A new film version of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*: "Those wretched hankerings after money and gentility"

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Directed by Mike Newell, written by David Nicholls, based on the novel by Charles Dickens

" In the little world in which children have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice. It may be only small injustice that the child can be exposed to; but the child is small, and its world is small, and its rocking-horse stands as many hands high, according to scale, as a big-boned Irish hunter. Within myself, I had sustained, from my babyhood, a perpetual conflict with injustice. " Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

It is unfortunate that the new film adaptation of Charles Dickens's extraordinary novel *Great Expectations* (1860), directed by Mike Newell and scripted by David Nicholls, may disappear from theaters in North America without a large number of people having seen it. It is an intelligent and moving version of the book, with a good deal to say in its own right.

Great Expectations has been adapted for film or television numerous times since a silent version in 1917 (which featured Mary Pickford's younger brother, Jack), in part because it is the most concise and manageable of Dickens' major works. Serialization, on television or the stage, seems most appropriate to the more sprawling of his books.

Nicholls and Newell are relatively faithful to the novel, bringing in (albeit fleetingly) a number of the details or complexities omitted in David Lean's famed 1946 version, which starred John Mills.

Pip (Toby Irvine) is an orphan, living in the country with his "tartar" of an older sister, Mrs. Joe (Sally Hawkins), and her husband, the gentle blacksmith Joe Gargery (Jason Flemyng).

The opening sequence takes place in a churchyard on Christmas Eve. While visiting the tomb of his parents, Pip is accosted by a convict in chains, Magwitch (Ralph Fiennes), an escapee from a prison ship anchored offshore. The following morning, Pip brings the man food and drink, and a file. Subsequently, Joe and Pip witness the brutal recapture of Magwitch and a fellow prisoner by a unit of soldiers. The pair have quietly expressed the hope the men will avoid their pursuers. (In Dickens: "I treasonably whispered to Joe, 'I hope, Joe, we shan't find them.' And Joe whispered to me, 'I'd give a shilling if they had cut and run, Pip.' ") Ultimately, Pip's brief encounter with the miserable, starving Magwitch has momentous consequences.

Some time later, Miss Havisham (Helena Bonham Carter), a wealthy woman who lives in complete seclusion after having been left at the altar, asks Joe's Uncle Pumblechook (David Walliams) to find a boy to play with her adopted daughter, Estella (Helena Barlow), and the latter suggests Pip. The boy is both repulsed and entranced by Miss Havisham and her dark, decaying mansion. Estella is rude and haughty. (Asked to play with Pip, she responds, "With this boy? Why, he is a common laboring boy!") Pip falls in love with Estella, in spite of—or because of—her, insulting and superior behavior.

Much to Pip's disappointment, the start of an apprenticeship at the forge coincides with the enforced end of his regular visits to the mansion. Years pass. A lawyer, Mr. Jaggers (Robbie Coltrane), appears at the smithy and reveals that an anonymous benefactor (whom Pip assumes to be Miss Havisham) has provided the means through which the young man, who now has "great expectations," can move to London and become a "gentleman." This seems the answer to his prayers.

Pip (now Jeremy Irvine) throws himself into his new life, in the company of his quasi-tutor in the ways of the world, the ebullient Herbert Pocket (Olly Alexander), joining a club and running up debts. A grown-up Estella (Holliday Grainger) comes back into Pip's life, still tormenting him with her coldness. He has learned meanwhile that Miss Havisham has brought up her adopted daughter to wreak revenge on the male sex. Estella threatens to enter into a loveless marriage with the wealthy, loutish Bentley Drummle (Ben Lloyd-Hughes).

Out of the blue, Magwitch reappears and announces that he is actually Pip's benefactor and considers the youth his son. Pip is appalled by the revelation, and decides to renounce the rest of the fortune due him. Magwitch was transported for life to Australia, where he made a fortune, so he runs a great risk showing his face in London. His old enemy, Compeyson (William Ellis), may be watching and waiting for him, ready to turn him in. Pip and Herbert conspire to smuggle Magwitch out of the country. Meanwhile, relations between Pip and Miss Havisham, and Pip and Estella, reach a decisive point. There is no possible convincingly happy conclusion to these events.

