

The Invisible Woman: Moralizing about Charles Dickens

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Directed by Ralph Fiennes; written by Abi Morgan; based on a book by Claire Tomalin

The following comment on *The Invisible Woman*, which has now opened in North America, was posted as part of the coverage of the 2013 Toronto film festival.

Directed by veteran British actor Ralph Fiennes, *The Invisible Woman* sets out to treat the relationship between 45-year-old novelist Charles Dickens (Fiennes), then at the height of his fame in the late 1850s, and his 18-year-old mistress Ellen Ternan (Felicity Jones), an actress who became his muse and passion. Despite his unsatisfying marriage to Catherine (Joanna Scanlan)—who has borne Dickens 10 children—career and other considerations dictate that Ellen (later Nelly) will lead an “invisible” life.

Fiennes, who made his film directing debut with the acclaimed *Coriolanus* in 2010, “felt moved by this woman [Ternan] and her secret past... holding a past relationship inside her, which has marked her forever, and of which she was unable to speak.” The story is based on the 1990 biography of Ternan by Claire Tomalin (*The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*).

The existence of the Dickens-Ternan relationship, which, according to Tomalin’s work, lasted for the last 13 years of the writer’s life, was not known to the general public until the 1930s.

A dark, brooding piece, Fiennes’s film is a fairly trite and superficial rendering of an episode in the life of one of the greatest and most popular writers of all time, who has enlightened and entertained readers for generations. In the movie, Dickens plays second fiddle to the always sullen Ellen, upon whose face the camera forever loiters.

The production notes for *The Invisible Woman* tell us that Dickens was “a brilliant amateur actor—a man more

emotionally coherent on the page or on stage, than in life.” Well, first of all, why should we take the filmmakers’ word for it? Once again, we are being subjected to ahistorical sanctimony. The film’s not-too-subtle subtext is its disapproval of Dickens’s treatment of his wife and mistress, ignoring him as a product of his era and social circumstances (which made divorce unthinkable).

Frankly, the novelist’s dedication to presenting life in his novels is a thousand times more important and enduring than his imputed peccadilloes. Who set up these middle class critics as the arbiters of morality extending back into history? What have *they* got to boast about? It should be noted that the movie was scripted by Abi Morgan, who wrote the shameful tribute to Margaret Thatcher, *The Iron Lady*.

Ironically, Thatcher, of course, is the politician who more than any other is identified with the return of conditions of social misery to Britain that might be termed “Dickensian”! Such an irony presumably did not occur to either Morgan or Fiennes.



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