

Review of the BBC Production of *Little Dorrit*

Charles Dickens was a prolific author, penning some fifteen (15) novels, hundreds of articles, editing two periodicals (*Household Words* and *All the Year Round*) as well as editing two newspapers, *Bentley's Miscellany* and *The Daily News*. In addition to his authorial and editing duties, Dickens gave numerous speeches and spent the last several years of his life touring Great Britain and North America giving readings of his most popular works.

The sheer complexity of his novels, their length (an average of some 800 pages), as well as the profusion of characters makes the transition from novel to screen a difficult undertaking. A number of adaptations have been attempted with varying degrees of success. Three of his mature novels, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*, have been adapted by the BBC to critical and commercial success. The current review will focus on the BBC production of *Little Dorrit* in 2008, which was originally released for television in fourteen episodes.

A listing of the primary characters and the actors who portray them, will provide a feel for the complexity of the novel and the profusion of Dickensian characters:

Actor	Character
Claire Foy	Little Dorrit
Matthew Mcfadyen	Arthur Clenham
Tom Courtenay	William Dorrit
James Fleet	Frederick Dorrit
Emma Pierson	Fanny Dorrit
Judy Parfitt	Mrs. Clenham
Andy Serkis	Rigaud/Lagnier/Blandois
Alun Armstrong	Flintwinch
Eddie Marsan	Pancks
Amanda Redman	Mrs. Merdle
Anton Lesser	Mr. Merdle
Sebastian Armesto	Edmund Sparkler
Russell Tovey	John Chivery
Ron Cook	Chivery
Georgia King	Pet Gowan
Alex Wyndham	Henry Gowan
Bill Paterson	Mr. Meagles
Janine Duvitsky	Mrs. Meagles
Maxine Peake	Miss Wade
Freema Agyeman	Tattycoram
Zubin Varla	Daniel Doyce

The novel explores a number of themes that recur throughout Dickens novels, and indeed, in a number of other Victorian novels. These themes include the lack of proper parenting, the class

distinctions that permeate Victorian society, the deplorable conditions of the debtor's prisons, the almost slavish worship of money as a panacea for society's ills, the uselessness of charitable societies and organized religion to ameliorate the conditions of the poor, and the nepotism masquerading as an effective political structure in Victorian England.

Given the number of characters and themes present in the novel, it would seem that the BBC production would have a difficult time capturing the complexity and tone of the novel. Yet despite its relatively modest run time of approximately eight hours, the BBC production manages to convey the atmosphere of early Victorian London while adhering to Dickens's sometimes labyrinthine plotline.

The pacing of the movie is aided by the cinematography which conveys the bustle and squalor of the seamier sections of London, such as Bleeding Heart Yard and the House of Clenham. The tight shots of the rooms in the Marshalsea help to convey an atmosphere of claustrophobia, reinforcing Dickens's vision of the city as a prison. Likewise, the opulence of the Merdle household and the scenes in Venice depict a society that is riven by class distinction. It is clear from these scenes of London and Italian social life that there is a sharp divide between the rich and the poor, at least when it comes to material comfort.

As the movie nears its conclusion, the scenes in Venice take on a more constricted look, emphasized by the tight shots of the crowd at Mrs. Merdle's Venetian banquet and William Dorrit's confinement to his room before he dies. Similarly, when Mr. Merdle ventures to a public bath which is inhabited by denizens of the poorer areas of London, and his subsequent death, the viewer is reminded that the apparent differences between the rich and poor in London are somewhat tenuous. Mr. Merdle, in particular, seems to be a man who is in the public eye but is uncomfortable with his station in society; he inhabits a no-man's land between the rich and poor, the affluent and destitute. Several other characters inhabit the same no-man's land as Mr. Merdle, travelling back and forth between riches and penury. The list of such characters includes Arthur Clenham, Pancks, Daniel Doyce, Mrs. Clenham, and of course Mr. William Dorrit.

Little Dorrit understands the thin veil that separates the upper and lower classes. While in Venice, she muses that there is little difference between the Marshalsea Prison and the self-erected prisons of polite society as well as the prisons erected by Mrs. Clenham, Miss Wade and Mr. Rigaud.

As for the attempts of religion to ameliorate society's ills, the portrayal by Judy Parfitt of Mrs. Clenham makes it quite clear that her rigidity and Old Testament morality leave little room for comfort or spiritual growth for herself as well as for other members of society. Indeed, Mrs. Clenham cannot grow; she is trapped in a prison of her own making and the final scene of the House of Clenham is of Mrs. Clenham's wheelchair poised above a ruined domicile.

The ability of governmental institutions to help the poor is also limited. The Circumlocution Office is depicted as a series of winding staircases leading to nowhere, flanked on all sides by reams of paper scattered haphazardly over everything. There is no rhyme or reason to the

Circumlocution Office; it exists mainly to afford appointment to connected, inept officials who accomplish nothing yet are well paid for their incompetence.

The depiction of Rigaud/Lagnier/Blandois by Andy Serkis is, by any standard, over the top: Dickens would have loved it. Dickens had an eye for the macabre and melodramatic; Serkis certainly delivers in these two departments. The plight of John Chivery, rejected by Amy Dorrit, reads somewhat comically in the novel. Yet, Russel Tovey's performance while emphasizing the bathetic nature of the character, somehow evokes a feeling of sympathy for this heroic-comic figure. Sebastian Armesto injects the proper degree of innocent incompetence into the character of Edmund Sparkler, while Emma Pierson portrays Fanny Dorrit as a self-satisfied, venal and manipulative social climber who traps the unsuspecting Sparkler into marriage. Amanda Redman's portrayal of Mrs. Merdle is spot-on, combining equal portions of haughtiness, venality and loathing of those in lower social stations and Dickens attacks her character mercilessly in the novel.

The portrayal of the three primary characters in the novel, William Dorrit, Arthur Clenham and Amy Dorrit are admirably played by Tom Courtenay, Matthew Mcfadyen and Claire Foy, respectively. Tom Courtenay's performance as William Dorrit is brilliant, alternating between fawning servility and injured superciliousness often within the same scene. Matthew Mcfadyen strikes the right note as the sensitive, emotionally stunted Arthur Clenham who believes that he has lost the ability to love as a result of his repressive upbringing and advancing years. Claire Foy imbues the character of Little Dorrit with a self-effacing, kind, and noble character that Dickens so often attempted to portray in his female characters.

It is difficult to effectively present the idea of goodness existing in an evil world, yet the novel *Little Dorrit* attempts to do just this. The BBC production of *Little Dorrit* helps bring Dickens's creation of a prison world to life; a world inhabited by flawed people, some of whom are truly good. The novel ends with Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clenham married and inhabiting this flawed world. They make their way in life in much the same way as Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the garden; inhabiting a fallen world attempting to bring sweetness and light to their fellow creatures.