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## For the Love of Literature: When Books Become Films

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# For the Love of Literature: When Books Become Films

by Laura Apol,  
Michigan State University



It is pretty clear to anyone who works in the world of children's or YA literature that if something is a hit as a book, it is almost surely destined to be turned into a feature-length film. *Hunger Games*. *The Book Thief*. *Where the Wild Things Are*. *Coraline*. *The Fault in our Stars*. *Charlotte's Web*. *Jumanji*. *Polar Express*. *Ender's Game*. *Divergent*. The list goes on and on...

Most book lovers are simultaneously delighted and dismayed by this phenomenon. We're delighted because at times the film can lead viewers back to the book—something that cheers those of us who love literature! But we're often dismayed because...well the film isn't the *same* as the book. Nothing is the way the author wrote it, or the way we as a reader imagined it. The character with red hair in the book is a movie brunette. A nice person isn't nice anymore, or a villain reveals their treachery too soon. The silver slippers are red, the best friend is too young, the dog is a schnauzer rather than a collie. The car is wrong or the house is wrong; the filmmakers left out a monologue and added a love scene, or a chase scene, or chase-turned-to-love scene. And, of course, there's that ubiquitous overarching lament: *The film just isn't as good!*



**Laura Apol**

On the bright side, film versions of literature often serve us well in our classrooms. Watching the film can be a reward when our students have finished the text (think *Romeo and Juliet*); films can entice students to engage with the book (think *Hugo Cabret*); films can serve as contemporary substitutes for books that are long and challenging (think *The Scarlet Letter*). Films may even serve a pedagogical purpose when we have students compare the film version to the book they just read (think *Coraline*, Venn diagrams and compare/contrast essays).

Those are all worthy activities. But we would like to propose more. If literacy involves viewing and listening along with reading and writing, then films can be more than a reward, a springboard..., or a substitution. And pedagogically, it's not enough to ask "what's different" and then to create a long list. Pairings of books and films can do much more.

In our column for this MRJ issue, we look at what we have found to be some interesting book and film pairings. Our goal is not to identify "what's different" but rather to prompt viewers and readers to ask "how is that difference created?" and "what difference do these differences make?" We believe that films based on books are not translations of those books, taking each character, scene, conversation and representing it, verbatim, in visual terms. Rather, we see films as interpretations, creating from the original text something new: an entity all its own, with a new trajectory, a new message. Sometimes that message is close to the original; sometimes it's entirely its own.

The point is: what does this new film-entity look like? It's easy to conclude that films are different because they're shorter (than a novel) or longer (than a picture book), or because they make concrete what is only imagined in a written text. But films are created for a purpose (which is often different from the purpose for the book) and for an audience (which may be different from the audience for the book as well). To create a film, the filmmaker selects from a world of possibilities, and makes deliberate choices that add up to something all its own.

The starting place for such a conversation around film, then, is to learn a language in which to have it. Filmmakers make "moves" in their work just like authors: shots, cuts, camera angles, close ups, fades, lighting, sound effects, frames... Each of these is used to create an effect, and each effect is in place to advance a storyline, or reveal a character, or communicate a message. So the starting place in thinking about films that are based on literature is to learn the language in which to talk about film as a medium of its own. How does the director go about creating the effects? How do these effects combine to create a message? How do these effects differ from the book version of the film? What difference, then, do these differences make?

When we speak about film as film, and when we think about how and why a director may have gone about creating a film from a written text, a completely different conversation takes place. Instead of judging according to "better" or "worse," we can debate about the effects, the change in focus or message, the implied audience and our sense of how well this new version "works." The conversations are infinitely more rich, complicated, and satisfying.

It's a great thing for us as teachers to do; but it's a great thing for our students to do, too. Even the youngest students can learn to recognize some filmmaking techniques, and can think about what effect is produced and what response a filmmaker might want from a viewer when he or she uses those techniques. Scary music? A close-up of a notebook? A bird's eye view of a playground? ...What does the filmmaker want you to see? To focus on? To feel? Why?

It's a small step from this kind of viewing to talking about message, and from there, to talking about "match"—with the book. With the audience. With our own viewing selves. Critical reading and viewing is based on just this understanding and evaluation. What do we think the filmmaker wants from us as a viewer? Do we want to give it, or do we want to push back?

