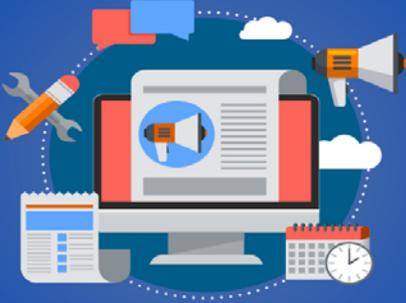


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A Critical Analysis of Douglas McGrath's Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*

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Abstract:

In the present study, Douglas McGrath's film *Emma* (1996), which is an eponymous adaptation of Jane Austen's novel, has been examined in the light of the Adaptation theory. The paper provides the comparative analysis between the novel and the film using Linda Hutcheon's approach to studying film adaptations as provided in her notable work, *A Theory of Adaptation*. Specifically, the paper focuses on studying the chosen film in relation to its source text on the basis of five common elements shared between the genres of novel and film namely, narration, time and temporality, setting, theme, and characterization.

Keywords: film adaptation, narration, time and temporality, setting, theme, characterization.

I. Introduction to the Adaptation Theory

Since its advent, Cinema has heavily relied on the literary texts for good stories. In the beginning years of the Cinema, various filmmakers reached the bookshelf to look for interesting novels that could be adapted into appealing films. A lot of such adaptations garnered positive response and accolades from the viewers, but received criticism on the grounds of fidelity to the original text from literary scholars and critics. It is only after the publication of George

Bluestone's seminal work, *Novel to Film* in 1957 that the academic studies began to be conducted on the film adaptations. Gradually, the film adaptations began to gain acceptance both from the masses and literary scholars alike, and today, due to the efforts of various adaptations theorists like Robert Stam, Linda Hutcheon, Deborah Caetmell and Sarah Cardwell, film adaptations are no longer treated as secondary, derivative, "belated, middle-brow, or inferior" (Naremore 6) when compared to their source text.

The analysis of the film adaptations traditionally focused on the notion of fidelity. But recent trends focus on various other aspects across the transmedia model, concentrating more on intertextuality and point out the fact that adaptation helps in the survival of the original work, along with stating the idea that adaptation is as much an urge to consume, erase or question an adapted text as a desire to pay a tribute to it by re-interpretation and re-creation. A successful adaptation, Hutcheon states, is the one, which is "a repetition without replication" (4), the one which balances "the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty" (25). Saying thus, Hutcheon presents the process of Adaptation (for films) as "the process of appropriation of taking possession of another's story" (10) and understanding the various elements in it namely, narration, time and temporality, themes, settings, and characterization through one's own sensibility, using media techniques of cinematography, *mise-en-scene*, sound, and editing in order to 'transcode' or 'transpose' (4) these elements; subtracting or compressing the story which is necessary in order to fit it in a limited time frame; deploying creativity, skills and techniques so as to make the text one's own, and thus, autonomous.

In the globalized world today, film adaptations are very popular as almost every third movie in the film industry is an adaptation of a popular novel mainly because of the appeal it provides in terms of popularity and story-line to the makers, the economic advantage it has

which is due to the fact that it had already succeeded in being a national or an international bestseller, and the fact that it is a franchise on its own which provides less risk to its investors. It should also be noted that along with earning well at the box-office and gaining a lot of attention from the audience mainly on the social networking sites, most of these adaptations in the Hollywood make it to the Academy Awards. Jane Austen is one of the writers whose novels have been adapted many times mainly due to their universal appeal, and their ‘adaptable’ quality.

II. Biographical Details of Jane Austen

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, at Steventon Rectory in Hampshire. While she lived, her works registered consistence sale and were appreciated especially by the upper-class gentry but none of her books became bestsellers, and very few reviews about them were written, probably because they failed to conform to the Romantic or the Victorian expectations. Her transformation from little-known to internationally renowned author began in the 1920s, when scholars began to recognize her works as masterpieces, thus, increasing her general popularity. Today, she is considered as one of the greatest writers in the history of English Literature, both by academicians as well as the general public.

Austen was highly receptive, conscious, a keen observer of society, and made her observations as one of her greatest strengths. Her social background became a major influence on the writer, as most of her inspiration came from what she saw around her. Austen’s greatness lies in the fact that although she wrote about what she knew best, that is, the society of nineteenth century English countryside families, yet her works possess universal implications for the insight they provide. In one of her letters to her nephew, Edward, she spoke of her works as paintings on

“the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory” - a phrase, which has earned a literary reputation of its own with time.

