

Part 1: "I discovered that films based on literature are actually more a product of their social and historical context than they are products of the literature."

When I began searching for classes to take for the Master of Arts in Education Program at Michigan State University, one of the courses I gravitated towards with TE 838 – *Children's Literature in Film*. The course involved two of my favorite activities: reading and watching movies. "This class will be a piece of cake," I said to myself as I added the class.

Roughly two months later, my perception on this subject has changed dramatically. I now realize that my previous "ability" of critiquing feature films that were derived from written text was trivial at best. Before this class, I had only begun to scratch the surface of analyzing films at an academic level. It has truly been a stressful, challenging, and ultimately rewarding experience.

Much like Rome, my understanding – and subsequent appreciation – of reviewing children's literature in films was not simply built in a day. Rather, it came from learning the tools necessary to "read" a film, and then apply it to a varied selection of literature. The early emphasis of this reflective piece will show the importance of each module to my learning. I will be giving summaries of modules one through three (*Learning to "Read" Books and Films*, *Fidelity to the Original*, and *Books and Films as Popular Culture*, respectively).

Since this is a course for educators, the second half of the reflection will center on how I can apply the concepts and skills from the course to aid in my student's comprehension of text-to-film conversions. To illustrate my points, I will use examples of children's literature that I could readily adapt to the age group I currently teach, which is sixth grade.

The first module we had in the course gave me – and my classmates – a crash course on how to "read" books and films; *Charlotte's Web* was our source for this module. I earned my Bachelors of Arts degree from MSU in Elementary Education, with a focus on English. Therefore, I felt confident with applying literary devices and strategies to give constructive input about the books we were reading.

However, my understanding of the vocabulary and skills needed to figure out a film was severely lacking. I found the article "How to Conduct a 'Close Analysis' of a Media 'Text'" to be very beneficial, because it helped to demonstrate that some of the skills I used to "close read" a text – looking at word choice or symbolism, for example – could also be applied to how I would interpret what is being seen in film.

As a child, I never read E.B. White's beloved tale, *Charlotte's Web*; I did have some basic knowledge of the story... mainly that it involved a pig and a kind spider. What I learned from reading the story and watching the movies was the amount of thought and energy went into the conversion process. For example, I was dumbfounded to see how the use of certain colors and chamber music could really elevate a scene; or how camera angles could heighten tension. I was truly beginning to see films in a different light; my pedagogy was shifting to where I was

looking at a cinema from a critical perspective, as opposed to reflecting on my feelings of enjoyment.

From our conferences in this module, I also was able to clearly identify some points that would assist me in the remainder of the course. A point I discovered was how much social and historical perspectives play in analyzing work. As I engaged in class forums with my group, an idea began to take shape; people's personal beliefs and upbringing have a greater effect on understanding these works than I previously thought. I discussed how many of my students, originating from the city, would have difficulty appreciating the vivid imagery of farm life in *Charlotte's Web*; not because they were unable to find meaning in text, but due to the fact that a majority of them had never seen or visited a farm.

This also helped me to see that my colleagues, with differences in age, race, and gender – also looked at the stories differently. This helped to bridge and foster positive communication within the group. Not only that, but in later modules and articles, I would see how people's notions on the theme and issues discussed in a story played a significant part in their analysis of a book or movie.

Our next module – *Fidelity to the Original* – was truly the next progression in analyzing children's literature as films. With a newly discovered understanding of how to "read" text, I was then able to reflect on my previous beliefs on fidelity, and gauge how – or if – it would change. Prior to the course, I believed that the adaptation of children's literature to any type of media should be a mirror image of what was previously written. In other words, the job of studios and executives was to use audio and visual images to bring the story to life, without any drastic changes. I considered any other sort of personal interpretation of an author's work to be blasphemous.

The first two books we read for this module really made me reevaluate my viewpoint. *Jumanji* and *Polar Express*, books written and illustrated by Chris Van Allsburg, were picture books turned into full length features. To turn these short stories into a movie, the studios had to add additional characters, scenes, and backgrounds. For example, *Jumanji* had a greater antagonistic role to The Hunter, while *Polar Express* added more intrigue on the train.

What I took from these two films made me have to expand my criteria for what made a movie a faithful version of a children's book. I started to believe that what was truly most important was in retaining the true essence, or themes, of the books. Chris Van Allsburg's stories both feature themes of holding true to adolescent wonder and belief. In my opinion, both films demonstrated fidelity to the original by featuring the "heart" of the books in cinematic form.

I also saw in greater detail how societal and historical issues play a part in these films. Elizabeth Wilson's article "A Note on *Jumanji*" gave me viewpoints on the movie that I would never have discovered. The article makes comparisons to scenes and depictions found in the film to Vietnam, and a discourse on the economic status of industry. While some of her points were

far-fetched to me, it did give me yet another example of the type of powerful thoughts and concepts can be found within children's literature.

