



## Literature

Elixir Literature 99 (2016) 43258-43260

Elixir  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# Films in Literature Classrooms in India: A Case Study

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 26 September 2016;

Received in revised form:

18 October 2016;

Accepted: 24 October 2016;

### Keywords

Cinema,  
Teaching tool,  
Literature classroom,  
Jane Austen,  
Pride and Prejudice.

## ABSTRACT

In the world of today when visual and digital have taken over the young minds most of us as teachers of English resort to screening movies based on canonical texts to engage the minds as well as interests of our young students. However, it is a highly complicated and problematic area as most movies based on novels or even dramas as canonical as that of Shakespeare are adaptations. Further, transference from page to screen, from one medium to another, places a lot of aspects of the text at a tangent making it far from a simple practice. The present paper proposes to study the problematic of reading a text in cinema with reference to the movies based on Jane Austen novels. The aim is to show that whether the movie is an adaptation or a faithful rendering of the text, awareness on the part of the teacher and a sensitization of the students to the difference in medium are the pre requisites of this practice.

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## Introduction

In the current era, which is witnessing proliferation in the e-options and visual media at a very fast pace, films and television programs are being increasingly incorporated as instructional materials in classrooms – literature classrooms in particular. The undeniable reality of a literature classroom is that most of the new students may or may not have read *Pride and Prejudice* but would have definitely seen *Balle! Balle! From Amritsar to L.A.* Wineburg speaking in context of the American Classrooms reminds his fellow colleagues that they cannot compete with such famous teachers as Steven Spielberg or Oliver Stone. Instead they should be embraced and incorporated into the classroom teaching yet remaining wary of the potential pitfalls. In the world of today when visual and digital have taken over the young minds most of us as teachers of English resort to screening movies based on canonical texts to engage the minds as well as interests of our young students. However, this is not without its own issues and concerns. Infact, it is a highly complicated and problematic area as most movies based on novels or even dramas as canonical as that of Shakespeare are adaptations. Further, transference from page to screen, from one medium to another, places a lot of aspects of the text at a tangent making it far from a simple practice. The present paper proposes to study the problematic of reading a text in cinema with reference to the movies based on Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The aim is to show that whether the movie is an adaptation or a faithful rendering of the text, this awareness on the part of the teacher and a sensitization of the students to the difference in medium are the pre requisites of this practice. The paper also proposes to highlight how cinema may be read as a text and the implications of this transference back and forth from text to Cinema to text in classroom teaching.

## Argument

It is undeniable that adaptations can serve two very pragmatic pedagogical purposes in a classroom of literature. First, adaptation as much as a literary analysis is an act of interpretation and hence can be used to broaden the horizon of

the different interpretations of the same text as regards to the possibility of different interpretations of the same text – a feature that has been hallmark of all everlasting literature. To illustrate, if one brings Jane Austen's novels to the classroom, there is room for just one interpretation – standard, that of a teacher year after year. However, her novels have served as a fertile terrain for adaptation since the very beginning of the twentieth century. If one considers *Pride and Prejudice*, its first adaptation appeared in 1938 as a television mini-series and one is all too familiar with the Bollywoodized adaptation *Balle, Balle! From Amritsar to L.A.* By exposing the students to this wide a range of possible interpretations and exposing the creative core embedded within the critical in such acts of interpretation/adaptation, they are made pedagogically more receptive as well as more sensitized to the literary possibilities of a text and those possibilities as well that go beyond literature and spill into other media.

A chronological overview of all the adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* would reiterate the point.

1813–The novel *Pride and Prejudice* published by Austen.

1938 –Adapted for the first time as a television mini-series.

1940 –First black and white feature film based on a screenplay by a MGM screenwriter Jane Murfin and British novelist Aldous Huxley.

1949 –The next adaptation as a one hour television play appeared on NBC's Philco Television Playhouse.

1952 –Adapted as a BBC mini-series.

1957 –The novel was adapted in Italian.

1961 –A Dutch adaptation appeared as a television mini-series.

1967 –Another BBC mini-series directed by Joan Craft.

1980 –Another television mini-series directed by Cyril Coke.

1995 – The novel are yet again adapted and screened in six one-hour long episodes. According to Denis Ray Cutchins, "This mini-series is, still the gold standard of Austen adaptation for many viewers: (145).