Austen's novel, *Emma* (1815) explores the concerns and difficulties of genteel women living in Regency England. It presents the story of a handsome, headstrong, and self-satisfied girl named Emma Woodhouse who overestimates her match-making abilities, as she is blind to the perils of meddling in other people's lives, thus creating problems in her life as well as the lives of people around her. The novel can also be viewed as a satire on the class-consciousness of the genteel society of Regency England.

The eponymous film adaptation of Austen's *Emma* was produced under the direction of Douglas McGrath, with Gwyneth Paltrow playing the main character of Emma Woodhouse. The film was released in 1996, and earned a worldwide gross of approximately \$22 million. It received positive reviews from critics, and also earned two nominations at the 69th Academy awards, with Rachel Portman winning under the category of Best Original Score.

III. Critical Analysis of Douglas McGrath's *Emma*

While Douglas McGrath was still an undergraduate at Princeton University, he read Jane Austen's novel *Emma* and was significantly impressed by it. After years of research, he pitched in the idea of adapting Austen's masterpiece on the screen to the American production company, Miramax Films. The co-Chairman of Miramax, Harvey Weinstein liked the idea, and hired McGrath to write the script of the film, and direct it. Thus, McGrath became the auteur of *Emma*, and so, the film can be viewed as his interpretation of the novel. He was the one who chose the American actress, Gwyneth Paltrow to play the lead character, Emma Woodhouse in the movie after seeing her performance in *Flesh and Bone* (1993). Likewise, he casted Jeremy Northam for

the character of Mr. Knightley and Toni Collette for the character of Harriet Smith, and the latter (Toni Collette) was advised to gain weight in order to appear true to her character.

McGrath's *Emma* is a straight adaptation of Austen's novel. It revolves around the titular character, Emma Woodhouse whose overconfidence in her matchmaking abilities lead her acquaintances into troubles. Following the wedding of her governess, Miss Taylor, Emma declares that she will find a suitable match for the village rector, Mr. Elton. As she moves ahead with her plan against Mr. Knightley's advice, she unintentionally creates problems in the life of her friend, Harriet. Emma even creates troubles in the life of her acquaintances, Jane and Frank who were involved in a secret affair. The confusion that she creates in everybody's lives leads her to facing the anger of her own love interest, Mr. Knightley. However, all the complexities are resolved towards the end: Jane Fairfax unites with Frank Churchill, Emma with Mr. Knightley, and Harriet with Mr. Martin.

Narration consists of plot and story and is considered easily adaptable from novel to film. Austen's *Emma* provides third person omniscient narration for the most part, however, sometimes the events are presented through the eyes of the protagonist, Emma as she sees the world around her. For instance, in the first few chapters of the novel, Mr. Elton's character is revealed as gentleman-like from Emma's perspective until Mr. Knightley is made to create some doubt in the minds of the readers regarding his disposition in Chapter 8. Thus, Austen makes a continuous shift between providing Emma's voice through which we see her world, and third person narration, which provides true and unbiased accounts of the actions and the characters associated with the novel.

In the film, narration has been done in various ways, mainly through the camera which has acted both as the objective as well the subjective narrator: as the objective narrator, the

camera has provided us true accounts of the details associated with the action in the novel, and as the subjective narrator, it shows the scenes from the point-of-view of Emma Woodhouse. The film is concentrated on the role of Gwyneth Paltrow and she occupies the screen for most of the time. As noticed in her essay, "Filming Highbury," Linda Troost observes that Paltrow has a total of 41% lines in the film. We see the characters as she perceives them till the camera makes a shift into becoming the objective narrator, which in turn makes us see the faults in the opinions formed by Emma.

The overall cinematography of the film has helped in its narration effectively. The camera has provided various shots with 'continuity editing.' The extreme-long shots have helped in displaying the scenic beauty of the countryside in some scenes and the interior of the room in some others, along with depicting the actions of the characters performed accordingly. For instance, the scene where Mr. and Mrs. Elton visit Hartfield and look around the house, the focus of camera on the interior of the house helps in depicting the setting related to Austen's time period, along with revealing the wealth and the status of the Woodhouses. The mid-shots have helped in focusing on the actions of the characters in order to emphasize the aspect of humour, develop the theme, or both. The scene where Mr. Elton proposes to Emma in the carriage is depicted with the camera placed outside the back window of the carriage. This gives the viewers a glance into the actions of both the characters, Mr. Elton and Emma.

