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Darkest Hour (Movie Review)

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Darkest Hour (Movie Review)

Abstract

"The Winston Churchill we get in 'Darkest Hour' is a flawed human being, one who doesn't command as much respect as revered historical figures are supposed to."

Posting about the movie *Darkest Hour* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/darkest-hour-review/>

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“Darkest Hour” Review

 [all in allthings.org/darkest-hour-review/](http://allthings.org/darkest-hour-review/)

Josh Matthews

January 25, 2018

“Darkest Hour”

Directed by Joe Wright

Starring Gary Oldman, Kristin Scott Thomas, Ben Mendelsohn, Lily James

Written by Anthony McCarten

Music by Dario Marianelli

Picture Winston Churchill. Pudgy, old, cigar in hand, sporting pajamas in bed, with brandy and bacon on a breakfast tray, yelling at his new secretary.

That’s how we first meet Churchill in the new historical film “Darkest Hour,” which takes place solely during May 1940.

It’s this Churchill who, as the movie opens on May 9-10 of 1940, has just been named England’s new Prime Minister. He’s the only choice, not for his bold leadership, but because he’s a political compromise between clashing parties. Churchill takes office with nobody really trusting him, not even his party allies, since he has been a flip-flopper during his long political career. Neither does the ultra-regal King George VI have any faith in the man, because Churchill had supported his brother’s abdication of the throne.

The Winston Churchill we get in “Darkest Hour” is a flawed human being, one who doesn’t command as much respect as revered historical figures are supposed to. He’s broke and, as his otherwise doting wife tells him, insufferable. He’s an alcoholic. His friends call him a salesman of sorts, and they don’t think that he should lie during his speeches, which he is prone to do.

He’s also not picturesque. The radio was the right medium for him, as he could never have been Prime Minister in the television era.

It’s the all-too-human Churchill in “Darkest Hour” that has to become, over the course of the movie, a bolder man and tougher leader. And he does so, in spite of himself. In May of 1940, he has to face the consequences of Britain’s attempted appeasement strategy with the Nazis. He must navigate political obstacles everywhere, even while dealing with the most serious international crisis in England’s history.

If there’s one reason to watch “Darkest Hour,” it’s to see Gary Oldman’s performance as Churchill. It is astonishing. Putting aside Oldman’s acting, which is always good, there is also the makeup artists’ transformation of him to consider. Though Churchill looks nearly nothing like Oldman, you can only see whiffs of Oldman in Churchill’s face every now and then. I suspect that not only will Oldman be nominated for every acting award this year but that the makeup artists will as well.

Some of these decisions are successful, yet some feel overdone. For example, Wright takes literally the phrase “darkest hour,” culled from Churchill’s most famous speech, by dimming the lights in nearly every scene. The shots of Parliament, with just a few bright rays of natural light, are mostly dark. And whenever Churchill meets with King George VI, they stand in the faintest artificial light. Had actual human beings lived in these lighting conditions, they would have gone blind.

Perhaps this is a symbolic choice on Wright’s part: these characters have been thrown into a scenario in which they cannot see the future, which is set to be dim if not entirely dark.

In addition, “Darkest Hour” plays too simply with a number of political problems. Churchill’s key enemy is not the Nazis but rather the first Earl of Halifax, Edward Wood. Halifax demands peace talks with the Nazis, to be brokered by the Italians, with the support of Neville Chamberlain. Wood believes that Britain cannot survive without negotiating. Several scenes ensue in which Halifax glowers at Churchill while Churchill yells at Halifax.

Churchill wants war, but then is tempted to negotiate for peace. According to the movie, this is the major plot problem with Halifax and Chamberlain as antagonists. The solution to the problem is somewhat cheesy, involving Churchill’s attempt to become more familiar with the English public. The political allegories around the movie’s climax are thinly veiled. Let me just say how remarkable it is that this movie thinks that a lifetime politician, a born aristocrat, and the leader of the Conservative Party can so quickly become a believer in public-transit democracy.

I do not believe this film’s presentation of these historical events, just as I am skeptical of any film’s presentation of history. It poorly portrays its female characters, in an attempt to provide a feminine side to Churchill’s story. The movie’s inclusion of a subplot about Churchill’s new secretary partly fails, as she never becomes more than a subordinate idea to Churchill’s political problem. Ditto for the portrayal of Churchill’s wife Clemmie.

“Darkest Hour” is destined to be shown in high school classes on World War II and in leadership seminars. It will probably be helpful there. With its narrative of the events of May 1940, it plays like a decent companion to Christopher Nolan’s “Dunkirk,” which was released six months prior to “Darkest Hour.” But while “Dunkirk” is about the horrors of British soldiers on the beach in France, “Darkest Hour” is about the pudgy alcoholic who tried to save them. Still, it bears watching for those interested in Churchill or in World War II. It will likely become, thanks to Oldman, the standard theatrical performance of Churchill for some decades.