

## Jane Austen Adapted – Recreated Stories: Changes in the Latest Two Adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility*

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### *Abstract*

*Traditional adaptation theory views hold that a film based on a novel must display fidelity to its source. Modern theorists however, emphasize the intertextual nature of an adaptation and that as a product it should be seen as a new text. Adapting Jane Austen's novels to film has fuelled debates on the extent to which adaptation industry has lessened or enriched her novels and to what extent alterations are justified or needed in order to render her novels 'correctly' to screen, if that is possible at all. The complexity of her novels, though, makes it extremely difficult to adapt forcing film-makers to create new texts. Adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, very much differ from the novel, they emphasize certain elements while disregarding other, sometimes vital ones. Dropping certain novelistic elements however, does not make the adaptations less valuable than the novel, but recreate the original stories. The paper presents some of the changes present in the last two film adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility*.*

The boom of adaptations of Jane Austen's novels in the 1990s often makes one wonder why the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century writer is still so popular today. Sue Parrill (2002: 3) answers the question by listing a few reasons like the novels being "good stories," also they are high-brow, therefore valuable, literature and their adaptations are likely to win important awards. "Name recognition is another selling point" (2002: 3) in her view, furthermore, production is relatively easy since the novels are in the public domain and they do require "expensive special effects" (2002: 3)

Although adapting any of her novels may seem easy, filmmakers may not find the task effortless. The difficulty of adapting Austen's novels to film is first and foremost due to the place they hold in the literary canon. Audiences are believed to have higher expectations as to fidelity to Austen's novels because she is a classic. In Linda Hutcheon's wording film adaptation theorists believe that 'audiences are more demanding of fidelity when dealing with classics' (2006: 29). Austen's novels are seen as texts carved into rock which no one is allowed to alter.

Despite the high expectations of the audiences many film-makers choose to adapt her novels to film. Adaptation theorists account this to various reasons ranging from the purely commercial to intellectual ones. In her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon mentions some reasons, among which the first is the 'economic lure' (2006: 86). Adaptation of classics proves to be an extremely profitable business since can be used in schools and university courses as well, so they target a larger audience than adaptations of less widely-known books. Another reason mentioned is the 'cultural capital' (2006: 91). Adapting Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens or any of the great classics, increases one's reputation. Brian McFarlane mentions that the previous success of the novel to be adapted also lures film-makers (1996). If a novel has been successful, such is the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, than its adaptation is likely to be successful as well. As a further reason to adapt, both theorists mention what Hutcheon terms as the "double pleasure of the palimpsest," (2006: 116). Upon seeing the film one feels pleasure of having read the novel, thus being familiar with the story. Familiarity with story and curiosity of seeing how someone else imagines what the reader/viewer has imagined may be part of this pleasure.

The palimpsestic nature of adaptations is in close relations with the idea of recreation of stories. In McFarlane’s wording ‘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’ (1996: 7). A film based on a novel is in fact nothing more than a recreated story. 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 film-maker has to find correspondents in film to certain elements in the novel or they may have to reduce the number of characters, compress the novel, or change it even. Having this in view, McFarlane distinguished between two operations required when a film is made based on a novel. According to him, due to the differences between literature and film we have to differentiate between transfer and adaptation. In McFarlane’s wording transfer refers to certain elements being taken from the novel to film whereas adaptation refers to ‘the process by which other novelistic elements must find quite different equivalences in the film medium’ (1996: 13). As to which elements are transferred and which are adapted McFarlane bases his description on Roland Barthes’s “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives.” Although Barthes’s theory is not related to film adaptations, McFarlane finds it suitable to determine which novelistic elements can be transferred and which need to be adapted. Based on his description Barthes’s narrative functions can be categorized as follows:

Distributional functions	Cardinal functions
	Catalysers
Integrational functions	Indices proper
	informants

*Table 1 Narrative functions of a text*

*Distributional functions* ‘refer to actions and events’, that is they are the formal content of the narrative and unless dependent on language, they can be transferred (McFarlane 1996: 13). Its first subcategory, *cardinal functions* are the “hinge-points” of narrative’ and they denote actions that are the skeleton of the story (McFarlane 1996: 13). The other sub-group, the *catalysers*, is “complementary to and supportive of the cardinal functions” (McFarlane 1996: 13). They refer to small actions, like how a table is laid, what characters do while sitting, walking, or how they pick up or put down various objects. Their role is to ‘root the cardinal functions in a particular kind of reality, to enrich the texture of those functions’ (McFarlane 1996:1 4). *Integrational functions* are more difficult to define, but in general they refer to information regarding the identity of characters or their traits and what the setting or the atmosphere is like. Within this group the *indices* provide information on character, atmosphere, while *informants* are pure data referring to names, setting, time.

