Great Expectations Realised or Disappointed? Using Screen Adaptations in the Classroom

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Introduction

It is tempting for teachers to show adaptations of class texts as time-fillers at the beginning or end of a term, without engaging students in discussion of filmmakers’ choices. Adaptations do help students to visualise plot and characters, especially if they get bogged down in language. For students whose first language is not English, this can be invaluable for accessing a text. For all students, analysing adaptations is even more valuable by highlighting that different people can read the same text differently.

Analysing adaptations requires students to demonstrate understanding of a text’s key elements: plot, characterisation, setting, themes, revealing whether they have read the text or merely gleaned from SparkNotes. Another positive is that through students’ comments, teachers can gauge their enjoyment of the text—the aesthetic, incorporated into recent curriculum revisions—by the extent to which they care about filmmakers’ choices.

Adherences to, and deviations from, texts made by adaptations also tell us about the contexts in which they were produced and received—prevalent attitudes, values and beliefs. MTV-style adaptations of Hamlet (2000) and Great Expectations (1998), both starring Ethan Hawke as a depressed young artist, are emblematic of a period when soundtrack was vital to the plot and angst-ridden love affairs were ‘in’ (Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 Romeo + Juliet is another example). In Julie Taymor’s 2010 The Tempest, Prospero becomes Prospera—does this make her indignation over the attempted rape of daughter Miranda more relatable to a modern audience, for whom a patriarch’s defence of family honour is not as
relevant? This could prompt fruitful discussion of gender and feminist readings.

Filmmakers adapting Charles Dickens’s novels have the challenging task of visualising a text originally serialised in as many as 20 weekly or monthly instalments. With their convoluted plots and dazzling array of colourful characters, creating a screen version within the time constraints of a film or TV miniseries without losing Dickens’s flavour and intent is no mean feat (many have tried). Teachers have the even more challenging task of deciding which adaptation would be of the most educational benefit to show.

A useful starting point for both teachers and students is to consider what makes a ‘good’ adaptation. Kristin Spooner suggests authenticity as a criterion—‘the film’s faithfulness to the novel’ (for example, the author’s intent) and/or fidelity—how the film represents the novel and its historical context. Susan Johnston, commenting on Alfonso Cuarón’s 1998 Great Expectations, argues that an adaptation fixated with historical accuracy produces a ‘historically picturesque’ film rather than an authentic one. To what extent should the resulting adaptation resemble the source text? In the controversy over Julian Fellowes’ script for the 2013 film adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, Fellowes was criticised for daring to tinker with Shakespeare’s language. Allowing filmmakers to present their readings demonstrates that the text is still relevant today, and helps the author by creating interest in their work for new generations.

Those teaching Great Expectations are spoiled for choice. Written during Dickens’s affair with Nelly Ternan (explored in Ralph Fiennes’s 2013 film, The Invisible Woman) and published 1860–1, it follows the fortunes of orphans Pip and Estella. Both are, to some degree, adopted by benefactors—a common theme in Dickens’s novels. His domestic drama has spawned (to date) ten screen adaptations, most recently, a 2011 BBC series and 2012 BBC film.

With the series, the BBC tried to replicate the success of their pacey, gritty, realist Bleak House (2005) and Little Dorrit (2008). It features young up-and-coming British actors Douglas Booth and Vanessa Kirby as Pip and Estella, supported by the well-known Ray Winstone (Magwitch), David Suchet (Jaggers), and Gillian Anderson (Miss Havisham). The more lavish film, released during Dickens’s 200th birthday celebrations, has Hollywood heavyweights Mike Newell (director), David Nicholls (screenwriter), Ralph Fiennes (Magwitch) and Helena Bonham Carter (Miss Havisham). Pip is
played by *War Horse*’s Jeremy Irvine and Estella by *The Borgias*’ Holliday Grainger.

Both versions have their merits; like all adaptations, they are products of their makers’ judicial decisions. Both essentially follow the novel’s plot and communicate Dickens’s twin themes of his longing for requited love and a stable family life. But there are key differences. Surprisingly, the series (three episodes, each 60 minutes’ duration), is not more accurate regarding the text, despite being longer—the characterisation and dialogue seem, at times, modern. The film, a neat 128 minutes, includes more characters and dialogue from the novel. The filmmakers’ choices make both worthy of class discussion as a conclusion to, or alongside, a novel study. Time permitting, a comparative study might prove rewarding.

