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From Text To Screen : David Lean's Art of Adaptation of Dickens's *Great Expectations*

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Abstract: Written in Nineteenth century, Dickens's "*Great Expectations*" is highly famous till today among readers that filmmakers cannot ignore its popularity; consequently, this novel by Dickens has been adapted multiple times both in Nineteenth and twentieth century as well. Despite the availability of multiple adaptations of Dickens's "*Great Expectations*", Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations* in 1946 is so close to the actual text of Dickens that it surpasses all other adaptations. His technique of adapting Dickens's Victorian era masterpiece on screen in post-world war era is so striking in terms of cinematography, generating Victorian setting and bringing life to characters that Lean's adaptation is still considered to be one of the great translations of literature into film that still continues to perpetuate Dickens's *Great Expectations*. In every aspect of adaptation, Lean excels his fellow filmmakers. As the Title of this article indicates, it shall try to focus on Lean's dexterity of film making which is unique.

Keywords: Cinematic skill, Adaptation, Chiaroscuro cinematography, Camera Angles, Gothic atmosphere.

Introduction: Lean's post world war adaptation of *Great Expectations* in 1946 simply creates magic on screen that attracts not only Twentieth century audiences but today's audiences. Lean's art of adaptation is so charming that each and every character of Dickens, particularly Pip, Estella, the eccentric Miss Havisham and Magwitch become real life characters who populate Lean's magnificent miniature under the picturesque cinematography



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of Guy Green and designed by John Bryan. Lean's masterpiece of *Great Expectations* aims to address multiple important factors; First, Lean's adaptation attempts to capture the rigid Victorian atmosphere of Dickens which is achieved through the use of chiaroscuro cinematography along with evocative sets made by John Bryan; second, this adaptation tries to maintain narrative focus on Pip through whose subjective worldview, audiences experience the events in both film and novel; First person narration of Dickens finds its adequate visual equipment in Lean's adaptation through the use of voice over and subtle subjective camera effects; Third, it tries to streamline all other characters through Pip's prism, making his character "a sort of coat hanger" onto which Dickens had draped the entire gallery of colourful Evergreen characters. Quite in his own style and manner of film making, Lean achieves a careful balance between realistic and gothic, with much emphasis on melodramatic and fairy tale elements.

Discussion: While talking about Lean's dexterity of adapting, his method of handling scenes should be discussed first and foremost. The opening of this film as in the novel, the famous graveyard scene immediately captures the attention of the audiences through its brilliant use of expressionist technique which echoes the gothic undertones of Dickens's novel. Considered to be one of the most iconic masterful sequences in the history of cinema, Lean's opening scene efficiently translates Dickens's gothic atmosphere into visual storytelling. This sequence, shot by Robert Krasker, sets the tone of the whole movie. Krasker makes this scene peerless through the use of stark, high contrast black and white cinematography as a landmark of expressionist lighting, generating exact Dickensian deadly and fearful gothic atmosphere. It is through the opening scene that Lean's visual translation tries to grab the essence of Dickens's prose, particularly the "memorable raw afternoon" by genuine cinematic means. In this context, camera angles used by Lean in this opening sequence need to be amplified. Lean, specifically Krasker, exerts certain cinematic techniques and camera angles to create emotional resonance and gothic suspense. Lean has left no stone unturned in this opening sequence to make the audiences plunge into the fear of young Pip on Kentish Marshes. Most part of the sequence has been shot from a low camera height to mingle the audiences with Pip's small figure. It makes the surrounding environment consisting of towering long tress and leaning tombstones, appear highly predatory and imposing. Apart from it, Lean employs tight close ups of inanimate objects to make audiences aware of young Pip's intensity of fear and also to personify Pip's utter dismay encountering the gigantic figure of Magwitch. An instance of close ups is the shot of twisted tree branch which resembles Pip's menacing face from his outlook. This camera close ups can also be observed in Pip's running through the



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churchyard. It resists the audiences seeing the wider landscape apart from Pip, making a feeling of claustrophobia by retaining the threat of Magwitch to young Pip until the end. When it comes to Magwitch's appearance in the opening scene, it is highly popular “jump scares” in cinema terms. Lean takes close ups of camera angles not only of Pip who starts to flee from the clutches of Magwitch, but of Magwitch who comes into the frame from the side, resulting in utter surprise to the audiences exactly same as Magwitch astounds Pip. When the interaction between Pip and Magwitch starts, Lean uses quick but rhythmic cuts between them. They are shown in separate shots in different frames which projects the feeling of individual isolation and Pip’s disorientation.

