



Reading Through Adaptations

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This introduction to the Educational Recording Agency's resources for Literature set texts offers some background about how and why presenting film, television and radio adaptations from Year 9 up to A-level and IB level can prove beneficial to students' knowledge and understanding of their text.

Why use adaptations in the classroom?

The prolific writer and adaptor for the screen, Andrew Davies has often offered his view that '[a]ny adaptation of the original, like any interpretation, is a reading of the original' with potential to teach us something about it that we did not previously know (Davies in McNab 2016). And while it is true that from Year 9 the student needs to have a firm and ever deepening knowledge of the literary text they are studying, it is also true that encountering visual readings of the text can develop their understanding both of character, theme or plot and the author's craft. So for example, watching the way Eva Smith is presented in Helen Edmundson's 2015 adaptation of *An Inspector Calls* can make students realise how her dual identity is carefully obscured from both audience and the play's characters by Priestley. Or witnessing Ray Winstone's portrayal of Abel Magwitch in the 2011 serialisation of *Great Expectations* can evoke empathy for a character who does not always receive it. A text's complex narrative structure, for example that of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, can be represented more accessibly by a visual text such as the 1980 BBC production or the wet shirt at Pemberley

scene in Davies's own *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) will reveal that sometimes pure invention from the screenwriter brings a pivotal moment in a relationship alive for students.

As learners move into A-level or IB study, the ability to take on board and critique other interpretations of a set text or a text chosen for the non-examined element of the course becomes a more significant part of their reading and written outcomes. Students are encouraged in A-level specifications to select and integrate the views of critics into their essays either to support their arguments or to challenge another interpretation and so champion their own views. When writing about plays, students are invited to reflect on elements of productions that present characters, setting, mood or themes in different and enlightening ways, following the fundamental tenet that plays are first and foremost a performance medium. For example, viewing the portrayal of Ophelia in several contrasting productions of *Hamlet* might inform a feminist exploration of the character.

Adaptations: intertextual, intermedial, transmedial, translating and transformative

In the debate around what an adaptation is or does all of the above terms have been applied. Adaptations scholar, Thomas Leitch has presented taxonomies of adaptation that explore these and many more approaches, beginning with idea that 'all adaptations are obviously intertexts, but it is less obvious that all intertexts are adaptations

(Leitch 2012, p.89). There is not room here to define all the terms that Leitch painstakingly investigates but two are worth discussing in more depth. The ideas of intermediality and transmediality that students aged 14-19 will all be familiar with whether subliminally, implicitly or overtly.

Any student who has laughed at a Harry Potter meme or played a Marvel Cinematic Universe video game having enjoyed the most recent MCU film has an inherent understanding of both intermediality and transmediality. And it is wise to draw on their foreknowledge of these when introducing adaptations to the classroom. Whereas transmediality deals with the convergence of media under the umbrella of global companies and media franchises, as defined

by Henry Jenkins (*Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 2006), intermediality offers a way of understanding the relationship between a broad range of media texts, looking at the interplay of their 'aesthetic practices' (Higgins in Voigts-Virchow 2005, p.83). It is actively exploring this interplay between textual and visual forms that can enrich students' reading of their set texts for literature.

What are the benefits of using adaptations alongside the text?

There are a range of wide benefits that working both with the text and the adaptation can deliver. This approach can act as:

- an introduction to a set text - to give an insightful flavour of the text before it is taught in detail
- a way of increasing the familiarity of students with the literary text
- an expansion of students' already inherent visual literacy skills – to make these explicit and give students confidence in using them verbally and in writing
- a pathway to support learners who may find the language of the original text a particular challenge
- a way of diversifying set texts and engaging the whole class – the casting for these productions and the themes that are emphasised all help to do this (e.g. Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, 2020 or the RSC's 2015 *Othello* with Lucian Msamati as Iago)
- a way of understanding contexts in which the text is produced and what alternative contexts or settings portrayed in adaptations can bring to these aspects of the text (e.g. Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* [2010] where the setting is akin to a Soviet military hospital in World War II with the witches as supernatural nurses.)
- a way to seed the ideas of intertextuality or intermediality and seeing an adaptation as a distinct interpretation of a set text: i.e. to draw on students' existing knowledge of media and stretch abler students
- a means of reinforcing understanding of genre conventions of plays and scripts
- an introduction to what performance adds to the understanding of a text – to allow for drama inputs and initiate an understanding of performative aspects of texts, (e.g. the way Scrooge is portrayed in Steven Knight's 2019 *A Christmas Carol*)



Insights into the craft of adaptation

The methods used and chosen by screen writers when adapting canonical texts are allied to key skills for the study of English Language and to encourage a range of creative writing outcomes.

The following chart gives examples of these skills from adaptations of GCSE set texts.

