

Graphic Novel Adaptations Of Canonical Texts: Crossing Media Boundaries And Reinterpreting Through The Adaptation Process In Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre

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Abstract

For a long time, the discipline of adaptation studies has not cared to make its way across the threshold of literature – film dichotomy, turning a blind eye to include the other mediums like drama, music, video games and graphic novels for the critical discourse and their assimilation in adaptation studies. This scholarly orthodoxy has resulted in either flawed or biased intellection for the products of adaptation, wherein they are always analyzed in terms of fidelity to the source text and are viewed as inferior or reductive.

However, this paper analyzes the process of adaptation in the graphic novel adaptations of canonical texts as epistemological transformations from one medium to another, involving intertextual webs, intermediality and unique semantic filtrations. Also, how, while transgressing the boundaries of one media to another enables the adapted text to have a discursive relationship with the literary canon and enrich the scholarly discourse of adaptation studies. This paper discusses how the adaptation of canonical texts assists in achieving new meaning and allows for relooking at the traditional scholarly positions. For this purpose this paper takes the graphic novel adaptation of Charlotte Bronte's seminal work, *Jane Eyre*, as a reference.

Keywords: Canonical text; Graphic Novel Adaptation, Critical Orthodoxy; Crossing Boundaries, Intermediality; Adaptation Studies

For a long time, the adaptation studies in the department of English and Culture Studies have given unprecedented attention to literature - film adaptations and have ignored other mediums like opera, plays, music, comics and graphic novels. This has led to a critical orthodoxy in the field of adaptation studies and a fallacious understanding of these new mediums of adaptation.

The medium of graphic novels and their adaptations have also been a victim of this scholarly bias and have often been viewed as less serious or literary and are regarded as a reductive art. This approach stems from the inherent wish of many old world literary figures to hold on to the spirit of 'the original'. In other words, they analyze these works of adaptation, in terms of fidelity to the source text, especially in case of canonical works. However, many contemporary scholars have challenged this view and are trying to establish a new adaptation dialogue. Linda Hutcheon, in her book, 'The Theory of Adaptation', urges readers to engage the genre of adaptation on its own terms and chart fresh strategies for the analysis of these hitherto ignored interrelations. She rightly says,

There are many shared lessons taught by Kristevan intersexuality theory and Derridean deconstruction and by Foucauldian challenges to unified subjectivity and the often radically egalitarian approach to stories (in all media) by both narratology and cultural studies. One lesson is that to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative. (Hutcheon xv)

So, there is a need to formulate new theoretical paradigms with the help of the recent debates on interdisciplinary discourse in literary corridors, which can set the ball rolling for a more substantive dialogue in the disciplines which have become obscure and secluded islands of literary attention.

Therefore, in a time, when conventional boundaries are challenged with concepts like 'intertextuality' and 'intermediality', the adaptation studies have become a sizzling interest for scholars, for exploring the phenomenon of adaptation and making new theoretical frameworks, particularly the graphic novel adaptations. As Julie Sanders states,

..there is a need to establish a more diverse vocabulary for discussing and describing the relationship between texts and hypertext, source and appropriation.. [T]he relationship is

often viewed as linear and reductive; the appropriation is always in the secondary, belated position, and the discussion will therefore always be, to a certain extent about difference, lack, or loss.(Sanders 12)

Thus, rather than seeing graphic novel adaptations as simple one way appropriations from text to adaptation, one must relook at the process of adaptation “..in terms of complex filtration and in terms of intertextual webs and signifying fields.” (Sanders 24)

This paper will analyze graphic novel adaptation as a creative filtration through the adapter’s mind and will discuss techniques and language unique to this medium in contrast to the literary text.

