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## Re-imagining Reading Using Modern Film Updates of Classic Stories

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### Introduction

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Words can be art. They are a construct, not innate, organic or given. They are synthetic, created. Therefore, there is no reason to see the use of words as anything less than creativity, especially when that use has been singled out as culturally valuable. Yet often students in a high school English class see things differently. They tend to see words as obligations, as if they were math problems or history facts; something they must contend with or get through - an ordeal. Apart from students who are passionate about any of the aforementioned (which is, to be fair, not necessarily rare), many students perceive the beautiful, often life-defining art in our words and language as little more than homework.

They do, however, really *really* like movies.

Who doesn't? Films are a wonderful medium through which we experience art. It *feels* like art to even the layperson. It is easy to digest. It is akin to our dreams, brief and episodic and impactful, leaving us with feelings similar to dreams - disturbed or enlightened, contented or shaken, oftentimes inspired. Through the camera's eye, which is existentially and often visually similar to the view through our own, we experience the imitation of life simultaneously in the most subtle and meaningful way. If, as Mark Twain said, "work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do,"<sup>1</sup> then seeing a movie can be as relaxing as play.

Students engage with this. I've rarely taught a book about which the students do not ask, "is there a movie for this?" Unfortunately, the other side of seeing movies as "play" presupposes that reading books is "work."

Film adaptations of the books we read in English class are advantageous mainly in two ways. The first is obvious: it allows students to synthesize the material in a different format, thereby clarifying themes through visual adaptation of certain things that happened in the book, or throwing this into contrast if the director *changes* something that happened in the book, arguably allowing students to synthesize or absorb meaning even better. The other reason has to do with why I am so encouraged when they ask if a film was made for any given book, and why I am disappointed if I have to tell them no. It is a clear indication that they enjoyed (or at least paid close enough attention to) the story that they *want* to continue experiencing it in its film form. It is extraordinarily powerful for a high school student to want to do something in class, and while I admit we

in the field of English get our fair share of that with the opportunity to teach entertaining texts, it is still wonderful to see a student engaged enough that they'd like to continue to study or scrutinize. Through this, without even realizing it, the possibility exists for them to "see how a story's greatness is a function of its powerful expression in its original medium." <sup>2</sup> I see an opportunity to use the same philosophy to help combat a problem I've noticed. I can keep track of how much a student actually reads a book assigned for classwork *through* that classwork, and through assignments and homework and quizzes. However, I cannot keep close track of how much of the assigned independent reading is actually done. My current independent reading project is merely adequate. It requires the standard "book report" routine - summarization, thematic analysis, thoughts on character development - but I know through student testimony that even this can be gotten around (i.e., students can complete it successfully without reading the whole book). I believe that through the study (and ultimately) practice of adaptation, students will be able to better synthesize original texts, and have the opportunity for a new type of independent reading project that would not only see an increase in *actual* reading, but do so by furthering student enjoyment of it.

In this unit, we will focus on stories for which the answer is a resounding "yes!" These stories have been made into *many* films. In this case, *Scotland, PA* (2001), *Ponyo* (2008), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), and *The Wiz* (1978).

## Background

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In most American public school classrooms, one will find students who struggle with reading, whether due to lack of skill or ability, or apathy, or distraction. I teach at a relatively diverse inner-city school and have seen readers of all backgrounds struggle with comprehension, analysis, and engagement. This, again, oftentimes stems from the obligatory nature of the work. Kids who put down their screens on occasion, who enjoy reading and choose to do it with their free time, are rare. Too rare. Books have a lot more competition than they used to. Therefore, since our students are so enamored with screens, it may even be considered educationally irresponsible in today's landscape *not* to bring the screen to them. As many times as I have seen a student contort their face in psychosomatic sickness or feigned misery over reading text from a page, I have seen another student light up in relief or even excitement when they learn a movie is being shown in class.

There is a natural link between books and films - stories. By studying adaptation we study the essence of stories as perceived by the filmmakers, the actors, the screenwriting and effects. Taking a close look at how a story is taken from text to screen reinforces both media as modes of storytelling, and is important for high school students to understand. This curricular unit is intended for upperclassmen (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade regular level to honors English students), but could be utilized for any grade level 9 - 12.

## Rationale

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If we are to use film adaptation to engage readers and promote comprehension, analysis, and understanding, we need to inspire students to want to read the book if they like the movie. They should *want* to experience both. The story exists – the plot, the characters, the pathos – and it is a boon to experience this in several forms, styles, and iterations. However, according to Thomas Leitch of the University of Delaware, “not all adaptations are created equal.” In fact, he describes many strategies in adaptation from allusion to fidelity, the most relevant for this unit being *adjustment* of the original text or previous adaptations into something newer, or more relevant, or simply different in some way that carries universal themes created in one time period that are still quite germane to another, just in need of some new clothes. These strategies for updating will be further explored in the “Teaching Strategies” section. <sup>3</sup>

Studying adaptation with students will of course require a focus on the concept of adapting stories, particularly if we are to ultimately ask them to take the reins and do some adapting of their own. My plan involves classic texts that are “re-imagined” as films. That is to say, films that are set in different worlds than the original, updated to fantasy worlds, modern comedy and suspense, and an urban musical. Students will have the opportunity to both re-learn the ideas and themes of a classic text, while exploring both the process and advantage of adaptation through viewing modern “re-imaginings” of those classics. When I refer to “re-imaginings,” I describe an elaboration of a known literary work (which I refer to as “classic”) done with freedom and creativity with an eye on its own historical and cultural context. Think Baz Lehrman’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), although that example is a bit more loyal to the original text than the examples I’ll use here.

