Tammi Dawn Simpson, Final Paper

1. *Journey through the course:*

    After taking a few moments to stop and reflect on the activities of the past six weeks, I am amazed and overwhelmed by all that I have encountered in this class. My thoughts were expanded so quickly that I am not even sure how I feel about some of the issues yet, but I know it has triggered a desire to know more and it has endowed me with insight that is useful not only for my personal understanding of literature and film and popular culture, but also for those I have been entrusted to educate—my children and my students. Looking back and reflecting on my walk (or rather, run) through the activities of these past six weeks, I can see how my perspective of a movie's "fidelity to the original" unfolded with each story or scholarship or review. Not only did I gain an understanding of whether fidelity was or was not possible, I also was able to see specific issues that make the fidelity of a film less desirable, especially among changed ideologies in a changed culture. One such issue is that the characters and themes of each book addressed in this class not only had an impact on the meaning of the story from within, but they also had an impact on the society and culture from without. Another issue, and the most obvious one for me, was that the process of translating books into movies is strongly influenced by personal experiences and ideologies, but it is also deeply influenced by cultural and societal ideologies. The examples of various book and movie pairs used in this class seem to indicate that the further the time distance between the book and movie, the more recognizable the display of differences and reinterpretations seem to be—i.e. *The Little Mermaid*—and the closer the making of the movie is to the publication of the book, the less obvious the differences seem to be—i.e. *Harry Potter*.

    The first module opened with an activity that directed my point of view to the overwhelming array of individual interpretations that were held regarding a single text; in this case the text was *Charlotte's Web*. Even if our lives depended on it, I am not sure that we could have arrived at a class consensus on either what the major themes were in E.B. White's classic, or their level of importance. This was a clear indicator for me as to how complicated making a film to represent the text would become. Basically, I began to see it as impossible. Engaging in a class discussion about the literary elements of *Charlotte's Web* undeniably proved that after reading a work of literature, we are ultimately left holding our own interpretations of it, and in the end, it shows that we all "read" books and films differently. Converting this concept to the film versions of written texts, it is easy to see how the film as well can only offer an interpretation rather than a true representation of the author's point of view, sometimes leaving the audience with what appears to be a separate text altogether.

    Likewise, the first module proved that learning how to "read" both the text and the film are crucial to understanding how we, as the "reader", are being influenced in the way we think

about the text and film, and in the way we view the text and film in the light of our own personal experiences and in the way we approach cultural issues. The most impacting part of this first module was developing an understanding of how angles and lenses affect what we see, or do not see in a particular shot and how music and sound effects are used to build tension as well as create mood and emotion and, finally, how all of this plays into how we interpret the original text. Movies develop their own interpretations and display those interpretations by using manipulative techniques such as camera angles, camera movements, shot sizes, sound effects, lighting methods, etc. These techniques make the audience see the plot, characters and theme ideas through the point of view of the filmmaker. This helped me to see what Elizabeth Thoman was emphasizing in her article *Skills and Strategies for Media Education*, that "All media messages are 'constructed'." Not only are they constructed out of an individual's personal ideas and out of a particular culture, but they are also eventually constructed into the personal ideas of others and into other cultures—sometimes even cultures from a whole different time period or generation. For example, when looking at character elements and themes, we must think critically not only about how they affect the story, but how they affect our beliefs about culture and stereotypes and ideologies today, as well as culture and stereotypes and ideologies of when they were written.

Based on the activities of the first module, I entered the second module with the belief that "fidelity to the original" was impossible. Once a filmmaker begins playing with the tools of media—i.e. camera, sound, lighting—it is inevitable that their own interpretations will be represented. The themes they deem most worthy will be highlighted and the way in which they want the character(s) to be portrayed will take precedence over the author's original intentions. An example of this was seen through E. B. White's character, Fern. Both movie versions reinterpreted Fern's faithfulness to Wilber and attached more devotion to her relationship with Wilber than White did in his original version. As I began to look at more and more examples of these changes happening to characters from other books—i.e. "the boy" from *The Polar Express* and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*—I began to analyze that there are more reasons for it than just the filmmaker's new point of view. Filmmakers must also take into account what the audience will prefer, and as profits show, happy endings are more desired than sad endings. In the case with Fern, a character that we easily become endeared to at the beginning of the plot, it is hard for us to handle that she could be so heartless or that she could become unfaithful to Wilber, whose life she so passionately saved. Both movie versions, but especially the 2006 version, gave us more of what we wanted to see in Fern's personality; perhaps to eliminate our ill feelings towards Fern, or perhaps just to give audiences what they wanted in order to keep them coming back over and over again.

Analyzing children's picture books that have been made into movies, as we did in the second module, proved for me that not only would it be impossible to make an exact representation of a movie as the first module indicated, but it would also be undesirable. The

plot of a children's book is usually too simple for this to be done. The activities of this week and learning about computer generated imagery (CGI) proved to be a great way to pinpoint some of the criteria filmmakers have when choosing a book about which to create a movie. Not only must it have the potential to generate a significant profit, but it also must allot for a wide range of creativity in the use of special effects and CGI. While both of these turn out to be important criteria for making a film, it still does not rule out that the book of choice must have a significant amount of literary merit as well as a well-known name in order to attract the attention of those making the film and then to attract the attention of those wishing to view the film. *Jumanji* and *Polar Express* certainly exhibited all of these qualities. The ideas from these two picture books were ultimately used to create two very different stories from their original versions; they are filled with the filmmaker's expanded ideas and interpretations.

