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For this book and film pairing, I chose to review Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Many of his books have become popular films for children due to their unique and imaginative storylines. As one of my favorite children's authors growing up, I've been surprised and intrigued by what I've learned about Dahl's books in this course and other courses. After comparing the versions of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* in a course last fall and examining *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in this class, I wanted to further my study of Dahl's books with one of my favorites. The film version of *Matilda* has been one of my favorite movies for a long time. However, it has been many years since I've read the book. Although my choice was first based on interest, I found some aspects of the two versions that would be applicable to teaching and made me consider what I'd like my students to take away from the two interpretations of *Matilda*. These aspects helped me consider the ways in which teachers become independent artists as they interpret books and film and how they intentionally share certain perspectives with their students.

As I watched this film and reflected back on the others we've watching in this course, I considered the ways in which the filmmakers were independent artists. Before this course, I seemed to have the opinion that the author was the true creator of the text. He or she was the one who invented the story; the filmmaker was just the one who brought it to life in the way he imagined it. While I still think credit should be given to the author, I now view the filmmaker as an artist too and see his independence from the author. When considering *Matilda*, for instance, the

filmmaker chose to use a narrator's voice to capture Dahl's tale but also to divert from the book version. While some may see this as infidelity to the text, I found the filmmaker expanding on Dahl's version. The narrator is used to point the audience toward major themes of the film, like the uniqueness of each person and the importance of family. The narrator is also used to move the story along and help the audience focus in on key plot points within the story. In this way, the film's interpretation moves away from the book and becomes its own original text.

In addition, the filmmakers act as artists in the way they introduce the characters and setting of the story. Thinking back to Michael Wohl's article "The Language of Film," the filmmakers reveal much about of main characters through the shots they use. In *Matilda*, we see Matilda's character grow up and age as the narrator explains her notable abilities as a child, like learning to take care of herself and learning to read. The filmmakers use close up shots to focus in certain objects, like the shoes she is putting on or the wagon of books she is pulling to reinforce the narrator's words. In addition, we also learn about Matilda's relationships with the other characters in the film. We learn of Miss Honey's gentle and kind nature is medium length shots that show her carefully putting flowers in a vase or intently listening to Matilda's conversations. Often times, Miss Honey and Matilda are in close proximity to one another, revealing their close bond to the audience. In contrast, the camera often angles up on shots of Miss Trunchbull to show her strength and power over the students at the school. We often see shots of her in motion, often accompanied by music that creates a dark, intense mood. She is

shown at a distance from Matilda, which tells the conflicting nature of their relationship.

The filmmakers also use their independence to bring the setting of the story to life. Using extra long shots, we first glimpse Crunchem Hall, where Matilda goes to school. Shots focus in on students playing and running, then back to Matilda as she takes in the scene of her first day. Other long shots reveal other key places in the film, like the Wormwood's house, Miss Honey's cottage, or Miss Trunchbull's house. While it seems that the filmmakers of *Matilda* were faithful in depicting the characters and places as Dahl described them in his novel, they are able to use their imagination to bring the story to life for viewers. As Wohl explains it, the choices filmmakers decide on when selecting certain shots to use help answer important questions for viewers and reveal information about the storyline. While the author uses words and description to explain this to readers, the filmmakers chose how to visually represent it to the audience.

Prior to this course, I found myself often frustrated by book-to-film interpretations. As a loyal and devoted reader, I would get upset when filmmakers chose to divert from the author's storyline in the book. This was because I knew there would be audience members who had never read the book, but had only seen the film version. To me, I somehow felt as though they'd be misinformed about the true version of the story. While I still feel this way when it comes to certain retellings, I now have a different view of the filmmaker's interpretation as well as a new appreciation for their craft. I also feel that films become their own text, one apart from the book they are taken from. This became apparent to me as we

worked with *The Wizard of Oz* and later *The Little Mermaid*, as I began to see how vastly different the book and film versions were. I realized that because of the filmmaker's choices to restructure the story, the audience was now given a new story. Where I once felt as though this was a filmmaker's infidelity to the book, I now see that it is a way they are showing their own perspectives as an independent artist.

I also began to realize how the choices of filmmakers always have a purpose. Wohl's article, along with Elizabeth Thoman's, have helped me view a film now with close care and observation, helping me tune in to what the filmmakers are choosing to show me and what things I am hearing as I view a film. When I think back to our work with *Charlotte's Web* and *Where the Wild Things Are*, I see that sometimes these choices are made to reflect the modern views and lifestyles of the time period. Changes in characters and their interactions with others may become more relatable to their audience. In addition, I used to feel that in effort to make films longer and fit the reasonable film time length, filmmakers would add in plotlines and flesh out the authors details, again diverting too far from the book's version. Thinking back to *Where the Wild Things Are* and even this week with *Matilda*, these intentional choices to add in material are others ways in which the filmmakers develop the film into its own text. They add new dimensions to the story, making it its own art form.

Other choices may reflect the filmmaker's desire to maintain the film's popularity long after the film leaves theaters. As we've seen with several of the films we've studied, audiences still love these films and continue to watch them, but also

have the ability to stay connect to their stories through merchandise, popular songs, and even theme parks. I see now that where an author's goal is to please the imagination of the reader, the filmmaker strives to capture the love of the audience.