Book and film pairings can encourage critical literacy, higher-order thinking, authentic discussions and collaborative learning. Here, we offer a few book-film suggestions to help you start.



Lisa Domke, Ashley Johnson, Laura Apol, Jeanne Loh, Tracy Weippert

This column is created by Dr. Laura Apol of Michigan State University, in collaboration with a team of faculty and graduate students who teach children's and adolescent literature in the teacher preparation program, who research issues relevant to the area of children's and adolescent literature, and who have been or are themselves teachers in preK-12 settings.

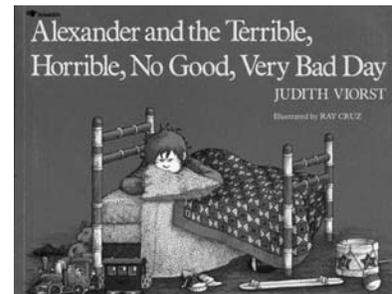
## Children's Literature: A Casting Call for the Audience —Tracy Weippert and Lisa Domke

Too often books and the movies based upon them are set on an either/or scale: Either you liked the book or the movie better. Sometimes what you encountered first affects your opinion. Other times it's an actor's portrayal that sways your vote. However, when we view movies based on books as a set of decisions made by a director and a script-writer, and when we question and analyze those decisions, we look at books and movies in more complex ways. We think about what it takes to tell a story not just through words, but through visuals as well—something picturebooks already do. However, their images are static, not moving and without sound. As we watch a movie based on a book, as teachers, we want our students to focus on three main questions (and they are not the ones you may think):

- 1) What patterns do we notice in how the story is told aurally and visually?

- 2) Why would the writer and/or director do this?
- 3) How do we feel about this as an audience?

First, we watched *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* directed by Miguel Arteta in 2014 based on Judith Viorst's



1972 book that describes everything going wrong in Alexander's day. He wakes up with gum in his hair, does not have a prize in his breakfast cereal, has to sit squished between people in the carpool, finds out that his best friend isn't his best friend anymore, makes a mess at his dad's office, and so on. He spends the day wishing he could move to Australia to escape it, but as his mom says, "...some days are like that. Even in Australia." However, the movie drastically changes the story,

because although Alexander has a bad day on the eve of his birthday, everyone else in his family has a great day. They don't seem to sympathize. Therefore, as a birthday wish, he asks that his family understand what it is like to have a bad day. The next day, everything goes wrong for his whole family with illnesses, suspensions, car accidents, botched celebrity readings at a book launch, tuxedo mishaps, calamitous job interviews, and more. To tell this story, we noticed several patterns in the movie's script and camerawork.



The most obvious pattern was the use of repeated lines and messages. Alexander frequently mentions his dad's saying of "steer your ship with positivity" —meaning that life happens, but since the only thing you can control is your reaction, approach life with optimism. However,

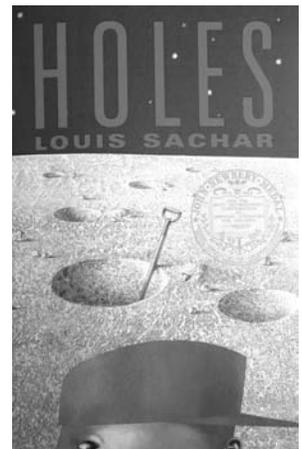
after a laundry list of calamities, everyone realizes that perpetual optimism is unrealistic and that what helps you through the bad times is family. These messages were stated explicitly throughout the movie and felt contrived. The oldest son even dumps his self-obsessed girlfriend and skips junior prom to spend the evening with his family...which would not likely happen in real life.