Of the four subcategories, in McFarlane’s view cardinals and informants are transferable while the other two are open to interpretation and adaptation. In his view, filmmakers have an easy job with ‘distributional functions’ especially with the cardinal ones but have to be inventive as to the catalysers. As far as integrational functions are considered, the indices proper are open to adaptation, like representation of atmosphere on screen. This explains Hutcheon’s definition of adapters who are ‘first interpreters and then creators’ (2006: 18). Filmmakers need to interpret the film ‘through the screenplay, through the choice of the actors, the actors’ reading of a role, through the choice of settings, through the music, and through the photography’ (Parrill 2002: 10). They have to know the text, decide which elements remain and which would be left out or altered, what they want to concentrate on.

Adaptation therefore, if seen as a process, is nothing but “a process of interpreting and then creating something new” (Hutcheon 2006: 20).

The 1996 and 2008 adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility* are such recreated, new texts. The medium they are presented in forces them to be different, to be altered. The film uses visual images to convey meaning whereas the novel creates different mental images in readers. For this reason films are direct, they are more explicit or straightforward than novels, especially Jane Austen’s novels.

Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* is an implicit novel which lets many events, descriptions, traits of the characters for the reader to make out. Not only are her novels distinguished by a sometimes biting tone, but also by the employment of techniques meant to protect her prose from sentimentality, a then prevailing literary trend. The techniques employed in *Sense and Sensibility* are:

*Insertion of dry legal, economic passages.* The first chapter of *Sense and Sensibility* is likely to put off any reader in taking up the novel again. Characters we would never encounter are described, a complicated family tree is presented, and financial details regarding inheritance are imparted to the reader. Calculations, various schemes and most undesired outcomes are on display. These are followed, by a most interesting conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood during which the income of certain other characters we know almost nothing about is slowly reduced.

*The use of reported speech in narrating highly emotional scenes.* Feelings are seen to cause chaos, therefore, highly emotional scenes are related in indirect speech to keep the readers out of ‘dangerous material’ (Poovey 2002: 343).. Willoughby’s rescue of Marianne, their meeting at ball in London, Elinor’s telling Marianne about Edward’s engagement, Edward’s marriage proposal to Elinor, Brandon’s proposal to Marianne, these are all emotional scenes related in indirect speech.

*Stories told by characters.* Austen embeds the most sentimental stories in other stories and has them related by “safe” characters to diffuse their effect. Such are the stories of the Elizas, embedded in Marianne’s story and told by Colonel Brandon, one of the least sentimental characters of the novel. Also, the story of Lucy Steele’s secret being revealed to the Ferrars is told by Mrs. Jennings whose loud, gossipy talkativeness is a safe guard from sentimentality.

*Characters presented from the point of view of other characters too.* In order to be more objective, Austen often presents characters from each other’s point of view, or tells readers how various characters see the others. Elinor and Marianne, for example, are presented from Willoughby’s point of view as well, who clearly perceives the girls differently. Austen cannot state the obvious about the girls’ figures, but she can safely put the matter in the words of a male character. Also, Colonel Brandon’s reactions are often seen first through Mrs. Jennings’ eye, who clearly misinterprets everything.

*Reduction of number of letters and highlighting their unreliable nature.* Letters are a significant part of the novel which initially started off as an epistolary novel. In the final version, however, Austen is very careful with letters. Emotional letters are never read when received or written. That is why Marianne’s letters to Willoughby are seen much later than when they are written. Letters that are read upon reception, prove to be unreliable. Again, the example is Willoughby’s letter written by his fiancée and copied by him (Favret 2002: 373).

*Undermining literary conventions.* Finally, Austen undermines literary conventions she refuses to punish the villainous Willoughby, the fallen Marianne, the evil Lucy Steele, the empty-headed and snobbish Robert Ferrars or his mother for that matter. This proves that the focus in Austen's novel was not on the individual, but on something more general she managed to highlight by generalizations and redundancy, the latter reflected by the existence of two Elizas.

Most of these techniques are almost impossible to transfer to film. The off-stage scenes in the novel turned into on-stage in the film, the way characters appear on screen, the lack of dry passages change the film and make the adaptation direct. The most striking change occurs in the characters of the two main female protagonists, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in the *Mirage* version. In the novel Elinor and Marianne 'follow parallel courses. Both fall in love with men who will not or cannot commit to them. The different ways in which Elinor and Marianne handle their love and disappointments in love... constitute the main interest of the novel.' (Parrill 2002: 18) Elinor represents sense while Marianne stands for sensibility. Austen's main purpose in the novel is to bring Marianne to senses, have her become like Elinor, who changes the least in the novel. When the novel begins she is already a formed, 'mature, capable woman' as Dickson assumes (2001: 54). She does not fall into either of the emotional extremes like Marianne does.