Students will need to understand the concept of adaptation as an artisanal practice, moving both between media and between art forms. After all, media are not always used for artistic purposes, so it will be important for students to differentiate between what is considered modern “media,” and the arts. Once this is established, they will be able to see adaptation in less evaluative, and more artistic, ways. Through pinpointing certain things about the root story through adaptation, we can be clear that it was digested by the student. “The book was better” is a widely used axiom regarding film adaptation. There have been classes titled “The Book Was Better.” Theorists agree that this is a popular opinion. James Naremore quotes Francois Truffaut in the introduction to his book *Film Adaptation* : “Theoretically, a masterpiece is something that has already found its perfection of form, its definitive form.” <sup>4</sup> Since it is perfect, why mess with it? Then quoting scholar Kamilla Elliott, Leitch makes the point in *Film Adaptation and its Discontents* , that “the majority of adaptation criticism favors the novel over the film.” <sup>5</sup> This begs two questions. First, why even make films? The answer is myriad and complex, and we must consider that it usually always involves money, and hopefully often involves art. Further, in bringing novels beyond the literate culture to the mass culture, adaptations generally burn novels into easily digestible entertainment. The second question, the more relevant question, is, why do our students prefer the movie? Why will they try watching it instead of doing their assigned reading? Why do websites exist dedicated to informing students of what differences there are in the film version of their assigned book, enabling them to pursue only one media form – the simple version, easier to “digest” as Bazin describes it? <sup>6</sup> The goal of this unit is not just to solve the problem of how to non-evaluatively assess independent reading, it is also to illuminate for students that it *is* in fact better to watch the movie, but to watch the movie *too* .

Through this curricular unit, it will become clear to students that film is a partner to text, not a replacement. It can be used to enhance the experience of reading, to broaden our ideas and challenge us by fulfilling or

counteracting our imaginations. Further, by focusing on the reimagining of classic texts, students will be simultaneously faced with both the familiar and the new. Classics are comforting and are rooted in familiarity and general life lessons. The re-imagining of classic stories can be disruptive and challenging, helping us to find - using new means - those old meanings, themes and ideas in original texts.

## Objectives

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Students will analyze and understand film as a partner to text, not as a replacement.

When we settle in to watch a movie, it is often for enjoyment. One objective is, through this unit, to have students hopefully feel that way about at least one text. Also, to see film as something to study. Working from both angles, eventually students will be able to read a good story, and prepare to deeply analyze a film, in order to enhance both enjoyment and learning.

Students will synthesize themes of classic stories as a wonderful source of learning, and to treat their adaptations as beneficial to modern art forms like cinema.

Because many classics have been adapted so many times, there is nearly unlimited material from which to draw. We will work through several adaptations, each as an original, classic story updated into animation, musical, comedy, and dramatic forms. This will allow us to reflect on the differences among art forms, while bringing variety into the classroom to increase interest and engagement, and to further complicate the themes we are dealing with.

Students will be able to create their own adaptations of classic texts in order to synthesize learning of adaptation theory and prove they have completed assigned reading.

For their independent reading projects, students will read from a selection of classic stories (all available online or easily accessible at local libraries). They will then utilize their phone cameras to create adaptations, updating them to the theme of their choice. They will be responsible for explaining which strategies they will have used, all taught as part of this curricular unit.

## On the Use of Re-imagined Adaptations as Opposed to Close Adaptations

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If viewing a film in class can sometimes involve a common mental shutdown on the part of students, their teacher must find a way to ensure they are even paying attention. Many of us simply attach discussion questions or the dreaded worksheet or some other sort of evaluative assignment, which does two things: takes away from the student's enjoyment of the film, and creates work for the sake of work. There is little learning, there is little enjoyment. Lose-lose.

A film with a re-imagined view of an original text, on the other hand, innately thwarts the disheartening scenario in two ways: first, knowing that what they are about to watch is highly different from the original text (read "new") should automatically pique interest. Second, a discussion question is implicit - what is different

about the execution of the common themes? We will address that re-imagined adaptations can bring something new while retaining and reminding us of the old, and human beings are drawn to both qualities. Combining these two elements into a study of theme through adaptation will, hopefully, inspire students to actually read further (and indeed farther) into their own independently chosen stories and reimagine them themselves. They'll be working with something familiar, without being dogged by pure repetition.

According to Dudley Andrew, in adaptation, with regard to fidelity, "it is assumed that the task of adaptation is the reproduction in cinema of something essential about an original text. . . More difficult is fidelity to the spirit." <sup>7</sup> The following examples are of films that at times skew considerably from what may be referred to as fidelity to text. However – and this is what makes this study more complex and therefore apt for attention by students focusing on reading – they pay tremendous tribute to the spirit of the story.

