

## Adaptation

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### Abstract

*“Adaptation” originally began as a scientific term, but from 1860 to today it most often refers to an altered version of a text, film, or other literary source. When this term was first analyzed, humanities scholars often measured adaptations against their source texts, frequently privileging “original” texts. However, this method began to shift when scholars like Brian McFarlane, Deborah Cartmell, and Imelda Whelehan outlined the negative consequences of source text bias. More recently, Linda Hutcheon argued that adaptation is worthy of study in its own right (2006). Furthermore, as Brian A. Rose has noted, serial adaptations respond to cultural and societal changes, helping us trace the relationship between the earliest definitions of adaptation and more contemporary understandings of adaptation. For example, Little Red Riding Hood shows how adaptations change through time, each focusing on a social concern prevalent at the time in which it was produced. Lastly, as John Stephens and Robyn McCallum argue, while “retellings of traditional stories may seem intellectually and culturally oppressive, there are always possibilities for resistance, contestation, and change” (p. 8)—thus confirming the importance of attending to, carefully considering, and drawing theoretical conclusions about altered or emended versions of familiar texts.*

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The earliest definition of “adaptation” appears in 1597 in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011) as “the action of applying one thing to another or of bringing two things together so as to effect a change in the nature of the objects”. By 1610, adaptation was commonly defined as “the action or process of adapting one thing to fit with another, or suit specified conditions, esp. a new or changed environment” (OED). While the first definition refers to the word’s history as a scientific term, the second reflects the beginning of its usage in reference to the humanities. It wasn’t until 1860 that “adaptation” was used as we think of it today: “an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now *esp.*) one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source” (OED). These definitions are not mutually exclusive. Adapters, whether filmmakers, theatre directors, or authors, still alter a work for “a particular end or purpose,” usually to “suit specified conditions, esp. a new or changed environment” (OED).

In 1957, George Bluestone wrote an influential analysis of screenwriters’ adaptation processes in *Novels into Film*. Since then, scholars have measured adaptations against their source texts, often privileging original texts or regarding adaptations as derivative. However, this attitude began to shift as the field emerged. In 1996, Brian McFarlane argued that loyalty to the source text takes away from other elements of the film’s intertextuality. A film is never just based on one source text; other circumstances such as popular culture and “social climate” affect the making of a film (McFarlane, 1996). Similarly, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan note that scholars in literary studies usually prefer the original text and that the original text bias skews analyses of adaptations. They argue that using the original text to evaluate adaptations in another form of media, “homogenizes the identities and desires of both film and fiction consumers who experience narrative pleasures differently” (Cartmell & Whelehan, 1999, p. 17-18). Like McFarlane, Cartmell and Whelehan fear that source-text fidelity discourages examination of an adaptation’s cultural and artistic differences. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon (2006) argues that adaptation is worthy of study in its own right, particularly in its offering of “repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (p. 4). Focusing on adaptation through the modes of telling and showing as well as interacting, Hutcheon (2006) suggests that, “there are significant differences between being told a story and being shown a story, and especially between both of these and the physical act of participating in a story’s world” (p. xv). Studying adaptation through these modes may be productive not only for adaptation studies in general, but also for children’s literature and culture. The Disney Studio, for instance, has honed its approach to adaptation, successfully appealing to children and families through all three modes: reading (literary texts), viewing (films and performances), and interacting (videogames and theme parks) (Hutcheon, 2006). More recently, Kamilla Elliot (2014) studies how adaptations may turn into a competition for power: power over the disciplinary definition of adaptation or power over a theoretical idea concerning adaptation. Elliot (2014) explains that, “while in the twentieth century literature and film scholars used adaptations to vie for *disciplinary* territory and power, in the twenty-first, they have more often used adaptations to compete for *theoretical* dominion and authority” (p. 576).

A work such as *Peter Pan* shows how source text bias is arbitrary and ignores more effective characteristics of adaptation. It has a complicated textual history, one that challenges the idea of a single source’s relationship with its adaptation. Its first incarnation was for an adult book, *The Little White Bird* (1902). *Peter Pan* became a play in 1904. In 1906, in the wake of the older *Peter Pan*’s theatrical success, *Peter Pan* was published as *Peter in Kensington Gardens*, and later, *Peter and Wendy* (Hollingdale, 2008). Removing Peter’s story from the context of *The*

*Little White Bird* diminished some of the more adult themes and concerns of the work. Furthermore, subsequent adaptations, especially Disney's 1953 animated film and P.J. Hogan's 2003 live-action film adaptation, among many other reworkings of the tale, continue to demonstrate problematic treatments of race, gender, and sexuality.

Brian A. Rose addresses serial adaptations and their relationship to cultural and societal changes, showing the relationship between the earliest definition's focus on, "adapting one thing to fit with another...esp. a new or changed environment," and more contemporary understandings of adaptation as "altered or amended version[s] of a text...one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source" (OED). Rose (1996) discusses how adaptations change through time, each focusing on a social concern prevalent at the time in which it was produced. When addressing oral versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," French ethnologist, Yvonne Verdier focused on aspects of puberty, motherhood, and menopause. When Charles Perrault adapted this oral story in 1697, he masculinized it, making it about socialization and warning French bourgeoisie girls to beware of *wolves'* sexual urges. Tex Avery's (1943) animated cartoon "Red Hot Riding Hood" takes place in the city rather than the woods, and both Red and Grandma are sexualized and objectified through their appearances, jobs, and hobbies. However, they are not as naïve or defenseless as the heroine of Perrault's tale. Red is cunning; she rejects the wolf and eludes his grasp. When the wolf encounters Grandma, she sexually objectifies him (aggressively). After his narrow escape from Grandma, the wolf vows to never look at a "babe" again. Catching himself ogling Red, he shoots himself. (This was a Production Code-induced revision of Avery's original ending for the cartoon, in which the wolf and Grandma brought their half-wolf, half-human children to watch Red's cabaret act.) In 1982, following in the tradition of James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf" (1939), Roald Dahl published his version, "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf." Here, Red immediately recognizes that the wolf is not her grandmother and when the wolf tries to eat her, "She whips a pistol from her knickers," demonstrating her preparedness, then "aims it at the creature's head / And bang bang bang, she shoots him dead," demonstrating her capability (Dahl, 1995, p. 40). Like Avery's cartoon heroine, Dahl's Red does not need to rely on authoritative male figures or Prince Charmings. As each generation highlights the cultural values and concerns relevant to their time, their re-interpretations support Rose's argument and outline tensions between "the new or changed environment" and the medium of the adaptation (OED).

John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (1998) suggest that "[w]hen compared with general literature, the literature produced for children contains a much larger proportion of retold stories. In part this is because some domains of retellings, especially folk and fairy tales, have long been considered more appropriate to child culture than to adult culture" (p. 3). Many of these retellings retain "Western metaethics," or ideologies from the original texts which can be "androcentric, ethnocentric, and class-centric" (Stephens & McCallum, 1998, p. 7, 9). Stephens and McCallum (1998) ultimately argue that while "retellings of traditional stories may seem intellectually and culturally oppressive, there are always possibilities for resistance, contestation, and change" (p. 8), thus confirming the importance of attending to, carefully considering, and drawing theoretical conclusions about altered or emended versions of familiar texts.

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