Adaptive skill	Definition	Example	English Language Skill
Omission	Choosing to leave out material	Stephen Knight's (2019) <i>A Christmas Carol</i> – edits out Peter and Belinda from the Cratchits' family	Editing
Concision	Keeping material but cutting out detail/minor elements	Peter Brook's use of grainy black-and-white still images to represent the disaster in the opening to <i>The Lord of the Flies</i> film (1963)	Selecting and synthesising
Condensation	Reducing a larger amount of material to a condensed form	Andrew Davies's (1995) <i>Middlemarch</i> – reduces 2 episodes from Chapter 46 to a short scene between Dr Lydgate and Mr Mawmsey	Summarising
Invention	Creating completely new material	Yael Farber's (2023) <i>Macbeth</i> – musicians on stage 'comment' musically and play minor roles, e.g. cellist plays Lady Mabeth's maid	Creative writing
Preservation	Verbatim conservation of selected description or dialogue	The famous opening sentence of <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> becomes Lizzie Bennet's playful line in Andrew Davies's 1995 adaptation	Selecting and synthesising
Re-ordering	Changing order of events/sections to create particular effects with	Simon Callow and Tim Cairns place Bob's private moment of mourning with Tiny Tim before he consoles his family in their 2018 one-man show	Structuring
Episodic structuring	Shaping structure across episodes or sections	Stephen Knight reworks the 5 Staves of <i>A Christmas Carol</i> in 3 episodes for television (2019)	Cohesion
Thematic linking	Developing themes across episodes or sections.	A large digital clock ticking down to zero after the death of Duncan in the RSC's 2018 <i>Macbeth</i> signifies a fateful end	Creative writing

All the adaptations mentioned above are available either in the ERA Shakespeare Archive or The Literary Archive.

Practical tips for using adaptations in the classroom

Considering when and how to add adaptations to the teaching of a set text might be challenging, given the tight timetable that exists for exam study. So here are some ideas for doing this to have most impact on students' appreciation of their texts:

- **Deciding when adaptations are most useful** – it is critical to use adaptations at times when students are most receptive to them. It may seem counterintuitive, but an adaptation can be a helpful introduction before students have even opened the text. They might then watch further clips once they have read the whole text and finally they can be a great way to revise a text. Once students are secure in their own reading of the text, viewing a more radical adaptation could be just the spur to get them thinking about other interpretations.
- **Selecting clips** – depending on at what point in the student's reading experience you plan to use a clip, if self-selecting, opt for episodes from the narrative or scenes criteria where least change occurs; where most change occurs; where a subtle change occurs which is interesting from a staging or a performance point of view. It can also be interesting to see how the narrative voice or standpoint in prose text is represented through the aesthetics of film or television. It goes without saying that clips selected should be age- and content- appropriate.
- **Presenting clips** - clips of either one scene or a short sequence of scenes make an appropriate focus for a single lesson. This makes it feasible and practicable for them to be viewed at least twice in conjunction with a selection of activities during the course of the lesson.
- **Use in class and for homework** – a range of lesson activities will allow for much choice and tailoring to the experience the class already have of their set text. Particular scene setting and main activities will be best suited to individual classes and the remaining main tasks or extension activities might make for consolidating or stretching homework tasks – either with written outcomes or in preparation for further class discussion of a character or plot strand, for example.
- **Ensuring that students differentiate between the set text and adaptations** – while adaptations can enrich understanding of their set text, they might also disrupt a student's understanding, for example if a screenwriter omits a plot element or a adapts a character to attract more empathy. Some ground rules therefore need to be established from the outset:
 - In exam responses, students need to stick carefully to commenting on the plot, characters and themes as they are represented in the set text. But they can enlarge their own understanding of these from adaptations that will help them view a theme or character from a different perspective and reflect on their set text.
 - Quotations must always and only be taken from the set text for exam responses.
 - Adaptations will often help with the historical and social contexts of a set text. Exceptions to these might be early moderns, especially Shakespeare at GCSE level, where a contrasting historical context is chosen for a production. Mediation and explanation of this through teaching activities can turn it to the student's advantage, bringing fresh insights into the themes and messages of the text as a whole.

Try posing the question 'You wouldn't ever think of a film and the video game of the same title as the same thing, would you?' This analogy might help students keep the set text and adaptations of it distinct in their minds

We hope that you will enjoy exploring the vast array of adaptations hosted by the Educational Recording Agency. Most of the examples chosen here are drawn from the resources available from their online archives but there are many more to discover there.

About the author

Dr Lucy Hobbs is an adaptations specialist and is a freelance Commissioning editor and project manager for educational publishers such as HarperCollins and Hodder. She was Research Fellow on De Montfort University project 'Transforming Middlemarch' (AHRC 2022-2023) and chief architect of its digital encoding and editorial annotation.

References and further reading

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