My learning and appreciation of this course really hit a high point when we had to read and discuss another book I had never read, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. Reviewing this book and film really opened my eyes to how much my ideas on fidelity were changing. One of the things I found most interesting was how much more I enjoyed the novel over the 1939 classic film from MGM. I knew going into the week that the film is one of the more beloved feature films of all time, and has many recognizable features; none more memorable than songs such as "Somewhere Over The Rainbow," and "If I Only Had A Brain." Since I had never seen the film in its entirety, nor read the classic children's novel, I fully expected to find the movie a true representation of the novel, and more enjoyable.

Was I ever wrong! Baum's descriptive writing, and story that was not as Wicked –Witch centric as the film, really drew me into the land of Oz. Up to this point in class, I had often enjoyed the films over the original text. This novel, however, made me see how concepts and parts need to be adjusted or omitted to create a movie that people will love. While the Wizard of Oz has a memorable cast, and is well written, MGM was clearly hindered from bringing Baum's full story to life. I attribute this to the studio having a time constraint, as well as wanting to create a feature film that would be wholesome at all points. Including relatively gruesome scenes from the book – the Scarecrow breaking the necks of crows, for a case in point – would be a shocking contrast to MGM's version of the story.

Aside from opening my eyes from a media standpoint, this section of the module also granted me the opportunity to get a sense of how some authors feel about their work being interpreted. The article "There's No Place but Home: *The Wizard of Oz*," written by Jerry Griswold, gave me a greater sense of amazement about not only the book, but Baum himself. The article brought to my attention that the Land of Oz may have been a representation of the United States, and the emerald city was a possibly offshoot of either Chicago or the state of California (Griswold 464). It was a very interesting read.

The biggest ideal I took from the article was not about the themes of the novel; rather, it was about Baum's own view on what fidelity truly. Griswold discusses in the reading that Baum fancied himself a fairy tale writer, in the same mold as the Grimms or Andersen (Griswold 465). It was his assertion that fairy tales are a cultural identity to be shared among the masses; Baum did not object or oppose to the idea of other authors deviating from the story's origin. In fact, he seemed to appreciate the mindset. For him...arguably one of the greatest writer's in history, these stories were meant to be shared, appreciated, and molded by other authors.

How stories are re-interpreted throughout the ages was clearly seen in Roald Dahl's book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The story had a multitude of themes and social commentary within it; however, two topics of seemed to bring out the most discussion: the Oompa –

Loompas, and Dahl's portrayal of poverty and adolescents. The Oompa – Loompas, as they were originally described and written by Dahl in 1964, bore a stark similarity to the caricature of African tribes. The issue may have been moot at book's beginning. The rise of Civil Rights Activism in 1970's, however, led to societal norms that were in contrast to previous eras. Dahl took a considerable amount of flak for his interpretation of the Oompa – Loompas, and has a direct correlation to both film versions giving them a different physical description.

This module also showed me how much of a lightning rod a children's literature book can be over themes. As mentioned earlier, Dahl's writing received abundant criticism for his portrayal of people in lower economic standing, and the relatively black and white view of the world (good kids always get rewarded, bad kids receive harsh punishments). Dahl took offense to these criticism, which were being levied by such profound writers as Eleanor Cameron; in a rebuttal to an article posted by Cameron, he seems particularly peeved about the insinuation that his books were harmful to children.

I feel both films made an effort to keep more in line with Dahl's version of the story. Reviewing both of them, while thinking about which one I found to be closer to the text, gave me an idea that my viewpoint on fidelity was changing. I preferred the 2005 film with Johnny Deep, not because it had better special effects, or was modernized. I found it to be closer to the original in terms of content and themes. For example, I understood why Tim Burton wanted to include Wonka's back story: it was done to give the readers an understanding of who this eccentric man was. This side plot did not take away from Dahl's book, and I found, in general, that I liked the variation found in the film.

Above all else, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory began an internal debate within me that would carry over into our last module: the idea that the most popular book is not always the best book written. Literary quality versus commercial success was the key issue in looking at how books are translated into films. I found the text version of the Little Mermaid to be surprisingly deep; I was drawn to the themes of sexuality and spirituality. When Disney decided to convert it into an animated film, a lot of these themes were marginalized, or removed from the final product. I had often heard of the "Disney model" for making animated films...princes, princesses, and happily ever after. I never knew how much of the content found in these fairy tales was lost in translation from book to film. It was very insightful.

Harry Potter, our concluding book discussion, was where I began to put everything together. In the process of going from book to worldwide multimedia franchise, J.K. Rowling's beloved series showed me just how much economics can play a part in the evaluation of children's literature. This part of the module also gave me a greater sense of all of the factors that happen behind the scenes – with publishing houses, advertisers, and other business practices – that go into the process of the business. The book series also has drawn endless debates over themes found within, which gave me another example of how controversy is still found in today's literature.