## Teaching Strategies

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### Overview of Relevant Adaptation Strategies

We will start students off with a discussion and overview of the concept of adaptation. If a masterpiece by definition has "already found its perfection of form," <sup>8</sup> then why bother with adaptation? Well, film is the preferred medium for most modern students; moreover, "Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals." <sup>9</sup> In studying films we can also study text.

Focusing on the intertextuality of films, as Naremore refers to it, can help illuminate this concept for students. Turning a story into film combines so many forms of creativity. It can bring in other stories, add to the original, and explore different forms of art in its composition. And all of this, at "The End," contributes to the celebration of the story, and of the idea of stories as a whole.

So where do we start when art can be anything? In a world of seemingly endless possibilities, the concept of creativity must be focused, and the combination of story and film can do that. In his book, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, Thomas Leitch describes many strategies in adaptation. For this curricular unit, we will focus on both the most common, and the most relevant to the works with which we will be concerned.

Leitch describes adaptation in its most common form as "adjustment, whereby a promising earlier text is rendered more suitable for filming by one or more of a wide variety of strategies." <sup>10</sup> This is a good way to introduce adaptation to students. Although the idea of reimagining involves growing beyond the concept of simply adjusting a story to fit the available resources, this is a foundational necessity from which students can jump off for their own projects.

Leitch explores several different ways to adapt a story under the strategy of *adjustment*, which he describes as "by far the most common approach to adaptation," <sup>11</sup> culminating in what will be one of our main focuses in studying the re-imagining of classics. I have chosen *adjustment* and paired it down to the most relevant for both this curricular unit and as examples for students about to study adaptation. Strategies under *adjustment* include:

1. Compression: wherein very long original texts are compressed to two hours or less to fit a marketable

film length. A modern example of this that students may recognize would be *Troy* (2004), based on Homer's *Iliad* .

2. Expansion: wherein a short story is expanded out to fulfill promises made by the original brief plot. A prime example is *The Killers* (1946), expanded from a 10-page Hemmingway story into a complex film noir classic. An example that modern students may be familiar with is *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) starring Brad Pitt, which is a very complex modern narrative film, based on the original short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
3. Correction: wherein an original text or story is retold in a way that changes an important plot point. A good example, although many students would not be familiar with it, is *The Natural* (1984) starring Robert Redford, which ends with the batter hitting a home run, versus the original book by Bernard Malamud where the batter strikes out purposefully. This would warrant a discussion about the reasons and consequences of this choice.
4. Updating: According to Leitch, this "far more frequent strategy is to transpose the setting of a canonical classic to the present in order to show its universality while guaranteeing its relevance to the more immediate concerns of the target audience." <sup>12</sup> Two of our explorations in this curricular unit deal with re-imagined *updating* : *Scotland, PA* and *The Wiz* .

Outside of *adjustment* , Leitch outlines several more strategies in *Between Adaptation and Allusion* , one more of which is particularly apropos to this unit. *Parody* , in which the original text or work is satirized by the film adaptation, should be easily recognizable to students as exemplified by popular modern films like *The Nutty Professor* (1996), which heavily satirizes "The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde." <sup>13</sup>

Overall, the following stories and their modern film re-imaginings fall under what Leitch calls "neoclassical imitations." That is, they assume the original story is "endlessly available for updating because [the] people and stories are universal." <sup>14</sup> I would agree. There is a place where the enduring spirit of a story and the stylistic decisions of both iterations cross over, giving fans, scholars, and hopefully pupils a particular feeling that what they are experiencing is an accomplishment. This is why we love adaptation. This is why students want to know "if there is a movie."

The following stories have been chosen both because their themes and characters and spirit have already withstood the test of time, and they make for notable examples of modern styles - musical, spoof, anime and "indie" film.

## The Stories

When working with classic stories and modern films, there is obviously a large pool from which to choose. While this will help when students ultimately pick their classics to adapt in their Independent Reading projects, it makes it difficult to decide which are best for illustrating the concept of adaptation and for analyzing some of the strategies that go along with it. The following have been chosen for several reasons. Mainly, because they are all great films (judged by myself, critics and even modern internet resources like Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB), all derive from stories with which most Americans are familiar if not intimate, and because they exemplify distinctly different genres and therefore have range as a body for instruction. Offering a variety of styles and showing that adaptations can be successful across genres will help illuminate possibilities for students to execute their own adaptations of classic stories when the time comes.

Note: it will be helpful to the user of this unit to have read and watched the original texts and updated film adaptations herein.

## ***Macbeth Vs. Scotland, PA.***

“It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” <sup>15</sup> - *Macbeth*

“Let’s have a conversation that makes you not guilty.” <sup>16</sup> - *Scotland, PA*

*Macbeth* is a strong place to start: it is Shakespeare, and what is more classic than Shakespeare? It is also dark – really dark – therefore engaging. It deals with the consequences of manipulation, treachery, betrayal and murder – all apt themes for analysis in film. *Macbeth* is sometimes taught in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade (it is in my school) and therefore a synopsis or a brief abridgement can be a solid foundation for comparison to film adaptations, excerpting key scenes to be studied in detail. According to Michael Anderegg, “numerous commentators have. . .asserted – that Shakespeare’s plays are in some essential way ‘cinematic.’. . .Shakespeare’s plays are set, literally and figuratively, in an essentially bare, abstract performing area, far removed from the concrete, detailed “realism” that cinema very early on discovered to be one of its major resources and attractions.” <sup>17</sup> All this, to me, makes Shakespeare an ideal entryway for study of re-imagined film adaptations.

