

Adapting Austen: Comparison of on-screen representations

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This essay will examine three on-screen renderings of a scene from the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. The scene under examination is the one in which Mr Darcy first declares his love and proposes to Elizabeth Bennett, and it will be compared and contrasted with the same scene in three on-screen adaptations of the novel. This examination will identify what type of creative response each film is: whether a transposition, a comparison or an analogy of the original work. The on-screen adaptations under analysis here are the seven-part 1995 BBC production directed by Simon Langton, the 2005 movie adaptation directed by Joe Wright, and the 2004 Bollywood modern-day musical adaptation directed by Gurinder Chadha.

The seven-part BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* directed by Simon Langton and released in 1995 is essentially a transposition of the original text; Langton has altered the plot, characters, dialogue and themes as little as possible to remain true to the novel. A thorough transposition is particularly evident in the scene in which Mr Darcy first declares his love and proposes to Elizabeth Bennett. The setting is quite similar in the BBC production as in the novel; in the novel Elizabeth is alone in her friend Charlotte's house and "chose for her employment the examination of all the letters which Jane had written to her since her being in Kent". While she is reading the letters, Mr Darcy arrives at the house and walks into the room, much to Elizabeth's astonishment. He is agitated and paces around the room, before finally saying: "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

Up until this point the transposition from novel to screen is near perfect. The scene takes place in an ordinary sitting-room in Charlotte's home, Elizabeth is seen reading letters shortly before Mr Darcy arrives, and when he does arrive Elizabeth's expression is one of surprise, which intensifies upon her hearing the first words of his speech, which are also transposed line for

line. However, in the novel the speech following his first profession of love is not written word-for-word, but is described:

He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit.

In the BBC production Mr Darcy has the following speech:

“In declaring myself thus I am fully aware that I will be going expressly against the wishes of my family, my friends, and I hardly need add my own better judgment. The relative situation of our families is such that any alliance between us must be regarded as a highly reprehensible connection. Indeed as a rational man I cannot be regarded as such myself, but it cannot be helped. Almost from the earliest moments of our acquaintance I have come to feel for you a passionate admiration and regard, which despite all my struggles has overcome every rational objection and I beg you most fervently to relieve my suffering and consent to be my wife.”

This speech is spoken directly by Mr Darcy rather than described by a narrator, but remains true to the description given in the novel. Thus, in the transformation from novel to screen, Langton has retained the essence of the description of Mr Darcy’s speech, while also having it spoken directly by him rather than it being described in the third person.

It could be argued that this part of the scene must be described as a commentary rather than a transposition, because it is an interpretation of the author’s description of Mr Darcy’s speech rather than an exact reproduction of it from the original text. However, allowances must be made for the differences in structure and composition between a novel and a screen production. Therefore, although the speech in the film is given in first rather than third person, the director has remained as true as possible to the novel within the demands of the medium of film.

An aspect of the original novel that has transposed very well in Langton's production, is the manner in which Mr Darcy receives Elizabeth's refusal. In the novel he is described as

...expressing his hope that it [the strength of his attachment] would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. As he said this, she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He spoke of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security.

When Elizabeth articulates that she does not like or even respect Mr Darcy, it is written that "he seemed to catch her words with no less resentment than surprise." This moment is transposed wonderfully in Langton's production, in which Mr Darcy is leaning against the mantelpiece as they are speaking. When Elizabeth has refused his suit, he turns from her a moment towards the wall on which he is leaning, seems to gather his composure, then turns back with a very angry and injured expression on his face. This moment captures the exact emotion described in the novel, and is conveyed with no words, merely Mr Darcy's expression. This is a moment of absolute transposition from novel to film, and Langton's efforts to keep true to the original work in this moment, as in the rest of the scene, results in a powerful event that fully conveys the emotions of both characters in a way that can only be experienced otherwise by reading the original work.

The 2005 movie adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* by Joe Wright is quite different when compared to both the novel and to Langton's BBC production. Wright's adaptation is a stand-alone movie-length version, and as such has different format requirements than a seven-part television series. This version is also slightly altered for modern audiences. The plot, setting, characters and themes are all essentially the same, but some of the dialogue, some of the interactions between characters, and many of the characters themselves have been adapted slightly to appeal to modern audiences and also to fit into the time restraints of a movie. As such this film is somewhere between a transposition and a commentary: the main and basic

elements of the original text are included in the film, but some parts of it, mostly small details, are interpreted a little differently.

The scene in which Mr Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth is quite different to that in the novel.

To begin with, it is set outdoors at a monument in the grounds of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's estate, it is raining heavily, and Elizabeth has run to the monument for shelter from the rain.

This scene is very emotionally charged, and there is no background music, only rain falling

heavily all around them. The scene is fiercely driven by their anger towards each other,

although for Mr Darcy it begins as love. In the novel Mr Darcy comes to her having agonised and struggled with his feelings for her, but ultimately still arrogant and sure of himself.

Wright's version depicts him as helpless and throwing himself under her, and he mentions her "inferiority in rank and circumstance" almost as a rash mistake; he is not depicted as arrogant or certain that she will accept him.

After she has refused him he asks, angrily and uncertainly, "Are you laughing at me?" Wright's

intention here is for the audience to feel some sympathy towards Mr Darcy. Langton's

production includes many scenes with Mr Darcy that are not elaborated or even included in

the novel, and the series begins with Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley on horse-back in all their

finery, and from the beginning of the series the audience is comparatively sympathetic to Mr

Darcy. These techniques were not used in Wright's adaptation, partly due to the time

constraints of the movie-length format. Therefore, in order to render the audience sympathetic

towards Mr Darcy, Wright portrays him in this scene as much less arrogant and somewhat

vulnerable. Of course everything is turned around in the final scene when he asks Elizabeth for

her hand the second time, but in this scene the audience needs to feel for Mr Darcy and dislike

him less than had Wright used the exact description of it found in the novel.