Marianne, on the other hand, needs to change radically. As Parrill puts it, Marianne is 'as extreme in her happiness, as later she is extreme in loss and disappointment.' (2002: 20). For this reason she is administered the greatest blows. As opposed to Elinor, she is formed by the men she meets, Willoughby in particular. Willoughby is the embodiment of Marianne's romantic notions: he is handsome, he has not yet been attached to other women, he is a great connoisseur of music and he admires the same authors as she does. Furthermore, he is not dull and serious, he likes dancing and does not mind expressing his feelings. Marianne becomes attached to him, therefore, when he leaves Marianne she collapses and is overcome by melancholy. She awakens only in London when she learns that Edward has been secretly engaged with Lucy Steele and that Elinor could not disclose it due to a promise she had made to Lucy. Upon learning this Marianne resolves to change and give herself over to study. Her reform is completed by her illness at Cleveland after which she learns to appreciate and love Colonel Brandon, the dull man who had been the exact opposite of the romantic Willoughby. In the end both sisters fall in love with men whose masculinity is proved by their ability to regulate the display of emotions.

This basic situation changes in the most well-known adaptation of the novel. The 1995 version of *Sense and Sensibility* was released by *Mirage* and *Columbia Pictures Corporation* production companies. The film directed by Ang Lee was based on a screenplay written by Emma Thompson. The cast also triggered great publicity to the film and ensured it a wide viewership. Elinor Dashwood was played by Emma Thompson while Kate Winslet performed as Marianne. The three main male characters, Edward, Brandon and Willoughby were played in the same order by Hugh Grant, Alan Rickman and Greg Wise.

The most visible change in the adaptation regard the characters and the roles of the protagonists. Elinor's character changes to the greatest degree. She is given strong feelings and, in Parrill's view 'Thompson plays Elinor as having strong feelings, but as successfully concealing these feelings from her family and acquaintances' (2002: 25). This image of Elinor is confirmed by Thompson's diary in which she writes about Elinor that 'she's the sort of person you'd want to get drunk to see her giggling and acting silly' (1995: 253). For this reason Thompson has her break down three times, once while listening to Marianne playing the piano at Norland, then at Cleveland while watching over Marianne and finally, at the end upon learning that Edward is not married.

Some critics have attacked the film for this radical change claiming that it has “undermined the quiet feminist force” of the novel (Dickson 2002: 45). She further claims that Thompson’s translation of Elinor Dashwood has “a surprising antifeminist element to it” (2002: 55) because she has Elinor break and portrays her as a “struggling girl-woman” (2002: 56), a repressed woman who is rewarded only when she learns to express her feelings or at least is able to display her emotions.

Display of emotions is a major change in the two male protagonists as well. The three main male characters are also radically changed or their roles are expanded. The romantic and dramatic Willoughby is diminished and his place is taken by Colonel Brandon who becomes Willoughby’s foil, since he does everything Willoughby did: he carries Marianne in his arms in the rain when she goes out at Cleveland, he gives her gifts –a pianoforte-, and he reads her romantic poetry. Moreover, he is portrayed as an active man – in one of the first scenes in which he appears we see Brandon preparing for a hunt, he is also portrayed as desirable by having him wearing high riding boots, dark clothes, wide-sleeved shirt and tight waistcoat which gives him a romantic air or as Nora Nachumi puts it, the Brandon played by Alan Rickman “out-Byrons Willoughby” (2001: 133). Similarly to Brandon, Edward is more appealing and loveable, too. He is wittier and more charming. During his visit at Norland he proves to be a caring twentieth-century father and behaves like an understanding husband which gives him a “sense of emotional depth” (Nixon 2001: 37). Nixon further argues that he becomes a more likeable character in the Mirage version than in the novel because “Edward’s many attempts, and failure, to communicate his love; his physical effort at attempting to speak calls attention to the voice he does not have and the emotions he does have” (2001: 37) since we appreciate men who struggle to display their feelings (Nixon 2001: 42). What is interesting is that neither Edward nor Brandon is allowed to express their feelings verbally. Edward is stopped on both occasions he attempts to confess while Brandon is portrayed as a mature man aware that Marianne would never look at him as a lover and therefore he does not even attempt to confess anything but rather suffers in silence.

The third Dashwood sister, Margaret, much younger than her two elder sisters, becomes a key figure whose presence serves several purposes. She substitutes the viewer on the screen since we are informed of the various states of affair through her. Also, Edward’s charming and loveable traits are revealed by his behaviour with her. She is also seen as voicing the opinions her sister and mother would not (Samuelian 2001: 149). She rebels against the restraint of emotions Dashwood women display and complains that they never talk.