Lean’s another iconic recreation in the film is Miss Havisham’s Satis House. Due to excellent production design by John Bryan, Satis House of Miss Havisham becomes a superior consequence of studio craftsmanship. This Satis House retains the accurate eerie and gothic atmosphere of the same in the novel. The decaying interiors of ruined mansion of Miss Havisham, reproduced in Denham Film Studios in Buckinghamshire, tries to iterate decaying faint atmosphere of Dickens’s Satis House which Dickens had written keeping in mind Restoration House of Rochester. It is not easy to bring the ruined mansion in studio, but it is because of skillful art of both Lean and Bryan that makes it happen. Lean uses the technique of forced perspective and wide lenses to capture the detaining nature of the house which makes the environmental more daunting and bigger. Keeping aside production design, Guy Green’s cinematography of Satis House is so remarkable that it is solely liable to create suspense and make an eerie and gothic atmosphere. Green’s use of high contrast lighting known as chiaroscuro, demystifies shadows of the characters of Pip, Estella and Miss Havisham, remarkably making strange and unstable environment of the house leading to the understanding of repressed sorrow and decay. The room of Miss Havisham is beautifully designed by Green’s cinematography, the candlelight of which stimulates “steady dullness of artificial light” as described in the novel. The Camera angles which captures the effect of candlelight in Miss Havisham’s room, engenders a gloomy atmospheric dimness, making audiences to stare at the cobwebs and visible decaying items by maintaining a ample feel of darkness. Shadows of characters are very important here in that by making shadows, Green's cinematography takes audiences towards unknown mystery and dark inner side of the characters, particularly Miss Havisham. Chiaroscuro cinematography in Miss Havisham’s room makes ghostly reflections on the walls and ceiling, displaying spectral presence of Miss Havisham and her ceased life. Apart from the interiors, Green’s forced perspective also finds its way when it comes to shots that capture the external part of the house. It makes the



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surrounding environment of the house more imposing. Lean through Green's chiaroscuro cinematography makes the whole Satis House of Miss Havisham an epitome of repressed sorrow, manipulative motif, vengeful temperament and self made imprisonment, very much like Dickens.

Lean engraves his skill of cinematic art through his depiction of characters in his film. Lean adopts a mixed approach while portraying characters; sometimes he maintains identical Dickensian characters and sometimes he departs from it by making it on his own. For example, the character of Pip can be taken into consideration. Lean's young Pip, portrayed on screen by Anthony Wager, is more appealing than that of adult Pip portrayed by John Mills. This dual casting by Lean is very interesting because through dual casting, Lean aims to capture Pip's trajectory in a modernised way which differs from that of Dickens. On the one hand, Wager is appreciated for beautifully representing young Pip's vulnerability and enthusiasm and on the other, Mills (in his forties when he presented adult Pip on screen) is eulogised due to his portrayal of adult Pip's moral growth and internal conflict. Lean's outlook towards Pip is very generous tinged with modernisation which is different than that of Dickens. The way Lean demystifies Pip's snobbery is different from Dickens. Pip's snobbery in Dickens is a product of internal psychological struggle. But in Lean, Pip's snobbery comes out of moral and visual transformation. John Mills performance depicting snobbery of Pip, displays how Pip's "Great Expectations" dispels him from his rural root for having a superficial gentility.

Lean's artistic calibre is reflected in the character of Estella. Here also like Pip, Lean leaves his mark. Lean presents Estella as a personification of Pip's romantic and social yearnings. Casting is more important when it comes to Estella and Lean does it so smoothly. Like Pip, Lean uses dual casting for presenting Estella. Jean Simmons in the role of young Estella is precise in reflecting young Estella's insolence with her pride and deluding nature. On the other hand, Valerie Hobson as adult Estella is peerless but passionately detached tool of Miss Havisham's manipulation and vengeance. Lean, through her character, makes attempt to project her lack of mechanism of love as a consequence of manipulative upbringing of Miss Havisham. Lean's Estella is somewhat calm who does not give importance toward Pip's feelings for her. Lean's remarkable presentation of Estella owes much to the brilliant Oscar winning cinematography of Guy Green, making her as a ghostly, unattainable tantalising figure within the shadowy interiors of Satis House.