Additionally, we noticed some patterns in the director's camerawork. Arteta's go-to device to indicate that calamity is about to strike is the wide-angle shot which sets the scene (such as the second job interview for the dad, Ben Cooper, which takes place at a hibachi restaurant). In this establishing shot, viewers are shown the family's recently destroyed van pull up to valet parking. Then the camera cuts back and forth between Ben and his potential employers, his wife Kelly and their three youngest children, and the oldest son Anthony and his girlfriend who are all at different

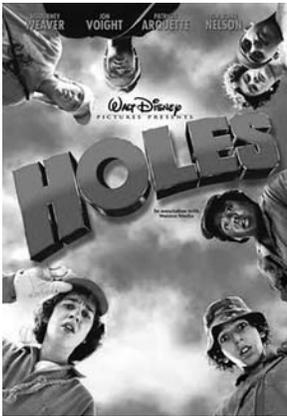
tables spread across the restaurant. The speed of the cuts increases as Ben gets caught up in trying to impress his potential employers. The focus oscillates between Ben's actions and his family's and other patrons' reactions, which builds dramatic tension as Ben leans too close to the grill, sets his shirt sleeves on fire, runs screaming through the restaurant, and finally submerges his arms in a fish tank to extinguish the flames. At this point, the camera cuts slow, but they are mainly close-up reaction shots that guide the audience's emotions.

Why make these messages so explicit and why portray the disasters in this way? It seems that in order to turn a 32-page book into an 80-minute movie, content must be added. In doing that, the screenwriter and director selected messages they wished to promote, then made them so clear that we, the audience, could not possibly mistake them. We are repeatedly told to "steer our ship with positivity," and we are repeatedly shown how to react to the events through close-up shots. This may leave viewers feeling that the film has carefully choreographed our reactions in order to ensure that we arrive at the "right" response. It is as if the film has only one "correct" interpretation, and this interpretation must be presented to the audience in no uncertain terms.

The 2003 movie *Holes*, directed by Andrew Davis, is told in a completely different manner from *Alexander*. First, it is interesting that Louis Sachar, author of the 1998 novel, also wrote the screenplay, which follows the book closely. In the movie, we noticed the theme of destiny throughout. Stanley repeatedly references his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather as the reason for his family's



curse and his incarceration in a boys' juvenile detention camp after a false conviction for stealing a famous baseball player's shoes from a homeless shelter auction. To continue the theme of destiny, there are many flashbacks (just as in the book) to the story of the outlaw Kissin' Kate Barlow. The book uses chapter breaks and increased spacing to distinguish present time from flashback. Due to the difference in medium, the movie instead uses fading and common imagery to achieve this division in time. For example, as Stanley rides the bus to Camp Green Lake, he sees a faded mirage-type image in the desert of an old wagon, a mule, and a man dressed in pioneer clothing. Also, as the boys are digging holes at the detention camp, the camera pans up to focus on the hot sun overhead, and then it pans back down to show a flashback of Camp Green Lake over 100 years ago.



The camera's focus impacts the storytelling as well as what the viewer is allowed to know at any given point in the film. The movie begins with a bird's-eye view of thousands of holes which helps show the magnitude of the camp, the desert, and the work the boys have been doing—

digging holes to “build character” (but really looking for anything the warden would consider “interesting”). Later, repeated shots of a grayish white rounded rock with grooves create visual foreshadowing, since this rock marks the actual location where Stanley finds the first major clue that the boys are not just digging holes to build character. There he finds a lipstick container engraved with the initials KB. Later, he gives the lipstick container to a more senior “camper” who can benefit from the warden's good favor. Eventually, this lipstick container becomes key to unlocking the mystery of Stanley's family's past, Camp Green Lake, and the warden's identity.

While there are repeated mentions of the warden, viewers do not see this character's face until at least a quarter of the way into the film. Instead, viewers are shown the warden's cabin and car and hear about the warden in vague references that have an authoritative, almost fear-laden feel. In a later scene, after the warden is called to examine the lipstick container, the camera focuses first on the car with a close-up of the grill, then the tires, then the warden's boots as the door opens, and the camera slowly pans up to the warden's jeans, belt buckle, shirt, and finally reveals her face. That's right; “her” face. Keeping the warden's identity a mystery helps create suspense and forces viewers to examine their expectations and gender stereotypes when they are finally confronted with an unexpected truth.

In the film version of *Holes*, the dialogue and camera shots work to create continuity as two storylines are portrayed—the one of Stanley being sent to camp and the curse from his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather. The film is also a mystery, and the choices to repeat some images while not showing others until later in the movie help preserve the suspense and keep the audience engaged.