Edward’s and Elinor’s display of emotions is one way of making them more appealing, though in Nixon’s view this only “emphasizes our current notions of ‘romance’ rather than late eighteenth-century understandings of ‘courtship’.” (2001: 25). Another aspect of this appeal is their constant presence on screen. Thompson writes in her diary “in the novel, Edward and Brandon are quite shadowy and absent for long periods. We had to work hard to keep them present even when they’re offscreen” (1996: 269). In Nachumi’s view one way of achieving this effect was by casting Hugh Grant and Alan Rickman, two prominent male actors, as Edward and Brandon.

In addition to main characters, some of the retained minor characters are changed as well. Mr Parker, for example, is not portrayed only as the cold and insolent husband he is in the novel, but as a kind and considerate man as well. He may be reading *The Porcupine* magazine while visiting and may be making ironic remarks, but he fetches the doctor without a word in the middle of the night when asked by Elinor at Cleveland.

In addition to changes implemented by the screenplay, photography also alters the original character of the novel. On one hand it makes the adaptation direct; on the other hand, it emphasizes certain elements of the story. The London-ball scene is presented in a very dramatic way. Rich rooms full of people are presented until we find Willoughby in the most

lavish of rooms surrounded by richly dressed people, which indicates his choice. The dramatic nature of the scene is further heightened by the crowd falling silent for a second and watching Marianne when she cries Willoughby's name out. On a wider range the choice of setting is also telling. In Parrill's view the *Mirage* film "makes full and effective use of outdoor settings, to convey both beauty and meaning. It shows in striking contrast the domesticated order of Norland Park and the wild beauty of the countryside around Barton Cottage" (2002: 41). The setting offers the perfect background against which the two love relationships may develop. Background and type of relationship are in harmony since Elinor and Edward fall in love at Norland while the romantic Marianne and Willoughby fall in love at Barton Cottage.

For the changes applied in the story the *Mirage* version has been severely attacked by Austen critics and scholars. Some protested against the alterations in female characters, others thought that Thompson disregarded the feminist aspect of the original story. The change in the male characters has also come under serious attack, just as the cast of the film. On one hand, the Jane Austen Society complained about Hugh Grant being too handsome for Edward (Thomson 1995: 244), on the other hand the famous cast gave a certain subtext to the adaptation. The media attention given to their personal lives also added to the film's fame, thus creating a strange kind of intertextual relationship. Hugh Grant was arrested for lewd behaviour while filming was still on, Emma Thompson divorced her husband, Kenneth Branagh. Edward Ferrars was instantly associated with lewd conduct, Elinor was not the young, sensible woman we know from the novel anymore. However, despite all the criticism, the film proved to be a major success. Emma Thompson won the Academy Award in 1996 for best screenplay; in the same she won the BAFTA awards for best actress while Kate Winslet won the award for best supporting actress, and Ang Lee and Lindsay Doran for best film. Besides these and several other awards according to the data on the IMDb website the gross income shortly after release was almost 43 million in the USA and over £27 million in the UK only (2009).

*Sense and Sensibility* has been adapted to film in form of mini-series on three occasions, in 1971, 1981 and in 2008 by the BBC. The first visible change compared to the *Mirage* version is the casting of this film, which allows viewers to concentrate on the film and is devoid of the subtext of the actors' personal lives. The latest version, directed by John Alexander and based on a screenplay by Andrew Davies offers an interesting blend of fidelity and innovation. It did not depart from the novel very much but it also employed invented scenes from the *Mirage* version, like the Cleveland scene of Marianne's illness. In both versions she becomes ill because she stays out in the rain, also the way she softens towards Brandon by thanking him is similarly presented in both films. Also, the way Margaret is explained why they have to leave Norland is strikingly familiar, even if her role is not as important as in the previous film version.

Besides the retained scenes, there are several invented ones, like Willoughby's seducing of Eliza at the very beginning which gives a slightly sexual air to the film. Another great innovation in the film concerns Colonel Brandon's character who is presented as an animal tamer. After the Dashwoods' return from Cleveland and Marianne visibly softens towards Brandon, he behaves very politely with Marianne and does not press his presence upon her. Elinor likens Brandon to a horse tamer, he allows time and space for the wild horse to go to him willingly. And Marianne does go to Colonel Brandon's estate to implement her plan of study and self-reform. The Delaford scene ends with Marianne walking out and approaching Brandon who is holding a hawk in his hand encouraging Marianne to touch the bird – a scene suggesting that Brandon has finally managed to tame the wild Marianne.

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