

Film Adaptation as an Instructional Tool in the Teaching of Literature

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ABSTRACT

The main thrust of this paper is about the integration of film adaptations as an instructional tool in the teaching of literature. With the ever-involving and ever-expanding world of media, teaching with the help of media in the classroom becomes more of a priority. In the twentieth century, there are two culturally dominant ways of experiencing fiction available: the visual forms of film and the prose forms of the novel. Students, of this generation, are exposed to various types of media and visual culture outside the classroom. This paper throws light on the need for literature teachers to equip their classrooms with film adaptations. It also discusses the differences between film and novel. The sample activity given in the paper highlights the importance of screening film adaptations in the classroom. Thereby, making the students play an active role in the teaching and learning process. Various examples cited, will justify the interplay between literature and film adaptations. Finally, the paper also gives a clear picture of certain limitations a teacher has in implementing it in a classroom.

KEYWORDS

Film adaptation; Teaching of literature; Novel-Film Relationship.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to emphasize the importance of film as an instructional tool in teaching literature. It also stresses the effectiveness of screening popular film adaptations in the classroom. Today, students live in a visual culture, bombarded on a daily basis with web pages, video games, television, and film. Using popular movies in the classroom can engage students who might not otherwise read course material. It also helps students to better understand course material by being able to relate that material to a medium with which they are more familiar. In order to take the teaching of Literature to the next level, teachers need to take some steps to ensure that they are using films in the

classroom in a way that is appropriate and legal. Watching films will create a significant learning experience for the students.

Much of today's literature classrooms rely on the teachers trying to teach a Shakespearian Comedy or unrevealing a complicated plot in Thomas Hardy's novels. Students, on the other hand, unfortunately, do not undergo the same learning experience, as the teacher actively has in a classroom. They are forced to imagine and think of an era that they are not totally familiar with. Film adaptations of literary works can be invaluable to the study of literature, particularly for new or inexperienced students. Films used in the classroom often have been considered as an

entertainment or reward, but adaptations can serve two very practical pedagogical purposes in the literary classroom. Firstly, since both film adaptations and literary analyses are, at their centres, acts of interpretation, films can offer both good and bad examples of literary interpretations. Secondly, the use of video materials could enhance the students' motivation and provide them different ways of input. The learning materials with the visual elements are more meaningful and alive and help to bring the real world into the classroom.

Ever since small projectors and screens were inexpensive enough for anyone to own, colleges have been using films in the classroom as an educational tool, even if it was not always a widespread movement. With the advent of DVD players and projectors, the access to playable media useful to a unit of study seemed to know no limits. The history teacher could show a seven-part series on The Seven Wonders of the World to give a visual context that no textbook with illustrations ever could accomplish, the Drama teacher could show a live performance of a play to go along with a reading in order to show how the viewing of a play compares to a reading, and the English teacher can use film to show how a novel was adapted from page to screen and thus giving a visual flavour to the text.

Consider a real-life example of teaching the convention and significance of soliloquy to a group of literature students, looking at how the device is applied throughout classical literature. Students are first introduced to a Shakespearean soliloquy, looking at his plays or a collection of his soliloquies. The teacher can successfully define what a soliloquy is by saying

Soliloquies are intended to allow the audience to understand a character's innermost emotional state and unspoken motivations.

But the real victory lies in making the students understand how it is performed in the play and on the stage. No matter the teacher does his or her best to describe it with a dramatic effect, the picture is not complete until the students "visualize" it. Instead, if the teachers incorporate film adaptations like Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) or Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953) which depicts soliloquies with a grasp of reality, students might find it easier to connect to literary terms. Film adaptations can add visual context for students who are unfamiliar with the terms used in classical literature. These adaptations seem to bridge the gap between the flowery language of Shakespeare's day and the modern world of Literature students.

Delving deeper into the idea of the written versus the visual, if teachers were to ask students if they would rather watch a film or read a book, most, unfortunately, the response will be, "Watch a film." For literature instructors trying to teach students classic works of literature, engaging students who often see few connections in these books to their personal lives is a difficult and frustrating endeavour. Using popular films to teach students about literary concepts is an effective way to help students make connections between books whose themes and concepts may seem foreign to them and the movies that they may already admire. After seeing literary concepts manifest themselves across films, students can more easily discover themes, motifs, and common settings in literary works by the same author. Students are attuned to noticing literary commonalities; they will more easily notice similar themes, settings, character types and motifs across the works of, as examples, Jane Austen or Thomas Hardy.

Novel versus Film

The Novel-Film Relationship runs back to early nineteenth century, where novels have consistently provided

filmmakers with ready-made narratives that have often resulted in prestigious, popular motion pictures. Films have been made from both literary classics and contemporary novels since their beginnings. Viewers bring many assumptions to novel-inspired films, particularly that the film should be a photo album of the book. Films based on novels ultimately transform a story based in a linguistic medium into a story told in a visual medium that has its own distinctive characteristics. Also, explaining why the choices are made when transforming a literary work into a visual medium can help students understand the strengths and unique qualities of both novel and film.

