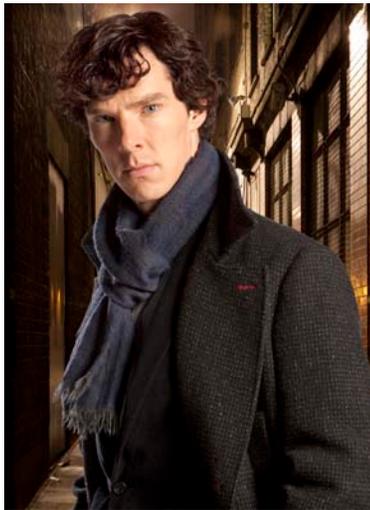


ADAPTATION: FROM NOVEL TO FILM

I used to teach Jane Austen, and in a way doing what I do now is a bit like doing those lectures in which I say “This is the way I see it. Don’t you see it like this?” [Now, as a filmmaker] I have got millions of dollars worth of visual aids and actors to prove my point.

—ANDREW DAVIES, SCREENWRITER FOR FOUR MASTERPIECE JANE AUSTEN FILMS*

John Harrington, in his book *Film And/Is Art*, estimated that a third of all films ever made have been adapted from novels, and, if you included other literary forms, such as drama or short stories, that estimate might well be 65 percent or more. Nearly all of the works of classic literature students study in high school have been adapted for film—some many times



SHERLOCK (BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH)

and in multiple languages, settings, or formats. For example, there are over 200 film versions of Sherlock Holmes, from a silent film made in 1916 by William Gillette to the reimagined 2010 MASTERPIECE version starring Benedict Cumberbatch. There

are nearly 50 film versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, from a 1900 French version called *Roméo et Juliette* to the 2011 animated American film *Gnomeo and Juliet*. But turning a novel into a screenplay is not just a matter of pulling dialogue from the pages of a book.

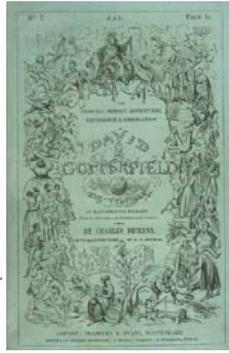
In novels, we often come to know characters best not through what they say, but through what they are thinking or what is said about them in the narration. A narrator mediates the meaning of what we read through his or her point of view: a coming-of-age story reads much differently if we hear about what happens from the point of view of the person growing up than if we learn about it from that person’s mother, sister, or teacher. But in film, the narrator largely disappears. Sometimes a narrator’s perspective is kept through the use of a voice-over, but generally the director, cast, and crew must rely on the other tools of film to reproduce what was felt, thought, and described on the page.

For example, consider the famous scene from the 1998 film adaptation of *Rebecca*, where the narrator, a young, naïve girl who has just become the second wife of the wealthy Maxim de Winter, first meets Mrs. Danvers, the forbidding housekeeper of his estate, Manderley. Rebecca’s terror and awkwardness, revealed in two pages of first-person narration in the book, are made clear to the viewer in the film simply by the way Mrs. Danvers first emerges from the shadows with just her severe face lit and the way the camera lingers there uncomfortably, making the viewer cringe with the same fear that the new Mrs. de Winter feels.

The major difference between film and books is that visual images stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words can do this indirectly. Reading the word *chair* requires a kind of mental “translation” that viewing a picture of a *chair* does not. Film is a more direct sensory experience than reading—besides verbal language, there is also color, movement, and sound.

* See the full interview with Andrew Davies at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/austen/davies.html>.

Yet film is also limited: for one thing, there are no time constraints on a novel, while a film usually must



Source: wikipedia.com.

COVER, FIRST SERIAL EDITION OF DAVID COPPERFIELD, 1849, BY PHIZ

compress events into two hours or so. (The 2002 adaptation of *David Copperfield*, for example, compresses a novel that runs to 800 pages into just 180 minutes.) For another, the meaning of a novel is controlled by only one person, the author, while the meaning we get from a film is the result of a collaborative effort by many people. Film also does not allow

us the same freedom a novel does—to interact with the plot or characters by imagining them in our minds. For some viewers, this is often the most frustrating aspect of turning a novel into a film.

How faithful to the original written work should a film version strive to be? In *Reading the Movies*, William Costanzo quotes George Bluestone, one of the first critics to study film adaptations of literature. Bluestone believes the filmmaker is an independent artist, “not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right.” Some agree with Bluestone that a literal translation of a book is often

foolish—even, some have said, a “betrayal” of the original work. Instead, the filmmaker has to refashion the spirit of the story with his or her own vision and tools.