Similarly, the close-up shots have helped in making the viewers focus on the feelings of the characters. When Emma visits Miss Bates in order to apologize for her behaviour at the Box Hill and the latter ignores her, a 'close-up' shot of Emma's face depicts her expressions of shame and guilt accompanied with pain. The 'extreme close-up' shots help in highlighting certain aspects crucial to the development of the plot. When Mr. Knightley kisses Emma's hand to show

his acknowledgement of her efforts in trying to make truce with Miss Bates, an extreme close-up of him kissing her hand focuses the attention of the readers on the romantic strain in their relationship. The powerful visual effects in the film transpose the audience to the time period depicted in the novel, giving an authenticity to the characters, thus enhancing the appeal of the film. The continuous shots focusing on the scenic beauty accentuate the romantic appeal along with giving depth to the emotive gestures.

Apart from cinematography, the technique of sound has also served the purpose of film's narration. McGrath makes an effective use of dialogues, voice-over and music to present the story of the film to the viewers. The conversations among various characters help in the development of the plot along with enhancing the humour, satire, and irony in the film. McGrath has altered the dialogues of the source text to a great extent in order to make them comprehensible to the contemporary audience. However, he has tried to remain faithful to the speech pertaining to the Regency England of Austen's time and has certainly succeeded in doing so as not only the words, but the tone, pitch and accent employed by the actors in reciting their dialogues, especially that of Gwyneth Paltrow as she has the maximum number of dialogues in the film, have helped in creating the aura of the 19th century countryside of England.

The technique of voice-over has also been used in the film for narration. The voice-over by Gwyneth Paltrow can be heard several times in the background as she performs action on the screen. For instance, when Emma writes her diary expressing her fondness for Frank after his departure from Highbury, whatever she writes is heard by the voice-over while on the screen we see Paltrow performing the action. In one of the scenes, Toni Collette's voice is also heard in the background as she narrates her encounter with Mr. Martin and Elizabeth Martin in the ribbon-shop to Emma. Such a technique has greatly helped in the narration of the movie along with

helping to compress the script keeping in view the limited time duration the genre of film possesses.

The album of the film contains a total number of eighteen tracks which keep on resounding in the background, highlighting the emotions of the characters in the scenes, thus contributing to the aural appeal of the movie. Portman has used the instruments of violin, and clarinet and has composed various orchestral pieces keeping in mind the time period depicted in the novel. The music has not only done justice to the time period, but has also helped in contributing to the emotional appeal of the film.

The film techniques of *mise-en-scene* and sound have helped in creating the time-period presented in the film. The costumes by Ruth Myers stay true to the fashions of the Regency England. The various props of umbrellas, books, and cutlery employed by the Art Direction, the setting of the countryside where the entire film is shot, the lighting which is almost always bright, even in the night scenes as the various lamps and candles are shown lit in the background, and the background score by Rachel Portman helps in creating the setting of the early 19th century countryside of England to a great extent.

The expressions and gestures of the characters have also helped in the narration of the film, as it is through them that the feelings of the characters have been depicted to the audience: Emma's guilt and shame when she visits Miss Bates in order to apologize for her behavior at the Box Hill is apparent from her sullen face; and Emma's and Jane's mutual dislike for each other and for Mrs. Elton is apparent from their scornful expressions. Similarly, Mr. Knightley's jealousy for Frank; Frank's dislike for Mrs. Elton, and Mr. Elton's contempt for Harriet that he displays at the Crown Inn Ball – all these emotions of the characters are apparent from their expressions and gestures.

A novel lacks temporality as readers can shuffle through its pages as per their convenience, but a film has a fixed duration within which its story must be narrated to the viewers. Austen's *Emma* is almost 300 pages long and is narrated in a chronological order with no flashbacks or flash-forwards in between except when Harriet narrates her encounter with Mr. Martin and his sister Elizabeth in the ribbon-shop to Emma. McGrath's film, on the other hand, is of 121 minutes in duration and stays true to the novel as it also presents all the sequences depicted in the novel in a chronological order. It is made in the genre of British Period Drama and depicts the fashions of Austen's time, that is, the Regency England of the early 19th century.