In one entry of Laura's Journals, a question was posed that I've been challenged with over the last few weeks. We were asked if a film can ever improve upon a book, and again as a loyal lovers of books, my initially reaction was no because a book would always be superior to a text. After all, when I read a book I can visualize the author's words in my own imagination. I can see the setting of the story as he or she intended me to and react to the characters in my own way. I also loved that in my imagination, a story could look one way but be completely different for someone else. However in a film, my imagination has to compete with the filmmaker's and I usually don't win. It becomes the filmmaker's visualization and imagination that is displayed within the film, not my own. There is also the loss of uniqueness, as I see exactly what the viewer sitting next to me sees. Yet, stepping back and leaving my own bias behind, I was able to see how the intentional choices of filmmakers did in fact improve upon some stories. I even noticed this in my choice for the final project. In the opening chapters of *Matilda*, Dahl describes a scene in the library in which Matilda tells the librarian, Mrs. Phelps, that all children's books should provide humor. While there are bits and pieces of Dahl's version that contain humor, the filmmakers capitalize on humor and add in many funny scenes to a somewhat dark story. While I don't think I will now find that every film based off a novel is improved upon, I now find myself more open to

seeing ways that it could be and ways in which the filmmakers chose to make the story more meaningful to their audience.

As mentioned earlier, I initially chose to review the two versions of *Matilda* because of my love for Dahl's books and my love of the film. When examining both versions, I began to consider these texts and what I would want my students to take away from both if I were to use them in a classroom setting. A major focus for me seemed to be on how the film seemed to tone down the oppression Matilda faced at home and at school. Both versions begin with Matilda growing up with her father and mother who not only pay little attention to her, but also act and express that they wish they didn't have her as their daughter. Her father is especially cruel as he hurls insults at her, calling her stupid, a liar, and a cheat. At school Miss Trunchbull, who terrorizes students by throwing them out the windows or locking them in the Chokey and punishment, rules over Matilda. While the filmmakers seemed to bring these two bullies to life as Dahl described them in his book, the filmmakers seem to play up the humor surrounding these characters, making them seem less powerful and threatening.

If using this book and film, I would want my students to observe the ways in which the filmmakers add in humor when these two characters are in the scenes. For me personally, I observed how Mr. Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull were portrayed. Mr. Wormwood, as he is described in the book, is always dressed in brightly colored suits. I felt as though actually seeing him look this way made him less intimidating as he is yelling at Matilda. When reading, I focused more on his word, but in the film, I found myself distracted by his hilarious appearance. When

considering Miss Trunchbull, she seemed comical even in her moments of anger. When she is chasing Matilda and Miss Honey around her house, she seems more like an angry bull as she huffs and puff, stomping and knocking things over. She also seemed to lose her threatening nature as she dances around in terror as Matilda uses her powers to knock the glass of water containing a newt onto her.

I also considered their interactions with the other characters in the story and how this made them less intimidating than their book descriptions. For Mr. Wormwood, I saw that his often loving relationship with Mrs. Wormwood and Matilda's decision to protect him from the FBI, which are both diversions from the book, helped play up his softer side. For Miss Trunchbull, the scenes in which she is terrorizing children became much softer as well. When she throws Amanda over the fence, the audience doesn't have to worry about Amanda's safety as we see her picking up flowers as she coasts gently down and then waves her arms to signal she's okay. When Miss Trunchbull makes Bruce eat the chocolate cake in the book, Dahl explains that he never shows that he may be getting sick or slowing down. By contrast, he almost gives up in the film, but is able to triumphantly finish as the school rallies to show their support for him. While this part of the story may have been meant to show Miss Trunchbull's dominating nature, it comes off as a victory for the students instead.

After examining the two versions, I would want my students to consider how seeing these characters represented visually change their demeanor. The filmmakers only make slight adjustments and additions from Dahl's story, so I would want them to pay close attention to the shots the directors use; how do

certain shots help us see these bullies in a humorous way? What are they doing that makes them less intimidating? I would also want them to consider how the music and sounds play into effect. How does the upbeat music when Miss Trunchbull is dancing around with a newt on her make her seem like a joke to the students?

As we discussed these observations of the film version's interpretation of the book, I would want my students to consider the effect this has on the audience. What happens to these two characters in the film version? How are the characters they supposedly dominate, like Matilda and Miss Honey, different as a result? I would also want them to think about why the filmmakers may have done this. Did they want this to be a more family-friendly story that was more appealing to children and felt that Dahl's tale as it is told was too dark for children? Did they simply want to improve upon the book by making this a funnier story? Or did they want to play up themes, like facing your fears and believing in yourself? Finally, I would want them to consider what I've observed from this course: the film as an original text. How do the filmmakers create a new version of *Matilda* because of the way they depict Mr. Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull?

When thinking about George Bluestone's quotation about a filmmaker as an independent artist, I think this can also be translated to the role of a teacher. As teachers read books and examine films, they become artists as they interpret each representation for their students. In the classroom, they act as artists as they share their observations, their connections, and their understanding of each interpretation. The perspectives they choose to share may point out certain book or film aspects for students that may have gone unnoticed. Yet an author does not



directly state for readers what he or she wants them to gain from reading the text. A filmmaker may not explicitly state this either. In the same way, teachers should provide instruction of their interpretations of books and film in a way that gives room for students to consider their own ideas. A viewer of a painting may stand back from it and understand one thing while another may understand something else. In the same way, our interpretations should not be the only view forced upon students, but should serve as a model for their own interpretations.

By provoking our students with questions and modeling how one goes about interpreting books and film, we can allow our students to engage further with these texts and challenge them with the task of analyzing them. So the task of comparing books and film is made meaningful to our students, as independent artists our craft and instruction should allow our students to tune into what issues arises from the differences of these two texts. By becoming aware of these differences in the versions of books and films, our students can become more aware of the intentions of the author as well as of the filmmaker. In addition, artists like teachers should make observers aware of the different forms artwork can take. Thinking back to Bluestone's quotation as it is presented, teachers should help students see that despite the differences in the two versions, both book and film are shaped by their respective artists to be their own text, their original representation of the story, and their own work of art.