Neither adaptation particularly deviates from the novel’s basic plotline and bleak, marshy landscape. Following the deaths of his parents, young Pip is raised by his sister and brother-in-law, Mr and Mrs Joe Gargery. A chance encounter with escaped convict Abel Magwitch leads to Pip becoming, unknowingly, the recipient of Magwitch’s fortune. He moves to London, transforming into a profligate gentleman. Estella (revealed to be Magwitch’s daughter) has been adopted by the wealthy, jilted spinster Miss Havisham, and bred to attract men and cruelly abandon them. This backfires when Estella marries the cruel Bentley Drummle. Pip’s doomed love for Estella echoes Dickens’s for Nelly Ternan.

**In loco parentis: Pip and his surrogate parents**

In both adaptations, filmmakers have made choices regarding characterisation—which of the minor characters to include, but more significantly, the portrayal of major characters and their relationships differ between the adaptations, and between the adaptations and the novel. At the heart of both is the intertwining narrative of Pip and Estella and their relationships with their surrogate parents. Pip has two potential father-figures: Joe and Magwitch; the 2011 series emphasises this in its portrayal of Pip’s relationships with each.

Both adaptations follow the novel by beginning with Pip meeting Magwitch. The series opens with Magwitch emerging menacingly from still water like a Leviathan; the hulks, from which he has escaped, silhouetted in the distance. Cut to young Pip clearing weeds from his parents’ graves. As Pip runs across a low-slung bridge, Magwitch shoots up and grabs his ankle, pinning Pip down and asking him to bring a file.
Pip’s encounter with Magwitch in the 2012 film is closer to the novel. Pip is cleaning the lettering of his parents’ headstone when he is seized from behind by Magwitch and thrust upside-down. In the book, Pip recounts: ‘the church came to itself—for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet’. This gives more potency to Magwitch asking Pip where his parents are, as Pip indicates the graves beneath him. Magwitch’s request for both a file and food (‘wittles’) is as per the novel.

Although these may seem subtle differences, they shape the relationship between Pip and his future benefactor. In the series, Pip offers Magwitch a piece of pie out of kindness. This creates a connection between the young boy and the criminal. Magwitch looks closely at Pip, as if for the first time. In the book and the film, Pip brings food out of fearful compulsion. The emotional connection is only made when Magwitch is arrested. He sees Joe hold Pip and speak his name tenderly. Magwitch whispers it, savouring it for future reference when he seeks to anoint Pip his child in place of the one he lost. The result of the series’ seemingly minor alteration is that Pip’s later disdain for Magwitch is cruel—he has lost his childhood naivety. In the film, Pip helps Magwitch—childhood fear matures into adult kindness.

Pip turns to his kindly brother-in-law Joe, a blacksmith, for affection because of the ill-treatment he receives from his much older sister, referred to in the book ironically as her bringing Pip up ‘by hand’. In the 2011 adaptation, Pip’s sister slaps him around the head, complaining about having to look after him. In the film, when she is enraged, Joe gives Pip a folded cloth to stuff down the back of his trousers as protection against Tickler (a cane) and thrusts Pip behind him—as per the book. This demonstrates the close bond between Joe and Pip, and is justification for Joe’s being upset later in the film by Pip’s rejection.

Mrs Joe’s fury is relatively short-lived in the film—given time restrictions, she disappears once Pip grows up; a brief explanation is given that she had died. The 2011 series has time to include the sub-plot of Joe’s apprentice, Orlick, beating Mrs Joe so that she is bed-ridden and mute until she dies in episode 2. Mrs Joe’s debilitated state gives opportunity to show Joe’s caring, sacrificing nature as he tends to her, and a means for Joe to guilt the older Pip for turning his back on his family. Audience sympathy for Pip is possibly diluted, especially as he leaves his sister’s wake early to go to a party.
Miss Havisham becomes, to some extent, a mother figure to both Pip and Estella. In the series, Pip’s abandonment of his family is birthed when Miss Havisham engages him as a plaything for Estella, giving Pip a glimpse of genteel life. He mistakes her manipulation for kindness. This highly eccentric Dickens creation provides filmmakers with rich material. In the 2011 series, she is a spectral figure with white hair, white face, faint voice and faded wedding garb. She glows; when Pip sees her descending the stairs, her ethereal beauty enthralls him. As an example of the adaptation’s tendency to tell as well as show, when Miss Havisham displays the shrouded remains of her wedding cake to Pip, she says, ‘It is a ghost of a wedding cake. And I am a ghost of a bride’, explaining the visual metaphor. This may seem like ‘stating the obvious’, but may be helpful for students for whom Miss Havisham’s insistent mourning is difficult to comprehend.