Though we believe these films cater to the same target audience, their intentions and beliefs about viewers are wildly different. *Holes* withholds some visual plot clues in an effort to force viewers to draw their own conclusions and then reexamine them. In contrast, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* shows every single action and emotion and tells the viewer exactly what to feel and what conclusions to draw—to the point that there is little room left for independent thought. Teachers can help guide students to look for patterns, think about why directors and scriptwriters made certain decisions, and examine their own reactions in response to these decisions. Analyzing these two movies reveals how the director's choices can affect both a film's overall tone and an audience's ultimate reactions.

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## Three Thumbs Up: English Teachers at the Movies

—Jackie Kerr, Ashley Johnson,  
and Dr. Jeanne Loh

*There's only one thing that can kill the movies, and that's education.* (Will Rogers)

Do our English classes kill the movies? Like Will Rogers suggests, our efforts to bring movies into the classroom sometimes result in removing the magic from what Richard King calls “an art form available to the masses.” Sometimes, as teachers of English, we believe our job is to focus on the art of written rather than visual texts, especially given that movies are often something our students *already* love.

As English teachers, we have all struggled with the question of the movie versions of our favorite classroom texts. Do we pretend they don't exist and hope our students miss them? Do we use them to get our students' attention? Do we acknowledge the movie but make sure to tell our students that it is very different from the book and can in no way substitute for reading? Maybe we even do all three!

Even as these questions fly through our heads, we most often make this time-tested choice: Read the novel with our class, end the unit with an essay or exam, and, when it's all done, “treat” our students to a few'8 relaxing days of watching the

film adaptation. And lest our students think we're giving them a free day, we pull out our old favorite—the Venn Diagram.

The Venn diagram—the inevitable comparison. What is missing? How is it different? Which one do we like better? Coming at the end of the unit, these discussions stay at the surface, easily forgotten as we move to the next topic. In this column, however, we would like to explore the possibility that films are not just a supplement to a novel unit but rather that they stand on their own as texts to be read, analyzed and critiqued.

Given the accessibility of technology, images and sound bombard us more than at any other time in history. By choice and by chance, our students are immersed in a virtual visual deluge—YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, Vine, DirecTV, Netflix, Hulu to name a few. Yet while our students enjoy watching, creating, and talking about visual texts, we rarely ask students to engage with those texts at the same level as books.

*Two Thumbs Up* movie critic Roger Ebert claimed, “Most of us do not consciously look at movies.” This implies that we must do more than simply watch the movie and talk about it—we must look at it. This new “look” may be uncharted territory for us; while we may enjoy movies, most of us are probably not experts in film and media studies. This does not have to be a deficit; instead, it can serve as an opportunity to learn from and with our students. Let's face it: when it comes to the digital world, they know things we don't. We need to work together with our students to become critical consumers of movies and media.

So let's extend what we think of as language arts, even beyond visualizing. Let's think about movies as more than a supplement to a novel. A movie is...

- uniquely collaborative because it is a simultaneously collective and individual

experience. The audience recursively reads/ experiences the text both together and apart.

- a participatory and interactive experience intensified by physical proximity and shared body language, facial expressions, verbalizations (gasps, sighs, laughter, exclamations, etc.), and movement (shifting around, jumping, applause, nudging, turning to make eye contact, etc.).
- empathic and inspirational, appealing to the human emotions by making emotive aspects of the story explicit through the actors, the music, and/or the cinematography.
- sometimes a mirror experience and sometimes a window; not unlike reading books, watching movies can either reflect our lived experiences or shed light on someone else's.

Let's not kill movies in our classrooms; let's choose instead to celebrate their textual contributions to the language arts, collaborating with our students to read the movie just as avidly and enthusiastically as we want them to read the book!

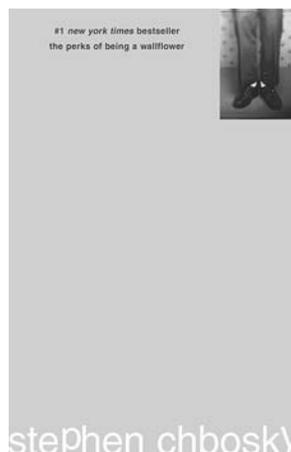
Here are few book and movie pairings to get started.