There are three main reasons a filmmaker or screenwriter might make major changes in adapting a literary work to film. One is simply the changes demanded by a new medium. Film and literature each have their own tools for manipulating narrative structure. In a novel, a new chapter might take us back to a different time and place in the narrative; in a film, we might go back to that same time and place through the use of a flashback, a crosscut, or a dissolve, such as the various techniques the filmmakers in *Wuthering Heights* employ to keep the complex narrative coherent. Or consider the flashback that begins the 2009 film adaptation of *Little Dorrit*, with the violent birth of Amy Dorrit in the Marshalsea debtors’ prison. In the novel, “little Dorrit” herself isn’t even introduced until some 70 pages in, but in the film version she is clearly the center of the story: the first sound we hear in the film is the sound of her cry as she is born, and in the next several scenes (in which she is a young girl) she is costumed in a robin’s-egg-blue cape, the only bright spot of color in an otherwise gray world.



LITTLE DORRIT (CLAIRE FOY)

© 2008 BBC.

For other works, the problems of adaptation might be even more difficult. Filmmakers working with *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a contemporary classic that is, after the Bible, one of the most read books in the world, realized they needed to tread lightly if they were to “update” a figure as beloved as Anne. Here is what screenwriter Deborah Moggach says about her decision to make Anne less “sanctified” in the MASTERPIECE film version:

*Like many people, I read the diary when I was young. Now, on rereading it, I'm struck by how contemporary Anne is...obsessed with boys, with her looks...rebellious, highly critical of her mother. In other words, a thoroughly modern teenager. In past adaptations, she has been somewhat sanctified—a bit cheeky and talkative maybe, but also over-sweet. I want to be true to the real girl. Sure, she got on people's nerves; but she was also full of life, her own sternest critic and, above all, she made people laugh.**

Sometimes filmmakers make changes to highlight new themes, emphasize different traits in a character, or even try to solve problems they perceive in the original work. Allan Cubitt, who wrote the screenplay for the 2001 film *Anna Karenina*, says in an [interview](#) on the MASTERPIECE website that he always felt Vronsky's suicide attempt was “undermotivated,” and therefore he tried to strengthen the character's sense of rejection and humiliation in the film version. Similarly, Andrew Davies wanted to add a male perspective to Jane Austen, so he wrote in scenes “that Jane Austen somehow forgot to write.” He explains:

Actually [Austen] didn't forget to write them, but she made a rule for herself that she wouldn't follow the men when the women weren't there.... [as if] she said, “I've never been in a scene where two men had a conversation together without a woman present. I have no idea how they'd be. I'd never write a scene for one man on his own.” But I think that robs us of seeing the male characters as a whole so the scenes that I add are generally scenes for the men doing manly things—going hunting, going shooting, going swimming, riding their horses—so you get a sense that they have a life apart from when they are being polite to the women in the drawing rooms.

Andrew Davies understands all too well the third main reason for a filmmaker to make dramatic changes to an adaptation, and it is one that anyone who works on a MASTERPIECE classic is motivated by: how to make a classic story “new” for a contemporary audience.

For more about screenwriter Andrew Davies's views on adapting four Jane Austen novels, see “[Longing, Betrayal, and Redemption: An Interview with Andrew Davies](#).” For more about using Jane Austen in the classroom, check out [The Complete Guide to Teaching Jane Austen](#) and the [Jane Austen Book & Film Club](#).



Sometimes this means subtle substitutions or additions of language or props that are more recognizable to a modern audience; at other times it means depicting events or characters in the novel in a way that better fits a modern sensibility.

One of the most striking examples of adaptation, is Steven Moffat's and Mark Gatiss's startling 2010 reinvention of Sherlock Holmes. In their series, *Sherlock*, Mr. Holmes is a private detective in today's London. He has a smart phone and a website, and he enjoys baiting the police via text messages when they aren't solving a case adroitly enough for his liking. As Mr. Moffat says, Conan Doyle's stories “lend themselves incredibly well to a modern setting...[they] were never about frock coats and gas light; they're

* From an interview in *The Diary of Anne Frank Teacher's Guide* at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/annefrank/annefrank_teachersguide.pdf.

about brilliant detection, dreadful villains and blood-curdling crimes—and frankly, to hell with the crinoline. Other detectives have cases, Sherlock Holmes has adventures, and that’s what matters.”* Reimagined, however, the Holmes stories still retain the central idea that any technology—whether it be the early forensic science of the original stories or a Google search in this version—is merely another tool for a detective with a superior mind. (For more about the new *Sherlock* series, see the [Sherlock Book & Film Club](#).)