*Scotland, PA* is a 2001 update of *Macbeth*, and a foremost example of the concept of re-imagination. The setting is completely transplanted, the professions and social intricacies replaced. “Mr.” Macbeth (played by a deftly goofy-turned-murderous-with-ambition James LeGros) is a fast food cook with designs on owning his own franchise. His wife, “Mrs.” Macbeth (Maura Tierney), of course fans the flame of these designs into treacherous ambition, inspiring the murder of the restaurant owner Norm (King) Duncan (James Rebhorn), and takeover of the business on the success of the brand-new concept of the “drive-through.” The clothes of *this Macbeth* may be unrecognizable, but the film is incredibly loyal to the original plot and consequences of the characters’ actions. The film *just* qualifies as appropriate to show in a high school classroom, due to dark violence and brief scenes of drug use. This, however, can simply be turned into yet another mechanism for comparison: if Macbeth, or Lady Macbeth, were acting under the influence of drugs, what implications does that have on a conversation about ambition? This will be further explored in the “Classroom Activities” section.

According to Anderegg, “the supposed affinity between Shakespeare’s plays and film simply does not hold up, which may at least help us to understand why Shakespearean films have always fallen short of the theory that would make such films inevitably successful.” <sup>18</sup> *Scotland, PA* falls under this supposition. It is rated only average on IMDB and made only \$43,366 in its opening weekend. <sup>19</sup> However it’s uproarious take on the classic plot is deep, entertaining, and provides plenty of fodder to compare an original with a re-imagining.

Furthermore, we can consider here the not-known concept that among many American students Shakespeare is regarded as, well, boring. Or at least not wholly accessible. If there is an adaptation that can prove otherwise, what better way to promote the art form as a means of enhancing interest in reading? According to Eric Brown of the University of Maine at Farmington, often Shakespeare can be seen by modern audiences as boring, dull at best, and even popular film makers like Mel Gibson cannot take something like *Hamlet* (1990) and elicit as wide a response as *Lethal Weapon* (1987) did. He asserts that *Scotland, PA* is the exception, in quality if not popularity, through its use of the *Macbeth* story (to which it remains impressively loyal) to shun elitism, satirize American obsession with fast food and convenience, while at the same time tackling the violence and pitfalls of misguided ambition. <sup>20</sup>

Taking the original plot of a Shakespeare work and actually making it work for a modern audience is a prime

example of the use of Leitch's notion of *updating*. *Scotland, PA* is in essence a complex crime caper and can be viewed as an entertaining modern film outside of any mention of *Macbeth*. This exemplifies *updating* by carrying forward themes universal enough to span centuries, if they're dressed in new clothes.

### ***The Little Mermaid Vs. Ponyo***

"I know that I shall love the world up there, and all the people who live in it." <sup>21</sup>

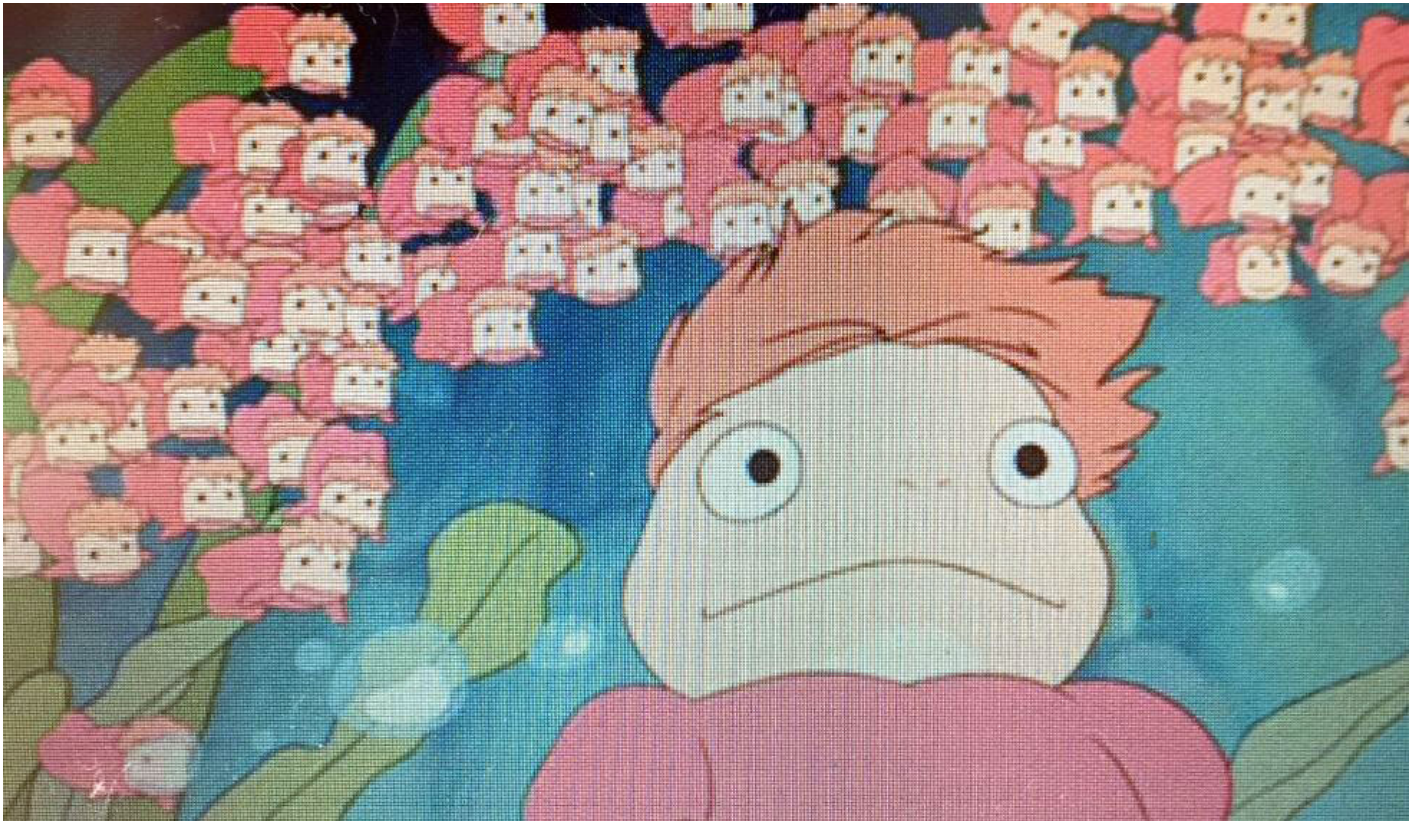
- *The Little Mermaid* (Andersen)