Since the camera can only show the surface, the film has to use some other methods to express people's thought. For example, in the first scene as for the ball in Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), the film could show the excited people, the beautiful ladies and the handsome gentlemen as well as their actions. However, it can't reveal Austen's detailed description about people's changing attitude toward Darcy, specifically, how "Mr Darcy soon drew the attention of the room" at first, and why "everybody thought Darcy was the proudest, most disagreeable in the world", and finally, "everybody hoped that he would never come there again". The film presents this rather complicated course through Darcy's cold facial expression and the dialogue between Elizabeth and Charlotte. Obviously, this is far from enough to describe the proud and disagreeable Darcy. In contrast, the subtle change in people's inner world toward Darcy could be revealed vividly and clearly in the novel. This difference between film and novel actually gives the audiences and readers different experiences.

The integration of popular culture into the classroom is not the only debate in using film as a tool as the question of

adaptation is also important. When a book or a play becomes a film, what is left out? What is changed? How does this change the experience? It is important to make the students realize this changeover. For instance, *Silas Marner* (1861) is a very complex and dense text, according to Boustead and Ozturk (2004), so many of the students expressed difficulty in the reading. Some found it to be very slow paced while others were put off by the enormous amount of detail Eliot placed in the pages. Later, following the film viewing, the students could easily relate themselves to the narration in the text. These perceived differences highlighted the importance of the use of contrasting examples of narrative to illustrate the particularities of each.

However, the using of films in literature teaching does not mean merely play the film for the students in the classroom. Actually, the teacher needs to design some activities based on the films and the novel, so as to create the environment in which the students could interact effectively with each other. Also, the students' language proficiency and their specific needs should be taken into account. Before screening the film adaptation, a questionnaire can be handed over to the students. If students have a list of characters, a few main plot points, and some questions to address about the film, they will be less likely to drift off or let their attention wander while viewing.

It can be designed as follows:

- a) What are the major differences between the novel and the screenplay?
- b) What role does music play in the film?
- c) Who do you think is the protagonist of the novel?
- d) How is narration in the text different from point of view in the film?
- e) Identify the genre of the Film?

f) Were you able to relate to the visual cues in the film?

Teachers can plan to give activities based on screening film adaptations in the classroom.

A sample activity is given below:

Name of the Activity: Watch & Discuss

Activity time: 30 minutes.

Objective: Understanding the importance of visual communication over verbal communication through discussion, speaking, motivation and collaborative learning.

Students can be asked to,

- a) Analyse works of fiction and drama for plot structure, setting, characterization, theme, and narrative point of view, sitting in groups.
- b) Critically analyse film through careful examination of adaptations of literary texts, focusing on character development, dramatic structure and performance.
- c) Learn and utilize the terminology of film analysis, shared with literary discussion (character, plot, theme, and setting) and those specific to the cinema (lighting, dialogue, special effects, etc.).
- d) Demonstrate an understanding of the possibilities and problems involved in the transposition of literature to film, applying terminology and critical skills acquired during the semester to analyse a cinematic adaptation of a text not discussed in class.

Films provide rich opportunities to explore the similarities and differences between visual and written language. Students may examine the effects of visual language cues: composition, colour and light, shadow and contrast, camera angles and distance, pace and rhythm, and the association of images and sounds. They learn to identify the point of view by following the eye of the camera.

Limitations

Of course, along with these ideal usages for the film as a tool, teachers sometimes manage to find some very inappropriate and ineffective usages of the film in the classroom. Teachers use film as a bribe or a reward to the students if they perform well on a test or on a big assignment. Some teachers use film as a silencing device intended to distract the students while they catch up on grading papers, lesson plans, or their own personal reading. Some teachers simply insert the video into the device and let the television do all the teaching, rather than preparing the students for the viewing with a scaffolding device and then following up with a discussion period.

Though the introduction of film in the classroom eventually proved to be a huge hit for both teachers and students, there are some practical difficulties in implementing it. Teachers should discuss the movie with students before, during, and after airing. They will want some pre-discussion in order to connect the movie explicitly to course content and to prepare students for certain themes or plot points. Discussing the film with students before they have completed viewing it allows them to voice any concerns about the film. And, obviously, teachers will want to have some wrap-up discussion about the film.

Sometimes, showing the entire film during a class period or multiple class periods may be impossible. If the school library owns the film, teachers should put the movie on reserve for students to watch on their own time, freeing up class time to discuss assigned portions of the film or to do a class activity related to the film.

Teachers should not violate copyright. Even if a teacher owns a copy of a film, making a digital copy of that film, putting it on a school-owned computer server, and then linking to the film copy through a course-management system shell runs the risk of violating copyright. Teachers should make sure that they

understand copyright laws regarding the use of film in the classroom in both the online and face-to-face formats.

Do not view the film as a one-shot assignment in the course. As students may be impacted more by what they have viewed in the film than by anything else in the course, refer to instances from the movie (when relevant) periodically throughout the semester. Not only does referencing the film emphasize to students that the film was more than just a “fun” assignment, but it also reinforces the movie’s connection to course content. Teachers could also ask students if they see course concepts present in additional movies or other media after the film assignment.

Conclusion

Films, ultimately, are narratives, but students may not see popular movies as anything other than simple entertainment. However, by teaching students to “read” and compare movies, literature teachers can show students that their favourite movies have some of the same literary qualities as the books they read. And by drawing this comparison between book and film, students will grow in their appreciation of both media. The film can be an interesting way for teachers to connect sometimes theoretical or abstract course concepts to a world outside the classroom. However, teachers need to do some advance work and take into consideration some possible pitfalls in order to ensure that a film viewing is a productive learning experience for students.

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