To show students how cleverly a literary classic can be brought into the 21st century, you might invite them to read just the first chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*, the famous story in which Holmes and Watson first meet, and compare it to the parallel scene, about ten minutes into the film, called *A Study in Pink*. Note, in particular, the brilliant way in which the original famous first line to ex-soldier Watson (“You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive”) has been reworked for today.

ACTIVITIES

Students can use these activities to explore the process of adaptation and the issues surrounding it.

1. How are film and literature alike? How are they different? In a Venn diagram, list as many similarities and differences between these media as you can. Think about the tools each uses to tell a story and to draw in its audience. Consider how each handles aspects of storytelling such as point of view, narrative structure, and time frame. Consider also that a work of literature is created by just one person and a film is created by a team. What conclusions can you draw?
2. What does it mean to be “faithful” to a work of literature—to capture it literally or to capture its spirit? Often in films, screenwriters adapt the plots, change the endings, or shift the emphasis of the literature from which they are working. What do you think about that? What are the rights of the original author? Are there limits to how much something can or should be changed? How might Thornton Wilder feel if the Stage Manager in *Our Town* were a woman, or if a hip-hop version of the play were created today? What would Jane Austen think of the invented scenes written for the film adaptation of several of her novels? For that matter, how might she feel if she were to read or watch one of the famous “mash-ups” people have recently created, such as Seth Grahame-Smith’s book *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, the YouTube hit “Jane Austen’s Fight Club,” or the 2004 Bollywood film *Bride and Prejudice*?
3. With a partner, try your own adaptation exercise. Have each of you write a paragraph or two that describes some event, action, or situation (an argument, a car trip, a first date, a fight, etc.). Then switch paragraphs with your partner, and try storyboarding each other’s description. (See Storyboard.) As you storyboard, you may take some liberties with the written paragraphs to make them more cinematic, but try to be true to the spirit of the original idea. Finally, collaborate to film them. For inspiration, you might try some of the plot ideas in Theme/Plot Elements, each inspired by one or more of the MASTERPIECE films in this guide.



Courtesy of Williamstown Theatre Festival.

GERALDINE FITZGERALD AS THE STAGE MANAGER AND STEVE LAWSON AS PROFESSOR WILLIARD IN A 1976 PRODUCTION OF *OUR TOWN*.

* In an interview at <http://www.geekosystem.com/sherlock-trailer-bbc-steven-moffat/>.

4. Open to a random page from any classic novel.

How much of the text is dialogue? How much is narration? If you were to cut the narration from the page, what would be lost? What does the narration show you about character, setting, and action that dialogue alone cannot? How would you replace it if you were filming this scene? (You can also reverse this process by taking a scene from a film and rewriting it as narrative description. What is lost? What is gained?) For example, if you are studying *Anna Karenina*, try transforming Levin's argument with himself about marriage into sound and image for a movie audience. See how screenwriter Allan Cubitt did it in his "[Novel to Film](#)" feature on the MASTERPIECE website.

Note: In John Golden's essay, "Literature into Film (and Back Again): Another Look at an Old Dog" (see Resources), he suggests having students use highlighters as they read a scene from a novel, and color code the portions that are "directly filmable" and those that are only "indirectly filmable." They then practice "translating" the indirectly filmable to the screen via visualizations.

5. What wonderful adaptations of books do you know of? Which adaptations can you think of that are terrible? Choose an adaptation of a literary work that you believe was not successful, and write an essay in which you analyze why.

6. What written work would you love to adapt for the movies? It could be a children's book, nonfiction book or essay, novel, short story, or play. Write the "pitch" that you'd deliver to the Hollywood executives who will decide whether or not to "green-light" your idea. Your pitch should be no longer than five minutes if you deliver it orally, or two written pages, and should provide as much detail as possible: Who will star in this film? How faithful will you be to the original text? Where will it be set? What will be some of the film's highlights? What will the opening sequence be? What music might be used on the soundtrack? You might choose to do this in small groups. Another group can act as the Hollywood executives who will decide which team has the most viable idea.