***The Perks of Being a Wallflower***, Stephen Chbosky

*"It's just that sometimes people use thought to not participate in life."*

—Bill, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

In Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie is a fifteen-year-old boy who begins high school as an outsider—an emotional boy haunted by memories he doesn't understand. Told entirely through



Charlie's letters to an unnamed friend, the novel captures Charlie's isolation through its structure. Since we know only Charlie's thoughts, we, like Charlie, remain distanced from the other characters in the novel. This distance serves to highlight Charlie's separation from high school life and his mostly unconscious choice not to participate in it. Charlie recounts his experiences with his friends, his teachers, and his family as if he is only partially there, as if things are done to him or around him rather than with him. Even as he begins to make connections with others, particularly his friends Sam and Patrick, Charlie's tale remains one-sided.



But how does an epistolary novel designed to highlight Charlie's thoughts become a movie? First of all, author Stephen Chbosky wrote the screenplay and directed the movie adaptation of *Perks of Being a Wallflower*. While there is nod to the novel's epistolary structure at

the beginning, middle and end when Charlie narrates letters to his unnamed friend, the film largely follows a traditional chronological narrative interspersed with Charlie's returning memories of his Aunt Helen, who died just before his seventh birthday. At the beginning of the film, we see Charlie against a sea of faceless students. Whether he is walking into the cafeteria, sitting down at a football game, or going to the homecoming dance, Charlie is always shown first alone, looking directly at the camera, larger than everyone else. Watching Charlie in these scenes allows the viewer to feel his awkwardness, his inability to fit into the fabric of the school. In this way, Chbosky highlights Charlie's isolation using screen shots. At the same time, when Charlie interacts with his friends, he is the same size as they are, and instead of facing the camera, he looks at them. To analyze Charlie's development might then become an exercise in

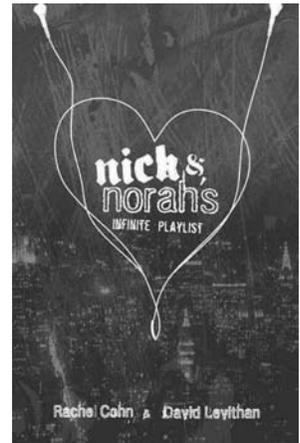
analyzing camera angles. How does a reader or viewer come to know Charlie's isolation in each version of the story? How can Charlie's visual positioning in a scene accomplish what words might accomplish in the text?

Throughout the novel, Charlie struggles to make sense of his emotions. In both the book and the film, Charlie references past difficulties, particularly when his best friend Michael committed suicide in 8th grade. We also know that part of his trouble stems from his relationship with his Aunt Helen. Still, as his friendships with Sam and Patrick develop, he seems to be able to cope with these flashbacks, even to the point that in both the book and the film they stop for a period of time. After an LSD trip and a sexual experience with Sam, they return. In the novel, Chbosky captures Charlie's failing mental state through staccato prose, letters that lack coherence and increasingly obscure references to strange experiences with Aunt Helen. But how can this be conveyed in the movie? Chbosky doesn't tell us Charlie is losing control. Instead, he shows us. What was staccato prose in the novel becomes cameras zooming in and out on Charlie. In moments where Charlie's mind begins to break down, images of his past move quickly in and out of the scene. For example, near the end of the movie, after Charlie says good-bye to Sam, the camera zooms in on his face. As he walks away from her house, he flashes back to their experience the night before. In his memory, Sam begins to rub Charlie's leg, but the camera zooms out and the hand changes. It's not Sam anymore; it's Aunt Helen. The scenes begin to alternate quickly between Charlie as a six-year-old with Aunt Helen and Charlie walking alone on Sam's street. As the scenes alternate, Chbosky visually represents Charlie's mental breakdown. First, we see not one but three Charlies. Then as he realizes Aunt Helen sexually abused him, layers of memories—his sister, his parents, and Sam—come flying into view. One after the other they become a visual representation of a Charlie's internal breakdown. In the film, his mind seems to literally race away from him.

And so we begin to consider the way meaning is made in a film. In the case of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the internal becomes external. Feelings and emotions expressed through words in a written text become images and sound in the film. Both formats demand an exploration of the way we construct meaning in a text. How do we read the text of the film? Since the author of the book and the film is the same, a pairing of the book and movie versions of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* offers a chance not only to look at the differences between these media, but also to consider how the same story might be told in two media and how both might help an audience come to know a character they will likely love. —AJ

***Nick and Norah's  
Infinite Playlist,***  
Rachel Cohn and  
David Levithan

"I know this is going to sound strange, but would you mind being my girlfriend for the next five minutes?"