"You can't be human and magic at the same time, sweetheart." <sup>22</sup> - *Ponyo*

The Hans Christen Andersen classic *The Little Mermaid* has been adapted many times and in many forms. It makes an apt study for high school instruction due to the popularity of the 1989 Walt Disney adaptation that today's students can still quote by heart, singing its lyrics.

*Ponyo* (2008), another animated adaptation by famed Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, offers students a considerably different take on the original - a literal "fish out of water" story. Miyazaki is famous for sweepingly imaginative animated films, and in *Ponyo* this is no different. *Ponyo*, the titular "little mermaid" character, leads the viewer through, funnily enough, a whole new world. Miyazaki proves, as he's done with award-winning films like *Howl's Moving Castle*, that creativity really is *anything*; that is to say, in a world of infinite possibilities like that of the imagination, creativity, expression, and art are not mutually exclusive, and they all play a role when applied. The same is true for adaptation, a process that can be just as creative as coming up with original stories or films. *Ponyo* presents an underwater world that is rooted in reality, giving us the ocean as we know it as viewed from land, to seafaring ships and jellyfish. But beyond that the film deals mostly in deep fantasy. We are presented, for example, with hundreds of the little mermaid's "sisters" as opposed to the original five, all of whom look like "fish" like *Ponyo*. This has a similar affect that Andersen illustrated with the original sisters' concerns about her desire to be human, using the visual instead of the narrative, combining Leitch's strategies of *expansion*, *correction*, and *updating*, by having her hundreds of sisters swarm around her like a school of fish to try and protect her, and ultimately to try and help her (see image).





Ponyo surrounded by her many sisters in the film *Ponyo* , Miyazaki's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* .

Deborah Ross, in her article “Miyazaki’s *Little Mermaid*: A Goldfish Out of Water,” points out the particularly imaginative qualities of the film, while maintaining that it not only utilizes some very important aspects of the original Andersen work, but pays homage to them. She describes *Ponyo* as, “like many Disney features, [presents] imagination as a sometimes dark and dangerous thing.”<sup>23</sup> This point is apt to share with students when confronting them with the original Andersen text, which is quite dark. Students familiar with the Disney version will probably find a bit of shock in the mermaid actually having her tongue cut out, permanently, instead of bartering her voice on a gamble like Disney’s Ariel. Or that the legs of Andersen’s mermaid bleed and cause her anguish with every step, “as if [she] were treading upon sharp knives.”<sup>24</sup> Which “alone may explain why parents are more comfortable setting their [children] down in front of the Disney video than they are reading them this gruesome story.”<sup>25</sup> With *Ponyo* , Miyazaki never crosses the line into the overtly disturbing as Andersen does, nor does he present a flashy, bubbly narrative like the Disney version. The character Ponyo, in an adaptive *correction* , is in fact saved by the human object of her desire, in this case a 5-year old boy named Sosuke, instead of the other way around. Her mother is a major factor in the narrative, also a *correction* from not only the original text, but from the many classic fairy tales which are missing matriarchs of any kind. It is still, however, a fairy tale in that the lessons to children remain quite palpable. In its significant environmental overtone, *Ponyo* teaches “that human actions have consequences.”<sup>26</sup> The “sea king” (in this case an underwater sorcerer) is a former human who left mankind to “serve the earth.”<sup>27</sup> There is a clear environmental agenda, utilizing the strength and universality of the original story to promote modern meanings, feelings, and even causes. The adapted narrative of *Ponyo* is consistently centered on preservation of coastlines and oceans, a prime example of *updating* (Leitch) and apt for class discussion of the importance of the ability of adaptations to use classic, familiar stories to promote attention to modern themes and considerations.