Novel and film are two different genres, and so use different techniques to present their nuances on the screen. In order to fit in the story of Austen's novel in a limited period of time, McGrath made a lot of alterations in the film while adapting it. Thus, the dialogues have been altered to a great extent and some of the scenes and characters in the novel have been removed or compressed in order to maintain the time duration and highlight the aspect the romance in the film. Certain new scenes have been added in the film to highlight the romance: Emma is shown to practice archery with Mr. Knightley as they talk about Harriet and Mr. Elton; Emma is seen riding a horse-cart where the wheel of her cart gets stuck in the pond, and she is rescued by Frank; and Mr. Knightley is shown playing with his dogs which makes his character more appealing to the contemporary audience.

The film compresses the roles of a few characters namely, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax, Mr. and Mrs. Weston and Mr. and Mrs. Elton, and even eliminates certain others namely, Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley, Mr. Perry, and Mr. Cox. Certain changes have been made in a few scenes in the film, for instance, in the novel, Harriet was attacked by the gypsies while she was walking towards her home along with an unknown friend, but in the film, Emma accompanies

her instead of the unknown friend, and the scene is made more dramatic as the gypsies try to snatch her purse violently, making her fall down on the road. However, in both the film as well as the novel, Frank rescues her and so, McGrath's faithfulness to the source text in this case cannot be questioned.

Setting constitutes an important element in both the novel and the film, and is considered easily adaptable. However, McGrath faced a lot of difficulties in adapting the novel's setting on the screen. This is mainly because Austen hardly provided any descriptions of the various places in *Emma*. The writer concentrated more on the development of character, and so, only provided the names of the various places, with very few details about them. As a result, McGrath tried to find the various locations that might correspond to the time period from the limited information that he could acquire from the source text about them.

The filmmakers have used a private home at Winterborne in Dorset named Came House to present the Woodhouses' estate of Hartfield; the home of the Earl and Duchess of Sandwich at Dorset named Mapperton to present the Westons' house of Randalls; Crichel House in Newtown to present Mr. Knightley's estate of Donwell Abbey; and the countryside of Evershot to present the fictional village of Highbury. The hall of Claydon House (a National Trust Property) has been used to present the Crown Inn Ball; Dining Room of Stratfield Saye in Hampshire has been used to present the interior of Hartfield where the dinner party scene has been shot; and the Long Gallery of Syon House in Syon Park has been used to present the place where Frank begins to reveal his feelings to Emma.

The film has been shot entirely in England with the aim of creating a romantic backdrop in the lush green, bright and pleasant landscape of the countryside. Emma is quite often shown outdoors rather than inside the house, and the various 'long-shots,' depicting the scenic beauty of

the countryside of England help in enhancing the romantic theme of the film. The film technique of sound has also helped in creating the authentic physical environment, for instance, in one of the scenes, Emma and Harriet are seen walking in the orchard and the sound of the chirping of birds is heard in the background that provides authenticity to the shot. The splendid gardens, dusty lanes, busy markets, and well-lit rooms, excellent food, costly furniture of the various estates shown in the film have helped in creating its romantic aura, which was the primary aim of the director.

Theme represents the central idea that is brought out with the help of the other elements namely, narration, character, and setting. Austen's *Emma* concentrates on the relationship between marriage and social status, which affect the lives of the characters, and the 'blinding power of imagination' which makes the protagonist take wrong decisions unintentionally. Apart from this, it also depicts the problem of social propriety of implying feelings instead of stating them directly in Austen's time, due to which misunderstanding and confusion are created among the characters. McGrath, on the other hand, chose to highlight the romantic relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley, and so, all the other themes have been put in the background and/or compressed. The was released under the genre of Romantic-Comedy/British Period Drama with the tag line, 'Cupid is armed and dangerous.'

In order to highlight the chose aspect of romance between Emma and Mr. Knightley, McGrath reduced the age difference between these two characters by casting a handsome actor, Jeremy Northam whose youthful looks complimented the beauty of Gwyneth Paltrow. Moreover, his character is made less irate and more playful in the film as compared to the novel to suit the taste of the contemporary viewers and make his relationship with Emma appear more acceptable to them. Furthermore, various new scenes have been added in the film in order to highlight the

development of romantic relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Infact, McGrath has made them kiss twice: first, in the scene when Mr. Knightley proposes to Emma and she delightfully accepts it, and second, after their marriage when they come out of the church.