Wallowing from self-pity after a recent breakup, Nick is a straight bassist for a mediocre queercore punk band. When he sees his ex-girlfriend with a new flame in a nondescript, grungy East Village club, he turns to the flannel-wearing plain Jane beside him and spontaneously asks her this bold question. This springs the story into an unexpected romance that unfolds through a single adventurous and tumultuous evening in the 2006 novel *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*. Award-winning young adult writers Rachel Cohn and David Levithan collaborate on this clever novel in which each chapter alternates between Nick and Norah's perspective, with Cohn and Levithan writing the voices of Norah and Nick, respectively. While their love for punk subculture serves as the linchpin for this fated courtship, Nick and Norah must battle

their own insecurities and seemingly inescapable emotional attachments to their exes in order to find each other at the end of the night.

The 2008 film adaptation of *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* is directed by Peter Sollett, written by Lorene Scafaria, and stars Michael Cera and Kat Dennings. Like the novel, love at first kiss sparks the story, and it is this aspect of the story—the characters' mutual chemistry in this chance romance—that the filmmakers preserve, and even glorify, most emphatically.

An in-depth conversation about the movie *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* with students can open up a critical examination of the filmmakers' choices and how these choices might attract or maintain the interest of an audience. Because a film adaptation is a work of interpretation, teachers can challenge students to question the filmmakers' intentions and the consequences of their choices. Beyond identifying similarities and differences between the novel and movie, students can think about the reasons for these subtle or blatant differences and the effect of these differences on the audience. Oftentimes, discussions will wander into the topic of audience: Who is the movie's intended audience? What message or ideology in the movie might conform to or defy the audience's attitudes and expectations? Critical questions about filmmakers' choices and the effect of those choices on the audience prevent students from being passive viewers who take movies at face value. These types of questions can be applied to any text, written or visual.

Even a cursory look at the differences between this novel and movie raises pertinent “why” questions about the filmmakers' “moves.” Nick and Norah's budding romance takes center stage in the movie, and the filmmakers scrub the story clean of the many quirky and unique contextual attributes from the novel. The gritty punk subculture in the novel, with its plethora of references to obscure bands and recitations of song lyrics, is replaced by



melodic alternative rock. The actors look like they have walked off the set of *Mean Girls* or, for us older television viewers, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, rather than from a Green Day or Ramones concert. Nick's fun-loving and rowdy gay band members are fashioned into wholesome and asexual side-

kicks. Any topics in the novel that might be potentially controversial or offensive, like homosexuality, Judaism, and classism, are sanitized for the viewing audience. Even Nick and Norah are less complex and have less messy lives in the movie. Nick is less insecure, while Nora is less sassy. These book-to-movie differences are a starting point for students to begin delving into the effect of these differences on the audience's viewing experience.

In spite of their decision to move toward a more conventional type of love story, the filmmakers craft a whimsical tale that stands on its own. Think of *Juno*, another sort-of-snarky, sort-of-rebellious, and very endearing movie in which Cera stars as another blubbing, hesitant, awkward heartthrob. The movie *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* is an entity all of itself that both follows and diverges from the formulaic journey of Hollywood romantic comedies. A thoughtful, meaningful discussion about the film might involve the exploration of archetypal characters in romantic works, the stages of traditional story arcs, the choices of casting and musical selection, the tone of the setting (in the movie, New York City is portrayed as an insomniac's playground for raging partygoers), and ideologies and messages that reflect or refute social norms.

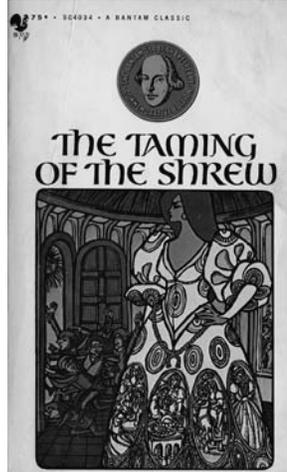
These are just a few ways to enhance critical viewing in a classroom. By taking students beyond a simple comparison of similarities and differences in the two texts, students may gain an unexpected

appreciation for the authors' and filmmakers' perspectives, just as Nick and Norah found love in an unexpected playlist.