The novel, the second to the last of Dickens's completed works, is one of the writer's finest. It is a somewhat somber affair. In his brilliant 1939 essay, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," American literary critic Edmund Wilson referred to the "ebb of Dickens' bursting exuberance" that characterized his later books. Wilson suggested, in fact, that the comic, specifically "Dickens characters" stuck out "in an unnatural relief [in these works] from a surface that is more quietly realistic."

Great Expectations moves in the direction, for better or worse, of the psychological novel (which would truly lose exuberance in lesser hands in the twentieth century). George Eliot's first full-length work, *Adam Bede*, had appeared one year earlier. As Wilson noted, for the first time in Dickens's work, in *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857) and *Great Expectations*, "We are told what the characters think and feel, and even something about how they change." Much of the latter portion of *Great Expectations*, which moves unusually slowly for a Dickens novel, in terms of its action, is devoted to Pip's self-analysis, and often, self-reproach.

There were no doubt various factors at work. Along with *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), *Great Expectations* is considered something of

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a moral autobiography. Dickens, who came from a lower middle-class background (indeed, his paternal grandfather was a butler and his paternal grandmother a house servant), remained an outsider in English society, even at the height of his vast fame. By 1860, his "mounting dislike and distrust of the top layers of that middle-class society with which he had begun by identifying himself" (Wilson) had accumulated in intensity. The "disillusion and discomfort" that filled his life at this time come across very sharply.

Dickens was outraged by an unjust, corrupt and hypocritical society and also perhaps disturbed and even guilt-stricken, one must assume, by his own celebrity and wealth. When Dickens (born in 1812) was 12, his father and the rest of the family were taken off to debtors' prison, while he was obliged to work, 10 hours a day, in a blacking (boot polish) warehouse for six shillings a week. Dickens returned to the prison each evening after work. By his mid-20s, he was a successful journalist and the author of a popular novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836). By the early 1840s, he was the most prominent and beloved novelist in the English language. Whatever illusions Dickens harbored about the society he was entering into, and he no doubt harbored many, he saw through them with increasing bitterness. He had become a conscious opponent of the "cruelty of organized society" (Wilson) and its leading institutions.

Pip, who narrates *Great Expectations*, is someone from the lower classes who comes into contact, more or less by chance, with wealth and elegance, or at least their charismatic shadow. He become mesmerized, and despite every warning and premonition, pursues his fantasy. In the novel, after his unwanted apprenticeship at the blacksmith shop begins, Pip tells his childhood friend Biddy (Bebe Cave in the new film), who loves him, "I want to be a gentleman.… I am not at all happy as I am. I am disgusted with my calling and with my life.… I never shall or can be comfortable—or anything but miserable—there, Biddy!—unless I can lead a very different sort of life from the life I lead now." To all of which Biddy replies, " 'That's a pity!'…shaking her head with a sorrowful air."

It all works out disastrously. Pip "turns into a mean little snob" (Wilson), Miss Havisham deliberately deceives and ensnares him, Estella tortures him, his fellow club member Drummle triumphs over him. On top of that, his mystery patron, much to his horror, turns out to be an inveterate criminal and would-be murderer (although, in the end, Pip learns to have considerable feeling and respect for Magwitch). The "great expectations" prove to be an empty illusion. "Estella and Pip have both believed that they could count upon a wealthy patroness…to make them secure against vulgarity and hardship. But the patroness vanishes like a phantom, and they are left with their leisure-class habits and no incomes to keep them up" (Wilson).

Pip in particular is a victim, as it were, of "an English tragedy." The stages of his unfolding understanding of this tragedy make up much of the novel. It takes the form, as he explains, of a "confused division of mind…between the forge and Miss Havisham's, and Biddy and Estella."