Also apparent in Miyazaki's adaptation are themes important to teenagers: the concept of being oneself and of persistence, and of magnanimous parenting. Again flipping the script of the original story, here it is the prince character, Sosuke, who is tested. "The happy ending cannot come about. . .until her true love, Sosuke, has promised Ponyo's parents to love and accept the fish that still lives in her." <sup>28</sup> Quite different from, and arguably far more progressive than, Andersen's mermaid who must give up her tail and life in the kingdom of the sea just for the *chance* to convince a prince to love her, Ponyo's mother, on the other hand, both supports her decision and insists that she be free to make her own decisions, even her own mistakes. I'm sure at least a few students will approve of a parent who "is more focused on promoting love and growth and therefore on respect for her child's will." <sup>29</sup> That may even spark some good class discussion.

Finding in this adaptation such themes as feminism, progressive parenting, environmentalism and conservation, as well as the promotion of self-confidence, students will be able to see clearly the effects of good *updating* . The film takes into consideration imagination just as much as Disney's iteration, and relies more heavily than expected on the original Andersen narrative. "The storyline. . .acknowledges. . .that magic is something to outgrow, though not forget, as we learn to help each other endure and enjoy what we can of this damaged and dangerous world." <sup>30</sup>

### ***Arthurian Legend Vs. Monty Python and the Holy Grail***

"Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus. Here lies Arthur, King once, and King in the future." <sup>31</sup> -Sir Thomas Malory

"Now go away or I will taunt you a second time." <sup>32</sup> - *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

Is there a more enduring classic than legend? This is another tale that many young people have been familiarized with over the years through the Disney iteration. In fact, it will come to bear that viewing aspects of the Disney production may be helpful in familiarizing students with the original story.

However we must start, as is the practice of this unit, with an original text. Arthurian legend has been written about and adapted and re-adapted since the 12th century. Comparing it to the loose, uproarious comedy of Monty Python offers both a look into the comedic culture of the 1970's as well as providing variety from which to study adaptation of original work.

Arthurian legend has been adapted into so many different forms - narrative, lyric, pictorial, musical - that for instruction of it one might feel free to pick and choose. As with *Macbeth* , for purposes of this unit, I will be doing an overview with students of the legend of King Arthur, as well as using sections of the poem *Perceval* by Chretien de Troyes which, according to Elizabeth Murrell, is the adaptation of Arthurian legend most responsible for sparking the imagination of British comedians Graham Chapman, John Cleese, et al. Using sections of the French poem (translated, of course) presents another opportunity for instructional diversity in this unit. The translated text can be found easily online (link in Teacher Resources). It's not necessarily wise to expect a 12th century epic poem (especially one that was unfinished by its original writer and taken up again by several others, having as complicated a history as it does a plot) to be well-received by the modern teenager. However, paired with general overviews of the story of King Arthur and the quest for the Grail, certain lines can be interesting and advantageous for scrutiny in class before viewing the film. For example: "The man who does not honor women / shows honor must be dead within him." <sup>33</sup> Themes of chivalry, hero quests, and even the concept of adventure as related to film can be explored in Arthurian legend. These are apparent, even in Monty Python's comedic take, giving us a prime example of Leitch's *parody* .

Murrell agrees that Monty Python is a viable classroom resource: "Since students respond to humor and to the unconventional, the use of contemporary film in the classroom is a useful strategy for introducing material whose content may be intimidating, strange, or difficult." <sup>34</sup> She asserts that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is a functional adaptation of the original poem, in addition to being highly engaging as an uproarious comedy. Focusing on the poem as an original classic text, an instructor gains the advantage of using a "borderline text – that is, it fills a space between epic and novel, as well as between myth and romance." <sup>35</sup> What is an epic? What is a novel for that matter? All important questions to explore when developing a conversation and study centered ultimately on reading. Students will have to decide what genre they are dealing with if they are going to set the stage for their own adaptation. Again, exploring the entirety of *Perceval* could easily make up a university semester or even a course of study. Highlighting particular lines to compare to scenes of the film as a good example of parody/pastiche is recommended and exemplified in the Classroom Activities section.

Another opportunity in using a comedic adaptation is to explore the nature of comedy as commentary. Throughout the film, the knights are being misunderstood, and there are problems with communication. The confusion, argument, and debate over words indicates a clear commentary on the nature of words and how much they can impede communication. For example, the famed Knights Who Say "Ni," – giant, imposing would-be killers – demand a shrubbery, and nothing else, for King Arthur and his knights to pass. When Arthur procures this shrubbery, the Knights Who Say "Ni," confounded, request another shrubbery. If time and context allows, an instructor might explore the nature of British humor from that time period. However for these purposes, an exercise in communication may be more universal to use with high school students. For example, in Classroom Activities we will explore what the nature of communication has to do with class divides as exemplified by scenes from the poem and film.

As a case study for film analysis, *The Holy Grail* is also worth a look. The film itself is often visceral and intense, portraying within its comedy a genuine feel for medieval times with jarring, handheld camera shots as well as frequent violence (sometimes comical, sometimes realistic, often both). Additionally, if there is time to go into the roots of the British comedy the film grew from, one should also point out the film as an example of comedic legend, since it is based on story that has become legend. Something that the film can help students realize is that the magic of storytelling is behind it all. The people who made this film were able to recognize a story that was so good, so epic, so universal, that it snowballed over the decades and centuries to become actual legend. This film was based on that legend, and in modern times, in modern media, it has become legend itself! Aren't books grand?