—JL

### ***10 Things I Hate About You***

*For I am he am born to  
tame you, Kate,  
And bring you from a wild  
Kate to a Kate  
Conformable as other  
household Kates.*  
(From William  
Shakespeare's *The Taming  
of the Shrew*, II.i.268-  
270)



Sometimes books and the movies they inspire are so loosely connected that it is equally productive to consider them separately or together. Perhaps it's due to the almost 400 years between the Shakespearean play and the modern movie, or perhaps the movie is simply a deliberately different update, but this is the case with *The Taming of the Shrew* and *10 Things I Hate About You*. William Shakespeare's romantic comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* was published in 1623. True to its title, the play tells the story of Petruchio's opportunistic courtship of Katherine; the fact that she is by choice shrewish and single greatly complicates things to the extent that Petruchio must tame his intended bride. Nonetheless, Petruchio states his intentions clearly: *I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; / If wealthily, then happily in Padua.* (I.ii.72-73) There are actually two parallel courtships because there are two sisters, and because the shrew is the elder, she must marry first. Conundrum. Enter the younger sister Bianca, her dedicated suitor Lucentio, and the willing Petruchio with an intricate plot in which everyone will get what he or she wants. Through witty and waspish verbal exchanges and convoluted plot twists, the play traces the taming of Katherine to the climactic

scene in which she proves her allegiance to her husband definitively and publicly: *Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee, / And for thy maintenance commits his body / . . . And craves no other tribute at thy hands / But love, fair looks, and true obedience, / Too little payment for so great a debt.* (V.ii.140-142, 146-148)

The play is essentially a comedy (meaning it ends happily) and its light-humored approach allows Shakespeare to address with a deceptive subtlety serious social questions about marriage, power, and the roles of women and men. By the play's end, audiences are entertained, edified, and no doubt endlessly debating the issues. Drama at its finest.

Fast-forward 376 years . . . to March 31, 1999, and the movie *10 Things I Hate About You*, a romantic comedy set in a large suburban American high school. Gil Junger directed, Andrew Lazar produced, and Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith wrote the screenplay of this modern-day adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Joined by a then relatively new and untried cast of teenage actors that included Julia Stiles, Heath Ledger, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, the production transports a Shakespearean comedy from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to a 1990's high school setting. Most of the movie was filmed in Seattle, and many of the Padua High School scenes were filmed on an actual high school campus, Stadium High School in Tacoma. Although it was only moderately successful in the box office, audiences and critics alike found things to love about the movie, including its sweet sense of fun, its energetic and upbeat music soundtrack, its solid acting performances, and its clever writing. The movie version convincingly transports Shakespeare's major characters and basic storyline forward several centuries and, despite drastically different social and historical contexts, manages to communicate important thematic messages about relationships, identity, creativity, and the roles of women. No small feat! It is likely that many young people who have watched the movie did not necessarily make the connection with the play but still managed to walk away with something substantial

for their 99-minute investment. The modern adaptation—sometimes described as a retelling—is intentionally different enough to make its own impact with new, uninitiated viewers, but retains enough of the play’s flavor and spirit that it does not disappoint viewers who know and love the original Shakespearean play.

American stage and film director Vincente Minnelli once said of movies, “It’s the story that counts.” Shakespeare was well aware of this fact, and in the literary tradition of his day and age, he culled his stories from familiar traditional tales his audiences knew and then used the language and meter of poetry to make those stories uniquely his own. His dramatic interpretations of other people’s stories often included modernization and adaptation for audience appeal; as a playwright, he recognized that the audience is integral to a stage production, and his audiences included all levels of society. He worked to bring people together through and around story in dramatic form, using characterization to bring stories to life on stage in order to provide mirrors of, and windows on, contemporary society.

### 10 things I hate about you



Employing a similar respect of story tempered by attention to a modern audience, *10 Things I Hate About You* retains the basic premise of Shakespeare’s play, with two sisters, the younger compliant and the older difficult—*shrewish*; a young man who desires the younger sister; a

rebellious bad boy who is paid to woo the difficult sister; and a cadre of minor characters, both young and old, who serve to complicate and move the story forward to its eventual happy conclusion. Some of the names have changed (Petruccio of Verona, for example, is updated to Patrick Verona; Katherine is Kat Stratford), but essentially the

modified cast of characters moves through a duplicate of the play’s plot twists and turns.