7. As you read a work of literature that's more than 50 years old, make a list of the problems a filmmaker might encounter in bringing it to life for a contemporary audience. How could he or she solve them? Then watch the film version and make notes on how the filmmaker addressed the issues you listed. How successful is the result? For example, is it possible to take George Eliot's lengthy and complex *Middlemarch*, which describes life in a rural English town in the 1830s and touches on everything from political reform to religion to women's rights to the changes threatened by new technology, and make it entertaining and accessible to an audience today? Make a list of how you might do this, then compare it with Andrew Davies's 1994 film adaptation. (For more about using *Middlemarch* in the classroom, check out [Teaching Middlemarch](#).)



1000 Words, Shutterstock Images.

8. In small groups, improvise a critical scene from a literary work you're studying, then watch how the director chose to bring it to life. What choices do you think he or she made that either enhanced or detracted from the text? For instance, a pivotal scene in *Our Town* is the one in which Emily revisits an "ordinary day" from the grave. How would you stage, direct, or act this scene? How does the filmed version compare to yours? Which do you prefer?

9. Write, storyboard, act out, or film a "missing scene" from a written work or a film. This scene could be something that happens before, during, or after the action of the filmed or written story. It might flesh out a character you are curious about, a theme or

motif already present in the work, or an event alluded to but not depicted. It might also be a sequel or a prequel to the story. For instance, in *The Turn of the Screw*, what do you imagine that a scene involving Miss Jessel, the previous governess who literally haunts the story, might reveal about her time with the children, Miles and Flora? Or, try your hand at creating a missing scene that the MASTERPIECE screenwriters actually created, then compare your version with theirs. For instance, the film version of *Mansfield Park* imagines a conversation between Mary and Henry Crawford as they walk toward Mansfield Park for their first visit. What do you think these worldly and manipulative siblings might say to each other on their way to meeting the eligible sons and daughters of the Bertram family?



HENRY CRAWFORD (JOSEPH BEATTIE) AND MARY CRAWFORD (HAYLEY ATWELL)

10. After reading a literary work and then viewing the film version of the same story, write, role-play, or film the dialogue you think might occur between the writer of the original work and the director or screenwriter of the adaptation—or write the brutally honest letter the original author might write to the filmmakers.

11. Create your own mash-ups as a homage to, or a parody of, two or more works you love. (You can find a list of examples at <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/17/a-mash-up-culture-ten-to-watch/>, or just search YouTube by putting in the names of authors and titles.) You might ask yourself if mash-ups are legitimate works of art in their own right, or plagiarism. How can you combine two things to make viewers see both in a new way? Why do you think mash-ups, whether of literature and film or of music, comic books, or any other art form, are currently so popular?

Exploring Screenwriting

What do screenwriters do when they adapt a literary work for the movies? To address this question with your students, first help them become familiar with the content and format of a screenplay by reading several excerpts. Note that the screenplay is not only dialogue, but also instructions for the actors, set and lighting descriptions, etc. (You can find excerpts from screenplays on the [MASTERPIECE](#) website, as well as at www.simplyscripts.com.)

Choose a passage from a classic work of literature that has been made into a film. A particularly rich example can be found in a key scene from *Daniel Deronda*, when Daniel meets his mother for the first time and finally learns the truth about his identity. Students can read an excerpt from the book, compare it to the script, and then view the scene on the [MASTERPIECE website](#).

The scene from *Oliver Twist* where Oliver asks for more food, is one of the most famous in all of English literature. As a class, read the original passage from the book (see page 21). Have students use the Storyboard to turn this into a scene of fewer than ten shots, paying particular attention to their choices for costumes, set, and lighting. Then have them compare their work with either the script or the actual scene in the [2002 MASTERPIECE version](#) or the [2009 MASTERPIECE version](#).

FROM OLIVER TWIST

The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end: out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal-times. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer, and no more—except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cookshop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held;

lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

“Please, sir, I want some more.”

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

“What!” said the master at length, in a faint voice.

“Please, sir,” replied Oliver, “I want some more.”

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

You might also choose to screen this *Oliver Twist* scene alongside the scene early in *Jane Eyre* where Jane first comes to the Lowood School. Students will find a vast number of similarities, from plot, character, and conflict parallels to the theatrical elements of costume,

lighting, props, and the use of camera angles used to bring both famous literary scenes alive. For more in-depth activities and explorations of screenwriting, see the Resources. 

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