I should note, incidentally, that along the same lines, *Monty Python* is legendary to an entirely different generation. The humor is often dry and not always universally accessible. *Monty Python* and *The Holy Grail* may be better shown in clips, since, while some jokes are extraordinarily lowbrow, its generally highbrow, dry and persistent humor sometimes relies less on narrative than on quick quips. Kids may lose interest. Clips on the other hand can be chosen carefully to pinpoint the actual plot points from Arthurian legend and also show that humor can be used in *updates* .

### ***The Wizard of Oz Vs. The Wiz***

"Come along, Toto,'she said. 'We will go to the Emerald City and ask the great Oz how to get back to Kansas.'" <sup>36</sup> - *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum)

"The genius who created me only took care of my dashing good looks, my razor sharp wit and my irresistible attraction to the wrong women. What he forgot to add...was a heart." <sup>37</sup>

## - *The Wiz*

It makes sense that an American tale as classic as L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* has been adapted so many times into a predominantly American artform, the musical. From the Judy Garland film to modern Tony winner *Wicked*, singing down the yellow brick road is arguably more recognizable than the quartet's walk down that road in the original work. In fact, simply calling it the "yellow brick road" is a habit born of adaptation -- Baum describes it in his original work as "the road of yellow brick."<sup>38</sup> I suppose that "follow the road of yellow brick" wouldn't have made as catchy a tune as "follow the yellow brick road!"<sup>39</sup>

For the purposes of this curricular unit, we will be taking a look at *The Wiz*, the 1978 re-imagined adaptation that places the same classic characters in a different Oz, one set in New York City, the Kansas of the real world being replaced by Harlem, and the cast being predominantly African-American. Adding a musical to our arsenal of imaginative adaptation examples promotes an aspect of diversity, as does the cultural relevance of the film to a more urban setting (like the one in which I teach). As mentioned earlier, it also does not hurt that the film is fantastic. It is unlikely that an instructor would lose engagement from many, if any, students viewing a film so visually, musically, and of course narratively stimulating.

If the original MGM film updated such things as the phrasing surrounding Baum's "road of yellow brick," *The Wiz* (first the musical, then film to which I refer), continues that adaptive process. Diana Ross as Dorothy, Michael Jackson as the Scarecrow, and their friends "Ease on down the road"<sup>40</sup> to Oz. In an essay exploring the many adaptations of the original story, Ryan Bunch of Rutgers University describes well the nature of the update: "Black vernacular speech, music, and movement transform the agrarian, rooted, nostalgic myth of Baum's book and the MGM film into an urban, mobile, modern vision."<sup>41</sup>

These new clothes on such a classic story not only can enhance appreciation for the original, but are quite dazzling visually, and the songs speak to the modern generation. Students will, depending on time, be reading the original story or excerpts from it, before watching *The Wiz*.

All said, each of these four films is fantastic and watchable in its own right. I highly recommend taking a look at each and deciding which may be apt for student study. The original stories of each are ones more or less known in the world of American education and it is likely students will have anywhere from a passing interest to active engagement based on that alone. But when we bring film into the instructional balance, when we add visual images and viewable human interaction and emotion to something students are familiar with or will have read in class, the use of adaptation can make the themes of these stories all the more teachable. Below are activities with which to do that for these stories and their film adaptations.

## Classroom Activities

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### Journals

The way to present each story and film will differ per classroom based upon time, resources, and teacher inclination, of course. I recommend journal-writes as warm-ups, checks-for-understanding, and monitoring of progress and synthesis. It is a strategy I use regularly and, as long as the prompts are interesting and thought-provoking enough, there usually isn't a problem with student engagement.

To make the prompts engaging, often-times general questions that can be applied to the material you've just gone, or are about to go over, work. These questions can be about anything from the meaning of life to the meaning of a scene in the film. Two general ones that come to mind when dealing with adaptation of classic stories are:

- What can we do with pictures that we cannot do with words? (When analyzing the value of adaptations to film)
- What comes first, the art or the "rules"? (This question is meant to begin a lesson on the strategies surrounding adaptation)

Quotes, and student response to them, are also apt for warm-ups. Michael Jackson as the Scarecrow in *The Wiz* pulls from his patchwork and recites phrases from great literature, such as "'Heavy is the head that wears the crown.' - W. Shakespeare." <sup>42</sup> This can employ both the strategies of film analysis and general life questions.

Once we deal with how to begin class, engage students in the topic for the day, or check for understanding, it is time to begin analyzing the stories and adaptations themselves.

## Comparisons

Utilizing the appropriate strategies, students will compare and contrast scenes from each film that coincide with those of the original story, either by plot, theme or both. This will be a good way to synthesize the different facets of the Leitch strategies. Also, we will begin to develop film appreciation during this time (beginning with *Scotland, PA*). For *Macbeth*, students will spotlight scenes of dialogue between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth and compare them to the coinciding characters in the film. For example, if we want to draw on the question "how does it change the conversation about ambition if the director implies that Lady Macbeth was on drugs when convincing Macbeth to kill the king?" we will be drawing on the scene in *Scotland, PA* when Maura Tierney as Mrs. Macbeth is convincing her husband to take over his boss's business only after they spend time smoking marijuana.