In the novel, it is difficult for the readers to anticipate the development of romantic relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley till halfway through, but in the film, it is quite apparent as the various scenes bringing the characters in the same frame make it obvious to the audience that they both will be united at the end. Also, Emma's class consciousness has been toned down in order to make her character more appealing to the audience as by the end of the novel, she embraces Harriet and is shown unaffected by her inferior status, where as in the novel, she decides to maintain her distance from her (Harriet). It must be noted that in choosing to highlight the chosen theme, McGrath has not fiddled with the spirit of Austen's text. In fact, it adds to the romance provided in the original text through the addition of new scenes that show development of love between Emma and Mr. Knightley.

McGrath has tried to remain faithful to Austen's characterization by casting actors that come close to the physical appearance of the characters presented in the novel. Thus, Emma Woodhouse whom Austen has described as, "handsome, clever, and rich ... nearly twenty-one ... with the power of having rather too much of her own way" (763) has been played by the pretty American actress, Gwyneth Paltrow who was 23-years old at that time. She had to study horsemanship, dancing, and archery during the three-week rehearsal period in order to prepare for her role. Similarly, Mr. Knightley who has been described by Austen as, "a sensible man about seven or eight-and-thirty ... had a cheerful manner which always did him good" (766) has been played by the handsome English actor, Jeremy Northam who was thirty-four years old at

that time,. McGrath has made his character more likeable in order to serve the romantic angle in the film, but even after making these alterations, the director has remained faithful to Austen's text. Moreover, owing to his "tall, firm, and upright figure" (Austen 961), Jeremy Northam has done justice to the character of Mr. Knightley.

Other characters namely, Harriet Smith whom Austen has described as "a very pretty girl ... short, plump and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness" (774) has been played by Toni Collette who gained weight in order to remain true to the role; Mr. Martin who has been described as, "not handsome" (778) but whose "appearance was neat and [who] looked like a sensible young man" (779) has been played by Edward Woodall; Mrs. Bates who has been described as "a very old lady ... almost past everything but tea and quadrille" has been played by Phyllida Law. Miss Bates who has been described as, "neither young, handsome, rich nor married ... no intellectual superiority ... [having] universal good-will ... great talker upon little matters" (773) has been played by Phyllida Law's real-life daughter, Sophie Thompson, who has remained true to her character. McGrath has emphasized on the talkativeness in her character in order to evoke humour and also to make the Box Hill scene where Emma slights her appear more dramatic to the viewers.

Frank Churchill who has been described by Austen in her novel as, "a very good-looking, young man- height, air, address, all were unexceptionable ... quick and sensible" (877) has been played by Ewan McGregor; and Jane Fairfax who has been described as, "very elegant, remarkably elegant ... her height was pretty, her size a most becoming medium" (862) has been played by the beautiful Polly Walker. Although they both appear true to the basic nature of their respective characters, yet they have failed to create that charm which Austen had endowed their

characters with, probably because the director chose to ignore the Frank-Jane sub-plot in favour of highlighting the romance between Emma and Mr. Knightley.

Other characters namely, Mr. and Mrs. Weston played by James Cosmo and Greta Scacchi respectively; Mr. and Mrs. Elton played by Alan Cumming and Juliet Stevenson respectively; and Mr. Woodhouse played by Denys Hawthorne, have been well portrayed in the film. Although the roles of the actors performing these roles have been compressed to a great extent, yet these actors have created an impression in their limited screen time. In the scene depicting Mr. and Mrs. Elton's visit to Hartfield, Juliet Stevenson's acting as the ill-mannered and boastful Mrs. Elton evokes humour along with highlighting the traits of her character. Certain other characters namely, Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley, Mr. Cox, the Coles, and Mrs. Goddard have been compressed to such an extent that they are seen almost missing from the film. It must be noted that due to its limited time frame, a film cannot incorporate all the nuances presented in the book. Moreover, alteration is all but necessary when transposition from one genre to the other is done. It can be said that despite making several changes in the characterization, McGrath has remained faithful to the source text. The actors have given effective performances and look highly appealing on the screen.

Adapting Jane Austen's novel is not an easy task as the writer is highly celebrated among the literary scholars and critics. As the film is McGrath's interpretation of the novel, he chose to include and exclude or compress the details as per his sensibilities. Despite making several changes in the presentation of the story, the director has succeeded in remaining faithful to Austen's text. The film adaptation of *Emma* not only reminds us of the novel but the slight changes made in it add to the appeal of the original text. The film has been successful in

adhering closely to the text and the positive reviews of the renowned critics, the various accolades that it received after its release are well-deserved by it.

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