In the 2012 film, she is portrayed by Helena Bonham Carter as more tangibly human, a woman whose wedding preparations were rudely interrupted, evidenced by her having only one shoe on, something Bonham Carter insisted on. This is true to the novel when Pip ‘glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent,’ and emphasises her obstinacy, a small detail which may delight eagle-eyed students. Debate could be stimulated as to whether this adds to the character’s eccentricity, or is an unnecessary distraction.

In the TV series, as in the book, Pip initially wants to be a blacksmith like Joe (fulfilling the father-son relationship) and he tells Miss Havisham so. But when she later provides the funds for his apprenticeship, he realises the time spent with her has changed him. He looks at Estella and Miss Havisham says knowingly: ‘I understand. Your eyes have been opened and now you cannot close them’. Pip no longer wants to be like Joe—he is discontented with his life. Miss Havisham absolves herself of guilt at this watershed in Pip’s life by saying ‘Your eyes have been opened’ rather than ‘I have opened your eyes’.

In the 2012 film, Pip’s yearning for a ‘better’ life is clear early on—he enlists his friend, Biddy (who is left out of the TV series), to teach him History, and he takes pains to teach Joe to read and write. Pip’s dissatisfaction with his life is plain whenever he looks at Joe, dirty boots upwards, which he does frequently. He is afraid of remaining a ‘simpleton’, constrained to a life of hard labour. His evident disappointment when Miss Havisham pays for his apprenticeship is understandable, because the filmmakers establish Pip’s dissatisfaction
from the beginning. Yet on this pivotal plot point, neither adaptation communicates Pip’s guilt in the novel. He says, ‘It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home’, and during his apprenticeship he is careful never to complain to Joe.\(^9\) Pip’s sensitivity and thoughtfulness may be attributed to the fact that he is the narrator, so he can reflect on his actions. Teachers could have students ruminate over Dickens’s choice to write in the first person, and what difference it would make to either adaptation if Pip was narrator.

Having become the beneficiary of a fortune from an unknown benefactor, Pip achieves his dream of escaping his unhappy family life and living as a gentleman in London. In the film, this transformation is made with a haircut, fashionable clothes and self-conscious attempts to round his vowels. When Joe comes to visit, the contrast in his characterisation between the two adaptations is apparent. In the film, Pip’s vocal embarrassment at Joe’s lack of table manners sends Joe home upset and humiliated.

In the TV series, while a similar contrast is made between Pip’s white face and genteel accent and Joe’s ruddy broadness, Joe is much more perceptive (and so more fatherly), accusing Pip of being ‘ashamed of where [he] comes from. Ashamed of me’. Pip murmurs, ‘You don’t understand’. Joe looks at him squarely and says ‘I understand’. This is a major departure from the book where Joe, who is a ‘mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish, dear fellow’,\(^{10}\) is nervous and displays his lack of education, saying ‘Thankee, Sir’ and ‘it were’ instead of ‘it was’.\(^{11}\) Making Joe more discerning has the curious effect of transforming Joe into a father figure who disciplines in love, but also the danger of turning Pip into an unlikeable protagonist and isolating audiences.

The Joe of the novel and the film is incapable of disciplining Pip; he is almost comical with his childlike, uneducated nature. Young Pip and Joe begin on equal footing, calling each other ‘ever the best of friends’; thus Pip’s later dismissal of Joe in the film is upsetting, whereas in the series Pip is like a sulky teen told off by his father (Joe). Students might discuss if this take is more relatable to teens today, or too radical a departure from the novel.