But in a retelling, how much *does* the story matter? Talking with students about the respective stories – what’s included in the movie, what’s left out, what’s modified or brand new – takes on an added dimension in this case in light of the knowledge that Shakespeare, like other authors of his day, often borrowed familiar storylines from other authors and sources, making changes and modifications to suit his intended audiences and his unique writing style. *10 Things I Hate About You* is sometimes described as a retelling of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Retelling the story allows the author much more leeway than a modern interpretive performance or a modern translation of the play would. Exploring the nuances of this retelling reveals the multitude of ways the screenplay authors carefully considered their intended audience and then worked to make the play’s characters and plot accessible, interesting, and relevant. On the other hand, also worth considering is the potential for the transported plot to constrain the flow of the movie’s storyline, trapping the modern characters and actors in a story that might not work so well in a contemporary setting.

It’s always interesting to look at how a movie makes it to the box office, and to consider the rationale behind the choices producers and directors make along the way. As the director, Gil Junger made a conscious choice to cast relatively unknown young actors in *10 Things I Hate About You*’s most important roles. Although Heath Ledger (Patrick Verona) and Julia Stiles (Kat Stratford) went on to become accomplished actors, this movie was their breakout opportunity. Their relative obscurity made it possible for the audience to focus less on the *actors* and more on the *acting*. This kind of directorial decision levels the playing ground for the actors involved in the movie while eliminating distractions for viewers: with no superstars, we are able to perceive that each character is integral to the storyline, and we can watch the

relationships grow and intensify. As a result of the casting, the characters – major and minor, collective and individual – represent recognizable types from American high school life. There are no truly detestable characters; even the “shrew” is a young woman with a backbone and sense of self we have to admire (and perhaps even envy), and Joey, the antagonist, while arrogant and annoying, seems merely self-involved rather than evil or malicious.

The point of a modern retelling of a Shakespearean play is to make it more accessible, and sadly that often means losing the bard’s poetic language. But allowing teenagers to speak colloquially and authentically does not have to dumb down the dialogue— the teenagers in *10 Things I Hate About You* are smart, sophisticated, and have impressive vocabularies. Kat’s shrewish barbs may be caustic, but they are always intelligently phrased. Using a linguistic sleight of hand, the writers manage to sneak in some actual lines from Shakespeare’s plays for a subtle and understated infusion of Shakespearean language. These unexpected gems, interspersed throughout the movie, are well worth waiting for and seem to be the writers’ shout-outs to Shakespeare.

The movie’s cinematography juxtaposes scenes that contrast the macro and micro levels of high school life, providing a picture of the collective and individual aspects of the major characters’ lives. Viewers in a theater (or a classroom) experience movies in similar micro/macro ways: as audience members, they are part of a larger collective experience even as they individually process what they are seeing and work to interpret and make sense of it in their own minds. In the way of movies, the busy, pompous, populated scenes give way to more quietly intimate scenes in which a few characters interact with each other on a personal level, revealing their thoughts and feelings and allowing us to know them as people. These contrasting views are accomplished through camera angles; the camera provides different windows and ways of seeing the people and exposing their stories. We can zoom in

and see the smallest changes of facial expression and the exchange of a tender moment between two characters, and then zoom out to see the vastness of the worlds they inhabit and must navigate. These varying perspectives build suspense, drive the story, and keep viewers engaged and guessing. They also complicate the people and personalities by gradually revealing more layers to characters.

What finally and definitively takes a movie or a book beyond mere entertainment to something lasting and significant are the impressions we take away from the “reading” experience. One of the most endearing, enduring aspects of watching *10 Things I Hate About You* is the myriad of ways to talk about it afterwards. This romantic comedy gets viewers thinking about things that matter – love, family, relationships, identity, gender roles, community, education, language, and values. Shakespeare, the master psychologist, would approve. After all, “The play’s the thing” to encourage virtue and promote citizenship. In today’s technological and visually oriented world, perhaps the movie’s the thing. —JK

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