2003 – The next movie adaptation based on the novel hits the screens.

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2004 – An interesting adaptation called *Bride and Prejudice* resulted from the fusion of British by Joe Wright.

The most recent adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* hit the screens in 2011 which is a modern day adaptation of the novel as made explicit by the title *A Modern Pride and Prejudice*.

An overview of all these adaptations studies as interpretation offers an interesting perspective on variables like time, locale, culture, period and position of the interpreter in the process of interpretation. Further, since two media – films and text are read in conjunction with each other, the limitations of both are revealed. It also introduces the student to the inherent freedom in the act of interpretation, thus broadening his horizons. It is also an effective way for the students to learn what is distinctly “literary” about a written text and, at the same time, what is distinctly cinematic about the film. As Sue Parrill points out, the principle difference lies in “the additional elements of picture and sound in which the filmmaker may reveal theme and character and move the action forward by means other than language” (10). Christine Geraghty offers another view of the basic difference between novels and films, “Novels are verbal and use words while films are visual and rely on images; novels can express internal knowledge of a character, screen adaptations have to imply feelings or motivations from a character’s actions since the camera is best suited to the objective recording of physical appearance” (2). Hence, film and literature are different in many aspects, but they also share multiple characteristics and reading both in tandem in a classroom becomes an enriching learning experience.

The use of cinema in a literature classroom, however, is not a simple dichotomous activity in which one media should be/could be privileged over the other. Infact, it becomes more fruitful if both the media are studied in all the complexity of their engagement with each other. Teasley and Wilder recommend pairing up texts and films in terms of:

- A film set in the same country and period as the novel, but with a different focus. (In 2003 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, the parents are removed entirely from the plot)
- A novel and a film adaptation of another novel by the same author (the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and the adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* authored by her).
- A novel and a film that share a similar situation or theme (*The small House at Allington* by Anthony Trollope and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*)
- Books and films from the same literary genres, such as epic, tragedy, fairy tale, satire, or myths and legends.

However, Teasley and Wilder also point out that, “At the same time, it is also important to recognize that not all film adaptations are successful and that it may be more productive to select film and print texts based on similarity of themes, topics, issues or problems” (135). To promote active learning through media literacy, Renee Hobbs, in an article published in the journal *Learning, Media and Technology* recommends the following:

- Incorporating pre-viewing discussion;
- Using note-taking as part of an active viewing strategy;
- Raising open-ended critical questions that involve students in analyzing the author’s purpose, point of view, and methods of developing ideas through language, image and sound; and,
- Implementing simple media production activities that promote insight into how media messages are constructed.

The pre-viewing discussion can initiate a deliberation on the plot of the novel as well as that of the movie chosen by the teacher to be screened in the classroom. *Pride and Prejudice*,

Austen’s second novel published in 1813, has been the most popular with the movie and television industry out of all Austen’s works. It tells a simple story of five sisters set in the Regency period amongst landed gentry, with their main concern, as was of the families of the period, to get them married into respectable families and hence in anticipation of young eligible bachelors, and hence the famous opening line of the novel, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”. This is a micro-narrative of the entire plot of the novel in which the five girls seek different alliances in marriage, the main focus being on the dynamics of relationship of Elizabeth Bennet, the second of Bennet sisters, and Mr. Darcy embodying the pride and the prejudice, culminating in a happy marriage nevertheless.

This novel has been the favorite for adaptation. As Bluestone remarks,

“Jane Austen’s preoccupations are still very much with us. The world of *Pride and Prejudice* meets the requirements of Hollywood’s stock conventions and, at the same time, allows a troubling grain of reality to enter by the side door. It depicts a love story which essentially follows the shopworn formula of boy meets the girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl. It presents rich people in elegant surroundings. It seems to allow for social mobility... It offers an individual solution to general problems.... If wickedness is not punished, virtue at least is rewarded. Neither the upper classes nor the middle-class worlds are all white or all black--- Above all story has a happy ending”. (144)

The pre-viewing discussions can also orient the student to the concept of adaptation before screening the movie. The relationship between literature and film is to an extent very close and the adaptation serves as a notional bridge between them.