Intermediality is one way by which the interrelations between two media, such as text and graphic adaptations can be analyzed. It can be considered a close cousin of intertextuality and enables the adapter to transgress the boundaries of one medium into another, as Hutcheon says,

In many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re- mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs. (Hutcheon 16)

However, this so called transgression may seem very technical for scholars in the literature field. As film critic Dudley Andrews talks about the struggle and impediments of such transformations, “More difficult is fidelity to the spirit, to the original’s tone, values, imagery, and rhythm, since finding stylistic equivalents.. .for these intangible aspects is the opposite of a mechanical process”.(Andrew 100)

Intermediality may not be able to transport ‘intangible’ aspects, nevertheless, it can, in its own capacity, unleash the transformation of semiotic units specific to each medium. Dudley Andrews talks about this dilemma in his work *Concepts of Film Theory*,

Can we attempt to reproduce the meaning of the Mona Lisa in a poem, or of a poem in a musical phrase, or even of a musical phrase in an aroma? If one accepts this possibility, at the very least one is forced to discount the primary articulations of the relevant language systems. One would have to hold that although the material [...] may be of a different nature [all] systems may construct in their own way, and at higher levels, scenes and narratives that are indeed commensurable.(Andrew 101)

Therefore the expectation of same spirit or meaning in the other mediums will not leave it the opportunity to have its own literary individuality or uniqueness of the medium. Having said that, critics like Brian Mcfarlane, have tried to break this conundrum of transgression by separating the adaptation process in ‘what part is being adapted (the narrative part)’ and ‘how it is adapted (enunciation)’.

Therefore, these are the important decisions taken by the adapters, that how much of narrative should be relaid into images, characters, scenes and how much of it should be retained in the linguistic units like context box, speech box/bubble and thought box/bubble.

Keeping in view the above discussion, this research paper will analyze the graphic novel adaptation of Jane Eyre and the interpretive skills used to unleash this emerging genre. For this, one needs to study graphic novels possessing their own unique language and complex capabilities. Every graphic or verbal rendition on the paginal apparatus of a graphic novel has a signification value and is structured in a way that it almost becomes like a code to be broken. The tools like hyperframes, margins, framing, panels, images and verbal units are used to establish a space(spatio) element and time (topia) element to formulate a narrative syntagmic structure of its own.

In a traditional novel, the gaze of a reader proceeds in a linear sequence and in a fixed route, from left to right and down the page. Therefore, the reading pattern is unconsciously maneuvered by the author, even though the reader has some freedom to break the directed course. However, in graphic

novel adaptations, the sequence of narration is adapted into plurivectoral narration, where panels containing images are undoubtedly arranged in a sequence, but due to the inevitability of visual language to be seen or observed rather than being read, it imparts a special flexibility to the gaze of the reader to deviate, take multiple routes and backtrack, as per one's requirement.

The adaptation from 'all verbal medium' into multimodal structures like objects, scenes, characters, images, thoughts/speech boxes, onomatopoeic insertions and paneling, demands a multimodal traversal of the reader's gaze, which in turn functions like 'irremovable beam' and whose focal vision gets simultaneously enriched by peripheral vision. This gives the genre its own reading pattern. As Groensteen says,

The "text" of comics obeys a rhythm that is imposed on it by the succession of frames—a basic heartbeat that, as is seen in music, can be developed, nuanced, and recovered by more elaborate rhythmic effects stressed by other "instruments" (parameters), like those of the distribution of word balloons, the opposition of colors, or even the play of the graphic forms. (Groensteen et al. 45)

For example, in the original text of *Jane Eyre*, the lengthy prologue describing 19th century England, has been transformed into one single page of its graphic novel adaptation.



Fig 1 : (Corzine et al. 8,9)

In Fig 1, the colourist, the illustrator and the graphics designer have depicted the 19th century through the dresses of the characters and have established the time and place 'spatio-topia', through the rectangular and grand image of Gates Head Hall acting as iconic signifiers of the graphic text and depicting the incident which set the foundation of the narrative ahead. Further, one can see Uncle Reed, who had adopted Jane Eyre, on his death bed, asking his wife to take care of Jane like her own children. The prologue of the graphic novel merely contains two and a half speech bubbles, but the setting is established through the painted imagery.

