclamation mark on the third repeat and uses the shouted phrase twice. Love her is then used three more times throughout the section. There is also a list of things that Estella will do to Pip that he must love her despite suffering. Dickens also uses word choice carefully to explain what Estella will do to Pip’s heart – ‘wound’ ‘tear’ and ‘deeper’ all suggest that Estella will cause Pip great harm. The parenthesis also shows that this harm will be sustained over time. Miss Havisham’s words to Pip show that she is consumed with seeking revenge against men, Estella is a weapon who is designed to cause men harm. Miss Havisham wants men to become infatuated with Estella so she can break their hearts and they will feel Miss Havisham’s pain. Miss Havisham is showing that she is a ‘bad ‘person still as she has not thought about the impact of her actions on Pip.

We get further insight into Miss Havisham’s character and start to feel sorry for her when we hear more of her story and react to her words on love. Miss Havisham was jilted at the altar by her fiancé who was only marrying her for her money, she truly loved him though and tells Pip that real love is ‘blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself’. Miss Havisham gives us a list of things she claims are to do with love. However her word choices here are odd, everything she lists goes against natural and safe love. It sounds like she is describing a broken and controlling relationship using words like submission and self-humiliation which suggest losing yourself and self-value. It reveals that Miss Havisham was utterly broken mentally by what Compeson did to her and reveals the true extent of her mental breakdown from which she has clearly never fully recovered. At this point we realise that Miss Havisham really is unaware that what she is doing is bad or wrong. She actually believes that what she is doing is right and justified. She will not be able to right things until she realises there is something to correct – just like Pip cannot correct his behaviour till he realises it is wrong.

Miss Havisham finally realises she has done wrong when she realises she has created a type of monster in Estella. Estella decides to marry Drummel against Miss Havisham’s wishes and Miss Havisham finally acknowledges ‘I stole her heart away and put ice in its place”. The statement is simple and the tone is sad and horrified. Miss Havisham takes responsibility for her actions in raising Estella, the metaphor shows she acknowledges how unfeeling she has made Estella. She has replaced her ‘heart’ with ‘ice’ making her a cold person. It also suggests that had she not raised Estella in the manner she had, Estella would be a happy loving girl. Miss Havisham attempts to make up for her actions towards Estella in paying money to her nephew Herbert Pocket, so that he can live a fulfilled life with his sweetheart. This action shows that she has given up seeking revenge on love and instead supports it. Miss Havisham’s final actions in the book show a move from bad behaviour to good and so she supports the theme of the book.

In conclusion, Miss Havisham is a main character whom we react towards with mixed feelings. Initially we are shocked and made uncomfortable by her actions and manipulations of Pip and Estella. We begin to regard her as a nasty person as these manipulations hurt Pip and Estella’s development as people. Ultimately though, we realise that Miss Havisham herself is a broken person and she acts this way as she thinks she is right. When she realises how much harm she has caused she tries to fix things the only way she can by supporting Herbert Pocket. In doing this, she shows that there is time to right wrongs and redeem oneself.