The remainder of the dialogue adheres to the essence of the dialogue in the novel, but each

speech is structured much shorter and sharper. There is a lot more emotion put into Elizabeth

and Mr Darcy's words than is evident in the text, and Wright's intention here is to make it

more identifiable to modern audiences. This is because the English sense of decorum and

hiding one's true feelings and reactions has become unfashionable, and does not have a place in modern cinema as it did ten years earlier for Langton. The short sharp speeches of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy in this scene are prime examples of Wright's efforts to modernize the film, while remaining true to the essence of the content of the story.

The 2004 Bollywood modern musical adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, entitled *Bride and Prejudice*, and directed by Gurinder Chadha, is an analogy of the original text. The plot is very similar and the characters are essentially the same, but the setting and themes are radically altered. The scene under examination, in which Mr Darcy declares his love and proposes to Elizabeth, is consequently quite different to the one in the novel. Chadha's adaptation is set in present day India, Los Angeles and London, and much of the initial conflict between Elizabeth (in this version named Lalita) and Mr Darcy (referred to simply as Darcy) is based on cultural and national differences rather than just differences in class.

The scene presented here is the equivalent to the scene in the novel in which Mr Darcy declares his love and proposes to Elizabeth, but due to the modern-day setting he declares his love for her but does not propose to her. Lalita (Elizabeth) has just learnt from Georgie (Georgina, Mr Darcy's sister) that Darcy separated Jaya (Jane) and Balraj (Bingley) to prevent their marrying, and that he has a girlfriend, Ann (Anne, Catherine de Bourgh's daughter). This scene happens at Mr Kohli (Mr Collins) and Chandra's (Charlotte) wedding in Los Angeles. Lalita is sitting on a garden bench with Georgie, when Darcy comes towards them through the garden, looking for Lalita.

The dialogue is written in present-day language, Lalita has an Indian accent and Darcy has an American accent:

Darcy: Look Lalita, I love you. And I hated seeing you with Wickham in India. I tried my hardest to forget you but I couldn't, and I know this is gonna sound totally crazy, my mum's gonna flip out, but I don't want you to leave.

Lalita: Only you could say that you love me and insult me at the same time.

Darcy: What?

Lalita: You tried to forget me, loving me is crazy, I'm not good enough for your mother, and you think I will leave my family for you after you've ruined my sister's life?

Further on she says:

Lalita: We may not have your family's money, but that does not make us inferior to you.

Darcy: I'm being honest with you here alright! My family are not gonna be jumping for joy about it: I'm telling you that I don't care!

Lalita: When I first met you, I thought you were rude, arrogant, intolerant and insensitive. Over the last few days I thought maybe, maybe I made a mistake. But I was right. You're the last person I'd ever want to be with.

This version is clearly very different from the novel, but the dialogue and themes have been adapted such that they retain the essence of the original as much as possible in the modern day setting. The misunderstandings between them have all been retained in this interpretation, despite the differences in time and place setting and characterisation.

Another significant difference between Austen's novel and Chadha's adaptation is that this scene takes place outside in a beautiful flower garden at Charlotte and Mr Collins' wedding. Chadha has used this setting in order to heighten the drama of the scene, to appeal to modern-day audiences, and, most importantly, to remain true to the Bollywood musical genre. The heightened drama somewhat affects the impact of the scene; it is essentially just a falling-out between the main characters and does not carry much weight as an unexpected plot-twist. However, it is in accordance with the essence of the rest of the film, which is dramatic and a little fantastical. In that sense it is in keeping with the Bollywood musical genre, and as an adaptation it keeps close to the original novel in content more than in spirit.

Although he has changed many elements of the story of *Pride and Prejudice*, Chadha has included references to films and series of the costume drama genre which are often associated

with Austen adaptations. The setting of a large flower garden is reminiscent of garden settings found in films and series of the costume drama genre. The novel depicts a very different setting for this scene, but it is similar to settings often found in other scenes in costume drama productions. In this sense, Chadha has referenced Austen in a sideways fashion by including an element from a different adaptation of the original.

There are many ways to approach a creative adaptation of a novel to the screen, and all can generally be categorised into transposition, analogy and commentary.

The scene closely examined here is that in which Mr Darcy first declares his love and proposes to Elizabeth Bennett, and the three screen adaptations analysed here each fall into one of these areas, although there is some overlap between the categories of transposition and commentary. This scene in the 1995 BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Simon Langton, can be most adequately described as a transposition, although it can be argued that some small aspects are in the realm of transposition. The 2005 movie-length production of *Pride and Prejudice* directed by Joe Wright is firmly in the category of a commentary, which is made quite obvious by the scene examined here. Lastly, the 2004 Bollywood modern-day musical movie adaptation, *Bride and Prejudice*, directed by Gurinder Chadha, is a clear analogy of the original text, as it is a radical interpretation of the original novel. All three adaptations can claim to be based on, or at least a version of, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and each representation has achieved this in its own way.

References

Bride and Prejudice, Directed by Gurinder Chadha (2004)

Pride and Prejudice, Directed by Joe Wright (2005)

Pride and Prejudice, BBC Production, directed by Simon Langton (1995)

Pride and Prejudice, (Penguin Classics edition, 2003) written by Jane Austen, (1813)