With reference to film adaptation there are two schools of thought. The first school is the traditionalist school that believes that a film should mirror the original work; the second school is more modern in its interpretation, borrowing certain elements from a novel and presenting them as in a new way. However, this again raises the question of remaining faithful to the original. As Mac Farlane points out, “... adapting literary works is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood” (7). The story in the novel cannot be retold in the same way since the two media, literature and film, work differently. Not everything can be transferred from novel to film; therefore, the filmmakers have to find in film certain correspondents to elements in the novel. In the process they may reduce the numbers of characters, compress the novel, or change it even. In such scenarios the teacher has to use his discretion in choosing which adaptation should be screened and for what pedagogical purpose.

Once the pre-viewing discussions have oriented the students sensitizing them to the two media and the use of both for learning, the movie may be screened but they must be engaged in active note-taking while viewing the screening. For instance, in case the teacher chooses to screen the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* directed by Joe Wright and Screenplay by Deborah Maggoach, the students may be asked to take note of points of divergence from the novel, the most obvious being that the film sets the story in the late eighteenth century rather than early nineteenth century.

According to Dole, “*Pride and Prejudice* is a hybrid that embraces both an irreverent realism.... And the classical heritage film’s reverence...for authentic period detail” (3). Another explicit divergence in Wright’s film is the use of outdoor scenes. All the important scenes are shot outdoor, which in the novel are indoor. Apart from dissimilarities with the novel, the most defining feature of the film that sets it apart even from the previous adaptations is the way nature has been foregrounded in the movie.

According to Sarah Ailwood, “the 2005 Focus Features adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*... is an insightfully Romantic interpretation of Austen’s novel” (1). This adaptation highlights the close relationship between nature and characters. This particularly concerns Elizabeth who wears gowns of earthly colours. This is also shown immediately in the main title short sequence. The first short captures a country landscape at dawn with the birds singing. As the sun rises above the trees, the title *Pride and Prejudice* appears, completely surrounded by the sunlight while a piano music substitutes the birdsongs. In this natural environment Elizabeth appears. The students can be engaged in interrogating and analyzing the effects of these divergences on the interpretation of the novel or the response of the reader/audience. How does relating her character to nature alter the way Elizabeth is perceived by the audience or what effect does the sound of piano have on the mood of the viewer. It can be discussed how Wright’s film is predominantly a ‘commentary’ since it privileges interpretation over fidelity.

There are various means in which media messages are constructed. One such interesting way of constructing a message can be seen in the movie. Joe Wright seems to make his intention of standing at a tangent to the novel explicit by a subtle stroke. In the opening scene of the film, Elizabeth is shown walking and reading a book at dawn which on

Close inspection (for those patient enough to capture the image on pause) reveals the book to be *Pride and Prejudice*, [...] while David Roche reads this meta-adaptive moment as an announcement of the film’s infidelity to Austen, that the adaptation will leave the book behind to create something different, Elizabeth’s possession of the book establishes a key connection between author and heroine. (Cartmell, SAPAP 112)

Furthermore, since the movie begins with Elizabeth unlike the novel, though one can make out that it is a film “from the beloved author, Jane Austen” but another idea is generated at the same time that it is “the story of a modern woman” (Geraghty 16). These and such other strokes provide insight into how media messages are constructed.

### Conclusion

A close reading of both literary texts and films in literature classroom cannot be a simple dichotomous activity in which one is privileged over the other. Erica Sheen, in her introduction to *From Page to Screen*, identifies adaptation as a kind of nexus for literary studies.

According to her, adaptation encapsulates “the dilemma of institutional reality” embodied in the study of films in a literature or humanities department rather than in a film school (2). Adaptations function in the liminal space between what is “literature” and what is “popular culture” and some adaptations even seem purposefully designed to blur the line between literature and film. However, amongst all this, what plays the most pivotal part is the role of a teacher who get to decide if a movie screening is to be instructional or entertainment.

In a telephone survey of reported that teachers in America by Hobbs, 51 percent reported that teachers are using media as a way to reduce the demands of their job or because they view video as entertaining and motivating to students, but not as ‘serious’ or deserving of the full-press intellectual effort of other teaching tools. As Hobbs puts it, “Films and television programs are powerful and effective tools for learning, but teachers do not always create a learning environment that enables these tools to be maximally effective”. The paper has been an attempt to demonstrate a few techniques by which a teacher may maximize learning using the alternate media

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