For *The Little Mermaid*, students will focus on the different actions and desires of the little mermaid as compared to the differences for Ponyo - for example, that Ponyo is saved by her future love, that she attains humanity mostly on her own (i.e., without the help of a sea witch), and that her true test is if Sosuke loves her as both a human and a fish.

For *Perceval*, students will focus on passages that highlight the experience of aristocracy versus peasants, and compare that to the peasant scene in *The Holy Grail*. For example, from *Perceval*, "The count is such a man that he listens. . .and if he hears others slandered suffers for them, whoever they may be." <sup>43</sup> This can be compared with such legendary comedic lines as: "You think you're king just because some hag threw a sword at you?" And, "Help, I'm being oppressed. Come and see the violence inherent in the system." It can make for interesting class discussion.

For *The Wizard of Oz*, the conversation can continue about lines of text/dialogue, or can be focused on the visual or audible, as *The Wiz* is a feast for the eyes (and ears!). This re-imagining updates a classic story with classic themes to not only modern day, but provides for appreciation of modern trends in culture: apparel, language, style, choreography, and art. It doesn't hurt that Diana Ross as Dorothy, along with really the whole cast, are irreplaceably spectacular. It says something about the power of movies to tell stories. They bring to

our senses, and sensibilities, the most talented, entertaining, engaging acting, editing, directing, drawing people into the story. It's why audiobooks by fabulous narrators are effective; films hit so many senses at once, we barely need to acknowledge consciously that we are even experiencing a story – this sentiment may sell the pairing of films and books to students, if it can be expressed without it making them think it's a reason to skip reading the actual story. Therefore in lieu of using just lines, I will be asking my students to compare how a story element was communicated. For example, compare Dorothy meeting the Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz* with how it is executed in *The Wiz*, where the “munchkins” (energetic and exhibiting clothing styles, sensibilities and song of teens in late 70's Harlem) break out from being trapped in, and indeed as, wall graffiti.

## **The Project**

When I conceived of utilizing film adaptation to teach literature, it began with the notion that students need to spend more time reading, and if they are responsible for adapting what they read, they will need to do the actual reading first, during, and throughout. The students' final project therefore will be designed first to reflect the culmination of their learning on adaptation, and second to prove they've read the book or story. They will be required to choose a classic story (with a minimum length) available online. There will be a limited list to choose from as well as links (see Teacher Resources). Students will be grouped, based on story choice, and be tasked with creating their own “re-imagined” film adaptation of the original classic story. This could mean that they update it to be culturally relevant in a modern socio-cultural context. This could mean that the students *choose* the historical context through which to re-imagine the story.

They'll start with a plan. In their story-based groups, they will be assigned the task of drafting a rough overview of their idea for the adaptation. Once this 1 - 2 page journal-style brainstorm is approved, they will construct either a script or storyboard, checking in when they feel it is complete. If they require filming equipment, I am lucky enough to be able to offer them that resource at my school. However, I believe my students are representative enough of the American population they at least one group member will have (and prefer the use of) a modern enough cell phone that the camera function will be more than adequate for this purpose. They will then plan and shoot scenes (between 3 and 5, but could be more or less based on time, resources, and what may be needed for any given story to prove the major aspects of the story have been read and understood).

Presentation of the work will be paramount to successful completion of this project. Groups will present their adaptations and then recap and reflect upon the process, including identifying which of Leitch's strategies they employed and why, the reason(s) they made the artistic decisions they did, and a general reflection on their experience.

The spirit behind this process was inspired by and is meant to reflect the spirit of adaptation itself. It starts with something that is already established, respected, and even treasured – both stories and indeed the very reading of them. It then provides an opportunity for an artist – like the director of a film, in this case a (hopefully) enthusiastic student – to take this great original piece and form it into something new. We will extrapolate the nature of storytelling and why it is important and enjoyed. We will confront the universal themes held therein and challenge ourselves to understand why they, and the stories that contain them, have persisted over time. We will see and appreciate that adaptation is a process that not only proves this persistence but can contribute to it. All the while the hope will be that once we are done, students will go on to see great movies and ask, “was there a book for this?”

## Teacher Resources

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1. Project Gutenberg: For an educator to execute the independent reading project as outlined herein, Project Gutenberg is a phenomenal internet resource to locate classic texts in their full form for free. The website is dedicated to digitizing texts just such as the ones outlined here and others like them that are in the public domain: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).
2. Internet Movie Database: For information about films, directors, actors, quotations, statistics, even trivia: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).
3. Other texts – *Perceval* , *The Little Mermaid* , the quote from Sir Thomas Malory – are all found on the web through google search.

## Appendix - Satisfying Standards

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Standards and requirements vary by district. This project satisfies the requirements of New Haven Public Schools for Comparative Literary Analysis through adaptation of a book, as well as requirements (again varying, in this case school by school) for independent reading.

These strategies and activities also satisfy Common Core State Standards as follows:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Students will discuss the choices of both original author, and then director of the corresponding films.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Through studying the impact of updating a story to a musical or comedy, students will explore many different aspects of communication and language.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

This is self-evident in that students will be studying direct interpretations of stories through their film adaptations.

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