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For the character of Miss Havisham, Lean, very much like Dickens, presents her as the central pillar of breaking heart. Lean's casting of Martita Hunt for the role of Miss Havisham is so mind blowing. The way Hunt portrays Miss Havisham's prevention to a healthy good relationship between Pip and Estella, is brilliant. Hunt is so good in depicting Miss Havisham's manipulative power. In a more sharper and captivating way than Dickens, Lean's Miss Havisham uses Estella as a weapon to "wreak revenge on male sex" by making explicit command to "break their hearts". Miss Havisham of Lean acted by Hunt embodies a fusion of madness, cruelty and deep sorrow, who turns out to be a "vengeful, jilted, aging bride" by arresting moving time to hurl her hatred on men. Hunt's dominating presence in the scenes at Satis House is noteworthy because in those scenes, Hunt's performance induces heartlessness and coldness in Estella. Hunt's method acting in Lean's film is highly instrumental in mingling Dickensian realism with gothic sensibility.

Lean's portrayal of Magwitch is distinct but not completely different from that of Dickens. Dickens's Magwitch is somewhat pitiable shivering animal who undergoes much physical suffering. On the contrary, Lean's Magwitch portrayed by Finlay Currie, is initially a threatening gothic monster who gives shock imbued with horror aesthetics. Currie's performance in the role of Magwitch is responsible for the film's transformation from a gothic thriller to a pure drama of salvation. The time after Magwitch's return from Australia and his becoming of Pip's secret benefactor for making Pip a true "gentleman", Currie's performance undergoes change in making Magwitch's character from a convicted criminal to "craggy bear of a man" with tenderness infused. Currie's depicted Magwitch is presented as the second Father to Pip whose aim is to make Pip a gentleman. Through Currie's appealing performance as Magwitch, Lean serves his film's morality. Lean's Magwitch signifies the idea that human beings may be the product of harsh social environments, but they are subject to change by achieving an internal soul of goodness with profound loyalty imbued in them.

Apart from the central figures, Lean makes subtle changes when it comes to the presentation of minor characters. For making his film's narrative straightforward and muscular, Lean removes certain characters such as Orlick, Matthew Pocket, Belinda Pocket and Mrs. Skiffins. In a striking manner, Compeyson, the arch rival of Magwitch, is never named yet he remains and makes appearances, and whose presence acts as the catalyst for the cinematic strife on the river. Lean's goal behind omission of certain minor characters was to shorten the length of his film as compared to Dickens but in doing it, lean in some ways or other, makes changes in terms of plot of novel and characters. Robert Giddings points out, "In order to compress



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the novel (not a long one by Dickens's standards) into two hours, much has been lost – Orlick (in effect Pip's other 'darker' self) has gone altogether, so have several other 'minor' characters, and Pumblechook, who has an important role in the money/snobbery themes, is severely reduced. The gross reduction of the role of Biddy, who marries Joe the day Pip returns to the village to ask her to marry him, is a terrible error of judgement" (Giddings 311). For the character of Joe portrayed by Bernard Miles, Giddings opines, "Bernard Miles works wonders as Joe, with a balance of comicality and pathos sensitively achieved, but in monochrome the important symbolism of Joe's whiteness, paleness and purity is lost" (Giddings 311).

Lean's significant deviation from Dickens's novel is the ending. Whereas Dickens's ending is "bleak", Lean ends his film in a romanticised manner. Stark contrast is observed in film as compared to Dickens's novel when it comes to Pip's confrontation with Estella in which Pip boldly reveals his ample love for her, consequently uniting them for a happy life after leaving Miss Havisham's ruined mansion. Talking about the ending of Lean's film, Philip Allingham says, "Pip rips down the draperies of Satis House to let the light of day upon the mould and decay of Satis House and releases Estella from the possessive spirit of the vengeful Miss Havisham" (Allingham 1917-1988).

Conclusion: In conclusion, it could be said that despite alterations, Lean's film imparts light of hope to exhausted and depressed post world war audience. Arguably Lean's adaptation of Dickens's "**Great Expectations**" is an elegant visual translation which has given him a landmark position in the history of cinema. In the words of Penny Gay, " The process of adaptation, like any reading, demands the recognition of the historical distance between the original text and its new audience. The challenge for filmmakers is to find the visual knowledge and a reading of the original that allows the story to speak to that new audience" (Gay 91).

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