

Distinctive features of the 1995 BBC screen version of Jane Austen's novel «Pride and Prejudice»

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Jane Austen's novels received moderate renown when they were published, but in the XX century they became enormously famous and continue to be read and to inspire adaptations in the XXI century as well. If not Jane Austen's best novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is certainly her most popular one. It has engendered 19 screen adaptations, but the favourite and the most famous one is, perhaps, the BBC version that came out in 1995 written by Andrew Davies and starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth.

The aim of my research was to find the differences between the book and the film (alteration of language by the example of some key episodes, changes in the plot line and in the behaviour of the characters), to analyse them and to justify them if possible.

The BBC put *Pride and Prejudice* on screen 5 times: in 1952, 1958, 1967, 1980, and in 1995, the latter being the most successful adaptation. Yet, the 1980 version written by Fay Weldon was also very popular.

Pride and Prejudice was a cultural phenomenon, inspiring many newspaper articles, making the novel a commuter favourite, and emptying the streets of England [www.screenonline.org.uk].

The process of adapting a book for television is not as straight-forward as it might seem. An adaptation can lovingly copy a book scene only to find that the final product is too literary and undramatic. The scriptwriter Andrew Davies is a full advocate of the 'show, don't tell' approach: the camera can tell you a great deal that a narrator would, but in a different and quicker way. The goal therefore was to remain true to the tone and spirit of the novel but to exploit the possibilities of visual storytelling to make it as vivid and lively a drama as possible [Birtwistle: 2].

While adapting novels for screen, adaptors have to cut some characters, subplots and scenes, but in the mini-series this tendency is minimised due to its length and skill of the scriptwriter. Yet, director Simon Langton uses the additional time also to give a sense of everyday life during Regency times.

Although Jane Austen's book was told very much from Lizzy's point of view, Andrew Davies decided to make his version Darcy's story as well. He did this partly by inserting new scenes that showed Darcy outside the stiff social events: we see Darcy riding, fencing, and even swimming, which allows us to see more of the real human being.

Jane Austen often features letters to convey background information in her novels. Adaptors have found a variety of solutions for this: rewriting letters as dialogue, dramatising a letter's events as the letter is read aloud, flashbacks, voiceover commentaries, etc.

The most important letter in the novel is the explanatory one written by Mr Darcy to Elizabeth after she rejects his first proposal. In dramatising it, Andrew Davies employed a complex sequence of flashbacks and invented scenes. At first, they simply serve to help us visualise events Darcy describes in his past. Then there are flashbacks to events both Darcy and Lizzy witnessed (such as the Netherfield ball), but this time Lizzy is forced to see them from Darcy's perspective. Yet, there are moments when she thinks about events to which Darcy alludes, but which she hasn't witnessed herself, and imagines the worst, e.g. when Darcy points out to Bingley certain evils of his choice of Jane.

In terms of language the key challenge for adapters is conveying Austen's satirical notes. This can be difficult because some of the satire and humour is in the narration. In this case, scriptwriters should either create new dialogue that has the playful mood of the original, or change elements of the narration into dialogue. Fortunately, Austen's texts abound in witty dialogue, which adaptors are able to take directly from the page. Though much of this dialogue is perfectly clear to the modern ear, Andrew Davies modernises it by adding

colloquialisms and other minor interpolations, e.g. when Lizzy rejects Darcy's first proposal, his expressive phrase «I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am rejected» [Austen: 163] is changed to «I might wonder why, with so little effort at civility, I am rejected».

In general all the changes cause simplification of the original. Some of the main tendencies are the use of contracted forms, while in the novel the author writes full forms, and making sentences shorter, which both are traits of oral speech.

Some omissions and changes seem not to alter the meaning of the original, while some make the meaning rather obscure. Thus, at the Assembly ball when Bingley tries to make Darcy dance, Austen's response of the latter is «I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner» [Austen: 12]. In the film the second phrase is missed out, making the reason why Darcy does not want to dance rather unclear.

The research has shown that although Andrew Davies made comparatively few changes to the text of the novel (when compared to some other versions), some significant substitutions have taken place. He has shortened some phrases; he has also substituted some formal words by their more colloquial counterparts and changed some grammar forms.

The adaptation is closely connected with its time and country. Since it was produced in the United Kingdom by the BBC, the original was treated very carefully, and the époque of the book was reproduced very accurately. Besides, the filmmakers succeeded in capturing the atmosphere of the novel.

On the whole, the adaptors succeeded in transforming the material into the language of their own medium.

Literature

Austen J. Pride and Prejudice. Ware, 2007.

BFI Screenonline: www.screenonline.org.uk

Birtwistle S., Conklin S. The Making of Pride and Prejudice. London, 1995.