Pip is reunited with his other father-figure, Magwitch, when he learns the true identity of his benefactor. Magwitch reveals himself to Pip, tipping his inheritance all over the floor and proclaiming ‘You’re my gentleman, Pip’, as if he could buy Pip’s love. Pip is a petulant bystander, with
Wemmick (clerk to Magwitch and Miss Havisham’s lawyer, Jaggers) and Herbert (Pip’s best friend) shouldering the burden of concealing and aiding Magwitch. Magwitch appeals to Pip’s goodness by reminding him about the pie. Instead of being grateful, Pip accuses: ‘I turned my back on my family’. Magwitch admonishes him, ‘I don’t recall stipulating you turn your back on your own. If you did, it’s down to you. Don’t pin this to my door’. This modern-sounding dialogue echoes that of a father to a teenage son. Pip insists that he cannot be the son Magwitch desires. It is only after hearing Magwitch’s sorry tale and realising they have both lost everything that Pip resolves to help. Again, this would be useful for discussing the dangers of an unlikeable protagonist.

In the film, when Magwitch says to Pip ‘I’m your father, Pip…your second father…you’re my son’, this more accurately follows the novel’s dialogue, making explicit Magwitch’s longing to be Pip’s father. Pip is more appreciative of Magwitch’s efforts—‘You risked your life to come to me’—and proactively protects his benefactor, allowing him to stay and finding him refuge, as he does in the novel. The effect of Magwitch’s death on Pip is more heartbreaking and so more likely to attract audience sympathy for Pip.

‘A ghost of a bride’: Miss Havisham

Miss Havisham is punished for being a bad mother in both adaptations with a horrible death. Teachers may need to warn students of this before viewing. In the 2011 series, Pip goes to Miss Havisham to ask her for money. He tells her that he could have made Estella happy and given Miss Havisham grandchildren. She asks for forgiveness and he gives it. After he has left the house, she gathers her withered bouquet and letters from the lover who jilted her, and climbs up in front of a fireplace where a candle burns. She lights the letters and drops them to her feet, setting herself alight. This suggests suicide as penance for her sins, as she could have put the letters in the fireplace. The flames engulf her and she burns to ashes. Pip sees the smoke and runs back to the house. In the film, Miss Havisham accidentally knocks the candle onto herself after Pip has left the room. He runs back and smothers the fire. She murmurs ‘Forgive’ from a gruesome, nightmarishly-blackened face, then dies.

In the book, Miss Havisham is sitting facing the fire, Pip turns to leave, but when he looks back he sees ‘her running at [him], shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her’, and puts the fire out. Whether it is accidental rather than suicide is unclear. Dickens may have accounted for
his readers, who may have denounced suicide as ungodly. Modern filmmakers have the dilemma Dickens did not have of visualising this key scene—the series’ filmmakers thought it permissible to show her committing suicide, but for the film, an accident was considered more acceptable. Both adaptations stray from the book in that Miss Havisham does not die swiftly from her injuries, but sometime later—a slow and painful punishment. For modern audiences accustomed to horror films, having her die gruesomely and immediately is more dramatic and Gothic. Students might debate this and whether it is gratuitous.

‘I am what you have made me’: Estella

In both adaptations, Estella constantly protests that she has no heart, thanks to her upbringing, however this is where the similarity ends. Played by Vanessa Kirby in the 2011 series with, initially, determined rigidity, Estella’s absorption into the role of Miss Havisham’s daughter is more complete. She calls her ‘Mother’ and answers robotically in a chilling catechism:

MISS HAVISHAM: What is happiness?
ESTELLA: Deception.
MISS HAVISHAM: What is love?
ESTELLA: Death.

In the film, Estella demonstrates love and devotion for her mother through actions. When Pip invites her to run away with him, she turns her back on him and lays her head on Miss Havisham’s lap. Miss Havisham reprimands Estella for her coldness, to which Estella replies, ‘I am what you have made me’, directing blame (and perhaps a comment on the nature of adaptation?). Estella pledges herself to the brutish Bentley Drummle.

In the series, her façade cracks. En route to her wedding, she throws back her veil; her panicked breathing indicating fearful uncertainty. This is realised in scenes of Estella watching her husband, Drummle, beat his horse (mentioned but not described in the book, given that Pip is narrator)—the implication of domestic violence. Clearly the filmmakers want the audience’s sympathy for her. She thanks the horse for killing her husband. Students might tease out a feminist reading of the horse representing Estella: she cannot be tamed.