Once having set himself up in London society, Pip is mortified by the thought of a visit from the uncouth Joe Gargery: "I had the sharpest sensitiveness as to his being seen by Drummle, whom I held in contempt. So, throughout life, our worst weaknesses and meannesses are usually committed for the sake of the people whom we most despise." When Joe comes to visit Pip in London, he quickly betrays his country manners, humiliating himself. He runs off, blaming himself for the debacle. The scene in the Newell film is carried off well.

Pip eventually comes to recognize his own self-delusion: "All other swindlers upon earth are nothing to the self-swindlers, and with such pretences did I cheat myself." Further: "As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me. Their influence on my own character I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very well that it was not all good." And later: "I used to think, with a weariness on my spirits, that I should have been happier and better if I had never seen Miss Havisham's face, and had risen to manhood content to be partners with Joe in the honest old forge."

At his most self-critical, Pip ponders his "subjection" to Estella—i.e., his manipulated fantasies about her: "Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood,—from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe."

And, finally, after all apparent hope of happiness has passed, Pip tells Biddy that "that poor dream, as I once used to call it, has all gone by…all gone by!" As Wilson commented, "Here [in the figure of Pip] the effects of both poverty and riches are seen from the inside in one person."

To its credit, the Nicholls-Newell film captures a good deal of this. These quoted passages are not cited, of course, but their general content and thrust find expression in the various images and relationships.

Dickens is something of a "dead dog" as far as the academic establishment is concerned. As early as 1939, Wilson noted that it was difficult for British pundits, who tended to treat the novelist with "only a perfunctory sneer," to see in Dickens "the great artist and social critic that he was." Seeing his greatness for these types has only become more difficult with time. In fact, the general consensus on the intellectual "left" is that Dickens was one of those nineteenth-century novelists whose essential task it was to "reprogram" populations "for life and work in the new world of market capitalism" (Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 1981).

The new film pays a good deal of attention to the question of class. In the work's special and venomous treatment of Drummle and his circle in particular, enormously privileged, boorish and self-centered, as well as its contempt for Miss Havisham's narcissism and machinations, it is hard not to sense some anger about the present social situation and the new aristocracy.

Likewise, Joe and Biddy (as an adult, Jessie Cave) are treated with great care and consideration. Jason Flemyng as Gargery does an especially effective job. He manages to present the blacksmith as a smart, sensitive man who has been deprived of culture through no fault of his own. There is not a hint of the condescension that even the novel occasionally conveys and which very nearly dominates the performance of Bernard Miles in the David Lean film. Olly Alexander as Herbert Pocket is a pure delight.

It is a very humane work. Newell has an eclectic filmography. Like so many British writers and directors, he began his career in television drama (*Play for Today*), which had a generally left-wing orientation, in the 1970s. *Dance With a Stranger* (1985), with Miranda Richardson, remains a high point in his career. He has also directed *Enchanted April* (1991), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Donnie Brasco* (1997) and one of the Harry Potter franchise (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 2005). The new film is a major addition to his body of work.

Overall, I prefer this new version of *Great Expectations* to the Lean film. Although the latter obviously benefits from strong performances by Finlay Currie (Magwitch), Francis L. Sullivan (Jaggers), Alec Guinness (Herbert), Jean Simmons (young Estella) and Martita Hunt (Miss Havisham), among others, it is a somewhat stiff and, in my opinion, overrated work. It is a film to be appreciated, but not deeply felt. I was more moved by Newell's version, which, again, may have something to do with our present social situation and its impact on artists…and audiences.

The weakest link in the new film is Jeremy Irvine as the mature Pip, but that may also speak to the character itself, a bit of an empty or mediocre space at the center of the novel and the film, surrounded by more powerful and compelling figures. As Pip himself recognizes, Magwitch and Joe are both better human beings than he, and Estella is a more tragic figure. As Magwitch lies dying, Pip explains, "In the hunted, wounded, shackled

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creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe." This is Dickens at his most extraordinarily farsighted and compassionate, and to the extent that the Nicholls-Newell film communicates a portion of this farsightedness and compassion, it is to be commended.

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