In the next page one can observe a thoughtful and sad girl looking out of her bedroom window, who in the next panel seems to be teamed out by the other characters. Therefore, without even reading any

speech bubble, one can freely move one's gaze and decipher the impression of a servile and unhappy child and a family positioned against her, including a frowning elderly lady.



Fig 2 : (Corzine et al. 17, 18 and 19)

In the next panel, in Fig 2, we see a young boy with a dominating demeanour towards Jane. The hitting expression painted by the illustrator and the visible anger and defiance on Jane's face, juxtaposed with onomatopoeic insertions requires multiple glancing of facial expression and deciphering of the body language to arrive at the psyche of various characters.

Along with the powerful impressionistic images, thought bubbles, speech bubbles and context boxes, provide additional assistance to the reader. Thus, due to dynamic narrative pattern in contrast to the monolithic verbal pattern of the original text, the reader has a more interactive role to play, with a flexible movement of the gaze and one can easily mark the difference in the psychological involvement in terms of the narrative theme. Further, in reference to Fig 2, the textual counterpart of these two pages is covered in seven pages in the literary text of Jane Eyre. However, in these pages, most of the verbal part is transformed by the various graphic novel artists like, sketching artist, colourist and illustrator, into dynamic modes of graphic language, like, framing, sketching and colour coordination.

The art of framing, which seems to have a negligible role to play in narration and only looks like a rectangular assemblage of lines, plays the crucial role of providing spatio-topical enclosure, coherence, differentiation in semiotic units, circumscription and acts like the punctuation marks in graphic medium. Adapters in the Fig 2, have transformed a huge verbal paragraph from the original text into a picture of two sisters conniving against Jane Eyre. One can easily visualise the teasing demeanour illustrated by the adapters. Through onomatopoeic insertions, one further sees Jane's reaction and the body language of Mrs. Reed. Through these pages one can realise how traditional novels rely heavily on words and verbiage for depicting a narration which can easily be illustrated in four times less paginal space in the graphic medium, which in turn presents the desired atmosphere or situation to the reader without much reliance on words, making the graphic language capable of being 'utterable'. Another technique of adapting narration into a graphic medium is reverse ekphrasis, which is putting the mental image of narration back into the concrete visual form. Through speech bubbles, graphic novel artist achieves first person narration and through context boxes and depiction of utterable images, author tries to convey third person point of view. Thought boxes perform the function of stream of consciousness narrative, and have thus been used generously by the adapters of Jane Eyre, to depict the thought process of Jane Eyre, throughout the narrative, to achieve the peculiar *bildungsroman* element, specific to the writing style of Charlotte Bronte.

In a similar way, the other literary technique in graphic novel adaptations, like characterization, finds its stylistic equivalent in rich and illustrative paintings. The artist John M Burns has abstained from using the art of cartooning, to give it the look of a complete artistic work in terms of painting and illustration. Facial expressions are painted with a nuanced artistic peculiarity and the colour contrast is established to show the change in scenery or change in the timelines. At many places one can observe that the flashbacks and dream sequences are adapted in gray-black backgrounds, whereas the present scenes are given a livelier colour, suitable to the background and the particular scene.

The use of motifs is done with the help of braiding, a technique particular to the graphic medium, by which certain reoccurring images, colours and objects are woven by the adapters across the panels, to accentuate the narrative theme of the graphic novel adaptation.

Therefore, we can see that graphic novel adaptation, with its own unique structure and narrative semiotic units, exhibits semanticism specific to it and offers a reinterpretation of canonical texts, unleashing new aspects and new interpretive skills.

Graphic novel adaptations, through multi modality, intermediality and intertextuality, establish a discursive bond with the literary canon and trigger an alternative academic discourse that provides fresh opportunity to venture into hitherto unexplored areas and acts as a testimony to the astute and skilful medium of graphic novel adaptations

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