The film Estella is colder. In the film, little is made of Drummle’s violence contributing to Estella’s unhappiness; it is merely mentioned, as is his
death. This less sympathetic portrait is completed when Pip tells Estella he loves her, and she responds simply with ‘I’m glad’. Her cruelty could also be discussed as a feminist reading—her response asserts power over Pip, undermining him as a romantic hero.

‘Home is where the heart is’: visual symbolism

Both adaptations employ the modern cinematic technique of visual symbolism to communicate Dickens’s themes on family. In the series, when Pip first visits Miss Havisham, he passes cases of preserved butterflies. Miss Havisham tells him that they were collected by her brother who, when he found beauty, ‘stuck a pin through its heart’, linking her past to Estella’s future. Miss Havisham is frequently framed by stuffed birds under glass covers, another reference to mummification and being trapped by destiny and circumstances. When Pip moves to London, he creates a Miss Havisham-style menagerie in his London apartment, complete with a globe (a reference to her atlas and his ‘expectations’), butterflies in cases and an identical stuffed owl in a glass case. Unlike Miss Havisham and the pinned butterflies, Pip escapes and forges his own path, precipitated by the repossession of these goods by his creditors and Joe’s unconditional love in settling his debts.

In the film, birds are a motif for freedom. Early on, shots of an empty cage swinging outside the forge represent Pip’s repression and bondage. When he leaves for London, he looks up, sees birds flying overhead and grins. Likewise when Estella leaves their village, she looks out the carriage window and sees birds flying towards London. Pip thinks freedom means flying the cage (and his family), but it turns out that he is most free when he returns to it (home). Near the end of the film, when he returns to the forge lonely and broke, the familiar sight of the empty cage cheers him. He hurries home to Joe who, after everything, turns out to be his true father.

Students could evaluate the effectiveness of each adaptation’s visual symbolism—do they help the reader understand the author’s messages? Are they too subtle or too obvious?

Happy ever after?

Pip’s yearning for Estella could be an expression of Dickens’s for Nelly Ternan. In the novel, Pip says, ‘...my mind all round the four-and-twenty
hours was harping on the happiness of having her with me unto death’. In a charged moment in the series, Pip and Estella kiss in a lake. This controversial, modern inclusion adds sexual desire to Pip’s motivation, which would have been too racy for Dickens’s Victorian readers. Students could consider if ‘sexing up’ the text is appropriate and successfully appeals to a younger demographic.

Famously, Dickens’s original ending for the novel was ambiguous as to whether Pip and Estella end up together—they appear to meet and part. Dickens was persuaded to alter the ending to suit the romantic sensibilities of his audience, on the advice of fellow writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton, not, as Fiennes’ *The Invisible Woman* suggests, Nelly Ternan. The result: ‘I took her hand in mine…I saw no shadow of another parting from her’. Ambiguous, but hopeful. The 2012 film visualises this by ending with a close up of Estella’s hand in Pip’s, but an ambiguous pose. The 2011 series goes for romantic, less ambiguous images: Estella runs to Pip, puts her hand in his and presses her forehead to his—the happy ending Dickens could never have with Nelly. Students could view both, read Dickens’s endings and debate the merits of each for Victorian audiences versus today’s. Are we also conditioned to expect happy endings? How does the ending affect a novel or film’s critical or popular reception?

**Conclusion**

Both adaptations of *Great Expectations* are enjoyable. Both communicate Dickens’s themes of the need for good parent figures and the pangs of unrequited love. As a direct translation of the book, the 2011 TV series is less accurate. While it generally retains the novel’s plot and setting, it is a more modern treatment of the characters and language, interpreting these to be more recognisable to a modern audience. Critics may scorn its pains to explain its own metaphors, but this may be useful for some students. The 2012 film is more faithful, more visually arresting and short enough to show in its entirety without detracting from valuable teaching time, though critics find it too extravagant (therefore less ‘Dickensian’) and the characters one-dimensional. Interestingly, the series is rated more highly than the film on IMDb (7.6 versus 6.4) but only marginally higher on Amazon.co.uk (4.1 stars versus 3.9). Teachers will need to decide the appropriateness of these adaptations for their classes; certainly both will provide numerous opportunities for rich dialogue on the novel and readings.
References


8. Dickens, op. cit., p. 69.


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