I have come a long way in my understanding of the children's literature in film. What began as an "easy class" slowly transitioned into a class that I will carry with me for the foreseeable future. As a parent of a four-year old daughter, Anabelle, I am currently seeing the impact of children's literature all around me. Due to having been a part of this class, I will now be able to make educated, informed decisions on what books and concepts I want her exposed to. That is something I honestly would not have expected at the beginning of my journey in TE 838.

Part 2: "How does teaching function as yet another form of interpretation?"

Looking back on TE 838, what I am most excited about is finding a class where I be able to take what I learned and apply to my students. In the process of showing them how to "read" and interpret children's literature – both in written and cinematic form – I will have another tool to help enrich their experiences in school.

When I think about how I have been approaching children's literature with my class, I begin to see that I have made haphazard attempts to connect children's literature and film. In previous years, I have had students read *Holes* by Louis Sachar and *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl, with the hopes of helping them learn to compare text – to – film. While my intentions were noble (to say the least), I realize that I did not have the prerequisite skills to challenge them to explore the subject.

Before this class, my viewpoint on casting judgment on a film based off of a children's story was extremely limited; from my perspective, a film was good only if it followed the exact same premise as the novel. When I had my students use a Thinking Map to compare and contrast *James and the Giant Peach* last year, I was only able to conduct shallow observations, like character's appearance, or any basic change to the plot. Now, with the wealth of information I have received from the class, I am able to take these observations and lend credence to them by asking my students to explore one question.

That question is "why?" Why did the studio omit that particular scene of the film? Why did was there choir music during that particular scene between the characters? Why do you agree or disagree that this was a quality interpretation of the novel? During my six years of teaching, I have already found that children discover the greatest insights when they are asked to take a position and elaborate on their reasons for that choice. What I have taken from the course has given me a stronger grasp on how to approach children's literature with a stronger academic background.

When I look at the children's literature selections I tended to use, I find myself guilty of associating good books with successful books. I used the aforementioned books not necessarily for the quality of literary devices and language found within, but because they were widely held as great stories among my students. Literally, I was judging and picking books based off

appearance, and popularity, over soundness of writing (I want to point out that I am not trying to label either book as terrible; in fact, I found many strong literary qualities in both).

After reading all different types of children's literature from picture books to long novels, I also see the importance in having my students identify a wide selection of books. In all honesty, I can say I was not doing a very strong job of creating a leveled library that featured different authors, genres, and writing styles. I have a library like that in my classroom, but I was only pushing the famous authors – Dahl, Rowling, Lowry, and Soto, to name a few. In TE 838, I read numerous articles about the importance of exposing students to a wide range of ideas. I realize that, by compartmentalizing the authors that are in the mainstream the most as “the best,” I was not giving my students any opportunity to read and grow to appreciate other authors.

My understanding about how all types of children's literature contains some social or historical context has led me to change how I approach other subject matters, such as History or Science. With my sixth graders, I will now be looking to incorporate children's literature whenever and wherever possible, to give them a different perspective. Using Dahl's initial depiction of *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* as a way to investigate the movement for social justice and tolerance in the 1960's and 1970's would be a great for my students on a number of levels.

First of all, it would keep my students engaged on a subject that many believe is dry by nature. A second way it would aid my students is by showing them the depth that can come from a work of children's literature; from personal experience, I know that many of them look at books aimed at their demographic as childish. I feel showcasing literature at their age as a springboard to a broader topic would really get them to see that there are quality authors for them to enjoy.

With my school year just around the corner, I have been racking my brain for ways to get my students to explore children's literature, and how to approach viewing and critiquing re-interpretations of original works. One activity I am planning on implementing is a reading and writing exercise. I am going to use the works of fairy tale writer's like the Grimms and Andersen as a reference point. My students will have to read a selected fairy tale, and give a “close reading” analysis of the piece. Then, to create an open dialogue on the idea of re-interpretation, I will have my class either extend the story, or re-write it in their own words. I am already salivating (figuratively, of course) over the idea of being able to have discussion on how an individual or group's ideology can impact and shape a story. We can also discuss how word choice and writing style change based on historical and social perspectives.

Another way I plan on applying this course to my own teaching is by using the vocabulary and knowledge learned to identify and analyze works that are more ‘young adult’ in nature; books like S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, which I read as an 8th grader, comes to mind. This book, which was in the top 100 most challenged books in the 1990's, according to

Wikipedia, is a book that I would have never addressed before TE 838. This is due to my perceived inability to navigate the subject matter effectively to reach my students. Though I may not attempt a book such as this in the school year – for a variety of reasons that are beyond my touch – I now will be looking for books to challenge my students, regardless of they have been converted into a full length feature film or not.

2. Then, in the second half of your paper, I'd like you to translate the activities of the course and your own learning to your classroom. What can you carry forward with you into your own teaching? How does thinking about books as interpretations that take place in a particular time and place (a social and historical context) this help you think about children and literature and film? Where do your ideas come from? What kinds of things might you try with your students, and (based on the activities and insights of the course) why do you think these things matter? Ultimately: