Havisham

Carol Anne Duffy’s poem “Havisham” is based on a character from Charles Dickens’ famous novel “Great Expectations”, Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham, an aging spinster who was jilted at the altar and now harbours an obsessive, all engulfing hatred of her ex-fiancé as she slowly loses her humanity and her mind. The poem seamlessly blends form and content to create a tale that both enthrals and disturbs the reader. Several techniques are used throughout the poem ranging from juxtaposition and enjambment to unusual lexical choice to reveal the complex character and situation of Havisham.

Havisham’s desire and obsession for revenge are the main themes in the poem which are expressed all throughout the poem using a number of literary techniques. An example of this is the first sentence of the beginning stanza: “Beloved sweetheart bastard” This shows the confusion Havisham is feeling about her ex-fiancé. The juxtaposition of “sweetheart bastard” shows the hatred for someone she should and would in normal circumstances love as shown by the sarcastic “Beloved.” The next sentence also displays the themes of hatred and obsession:

“Not a day since then I haven’t wished him dead.” This shows the extent to which Havisham loathes and despises her ex-fiancé. “Not a day since then” suggests that Havisham is in a constant state of despair ever since what happened to her on her wedding day. “Wished him dead” shows that Havisham has prayed for the death of her ex-fiancé, which displays the burning hatred Havisham holds towards her ex-fiancé. The inversion used emphasises the length of time Havisham has harboured these feelings for. The use of the double negative of “not” and “haven’t” add to the negativity she feels towards her ex-fiancé.

The extent to which her obsession has grown and the negative effects it is having on her life is then described in the first line of the second stanza. “Spinster. I stink and remember” This highlights how Havishams personal hygiene has suffered as a result of her obsessive behaviour. The minor sentence of “spinster” shows how forcefully Havisham feels about the term. The sibilants of “spinster” and “stink” suggest she is harshly spitting out the words. “Remember” suggests that there are moments when Havishams attention is on matters other than her ex-fiancé, wedding day or hatred of men but that these moments are brief and short lived as there are constant reminders of her ordeal. Another example of how her hygiene is suffering is the fact that her wedding dress is rotting because she has never removed it. “The dress yellowing.”

The idea of Havishams decent into dehumanisation is another prominent theme. There are several references to how Havisham is now no longer entirely human. “I’ve dark green pebbles for eyes, ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.” This shows how her obsession with revenge has transformed her into a jealous sadist. “Whole days in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall” This shows how Havisham’s lack of human contact has affected her mind. Havisham either does not know there is no one present or does not care. The choice of the word “cawing” suggests an animalistic quality similar to the call of a crow or raven. “Puce curses that are sounds not words” This also suggests that Havisham has lost her ability to communicate in an audible, clear, understandable way. The fact that she can no longer say a simple word shows how Havisham is becoming more and more uncivilised, barbaric and animal like in her isolation. The word “puce” also suggests pain as this is the colour of external bruisng of the skin. “The slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this to me?” This shows how Havisham no longer recognises herself. That the once beautiful, young woman she was is now a barely human, cynical old woman. She also thinks it is the fault of someone else most plausibly her ex-fiancé shown by “who did this to me?”

Violence is a theme present throughout the poem. Havisham clearly wants to inflict pain on her ex-fiancé and on men in general. “Ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.” This shows how Havisham wishes to slowly kill her ex-fiancé in a slow, painful manner. It is also a reference to the wrinkles and protruding veins visible on her aged hands. “I stabbed at a wedding cake.” This shows how Havisham wants to destroy everything to do with her wedding but yet she is living perpetually in the moment she was jilted as if tormenting herself. “Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.” This shows the image of happiness after marriage has been twisted and demonised in Havishams mind and that her hatred for all men extends to such an extent that she would rather have a dead man than a living one. “Don’t think it’s only the heart that b-b-b-breaks.” This shows how Havisham is having sadistic thoughts about harming men and wishes to exact vicarious revenge for the heartbreak she felt on her wedding day through breaking the bones of men.

Duffy creates a unique poem stemming from the work of another prominent author of literature, the famous Charles Dickens, which using dramatic monologue and a wide range of other literary techniques highlights the plight of a woman the world forgot and captures the sheer and utter desperation of her predicament and the adverse effects it has on her mental state, forcing her to the brink of insanity. Evoking both sympathy and fury from the reader for the way in which Havisham reacted to her situation, forcing the reader to confront fundamental questions about the human psyche.