Module two also provided insight into the idea that "fidelity to the original" is generally replaced by a filmmaker's "fidelity to the movie genre" or "fidelity to making profits". Reading and watching *The Wizard of Oz* forced me to look at what was lost and gained when the movie version fares better than the book and its impact on popular culture. What is lost is the heart of the original story, but what is gained is popularity for the title that could provide incentive to revisit the original version that may have otherwise been forgotten.

"Fidelity to the original" is also challenged by stereotypes. These stereotypes arise out of the culture from when the book was written and are reinterpreted to fit into the culture for which the movie is produced. At this point of the course and then again later when we looked at *Harry Potter*, I began to understand how the characters and themes do not just affect the plot of the story they also affect the culture and ideologies outside of the story. This entire module brought clarity to the concept that "fidelity to the original", when addressing a book and a film that were created to appeal to different age groups or that were created years apart, is impossible and undesirable. And after reading the original version of *The Little Mermaid*, I learned that, at times, it could also be inappropriate. Although films are different from the original text, they are entertaining and endearing in their own way, and although books may be lost under the fame of the movie and all the merchandise that supports it, they are critical to understanding the heart and the depths of the story; it would be disappointing if we lost one in spite of the other.

The third module was the most impacting of all. There is certainly no better example for looking at "books and films as popular culture" than diving straight into the *Harry Potter* phenomenon. While there is a sense of amazement when thinking about all the marketing and entertainment that surrounds the series, it is evident that the book has remained part of the phenomenon. For as easy as it is to find marketing devices that have been directly impacted by the movie, it is also just as easy to find discussions, arguments, controversies, reviews and scholarly articles centered on the impact of the text itself—a text which Rowling made rather

complex in order that it would continue to draw the readers' attentions for a long time to come.

One of the interesting lessons I learned about a movie's "fidelity to the original" was found in this module and, more specifically, it was initiated when I wrote my paper dealing with the differences between Rowling's book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and the 2001 movie version. The differences were more imaginative differences rather than thematic differences; this I contributed to Rowling's ability to incorporate scenes with tremendous special effect opportunities and the movie genres freedom to add their touch with CGI. After looking at several examples of books and movies with extreme thematic differences, I was curious about why the movie version of *Harry Potter* did not seem to fall in the same category. This is when I began thinking about the connection between a fans' loyalty to the book and the filmmaker's loyalty to please the fans. Clearly, there is a tremendous amount of loyalty from *Harry Potter* fans to Rowling's original versions; this loyalty seems to largely be associated to the fact that the book is barely a decade old and the movie was released only four years after the book's publication. Little had occurred as far as cultural changes and changes in the stereotypical "norms" of society, thus little has changed in the way fans feel about the issues brought up in the *Harry Potter* book. My conclusion has become that the greatest alteration between a book and its movie version is initiated by the amount of time that has lapsed between them. Therefore, the closer the making of the movie is to the publication of the book, the less obvious the differences seem to be.

Keeping my focus on fidelity and all the issues that surround fidelity is important in my understanding of how to think critically about interpretations and reinterpretations and how those interpretations and reinterpretations are built out of individual ideologies, personal experiences, stereotypical norms, racial diversities and cultural differences. All of these issues go through changes over time and "time" as well as individual ideologies are significant factors in changing our view of a particular book and in changing the way filmmakers interpret the book into a film.

2. *Translating the activities into my classroom:*

Every activity accomplished in Children's Literature and Film can be recreated at an age appropriate level and used to teach students to think critically about books and movies, and issues that arise from both. Teachers have a tremendous responsibility to train children to be thinkers, responding to what is before them rather than just embracing it as truth. So often, teachers present literature as a separation from everything that surrounds it—the author's personal experiences, culture in the time the story was published and when it is read, stereotypes, ideologies, interpretations, critiques, etc.—and we miss the opportunity to really challenge students to reflect and make decisions and choices concerning their own ideals. Taub and Servaty-Seib's article really drove this point home for me. They addressed several complaints against the appropriateness of *Harry Potter* as a children's book; some were about religious issues, and others were about emotional issues. The theme of this article kept coming back to adults, mainly parents and teachers, being a source of enlightenment and direction as children come across such challenging issues. In this case, teachers should equip students with how to be discerning and wise, rather than give them all the answers. If we can accomplish this large task, they will learn to ask questions and weigh consequences rather than just be embracing of everything that comes their way.

Teaching students to be critical thinkers is a process, much like the process of teaching individuals to be media literate. The first step involves "looking". Rather than just absorbing what is placed before their eyes, or what is within the sound of their ears, students need to be trained to really "look" at what is before them. I was impressed with Thoman's strategies for how to help students become aware of the influences of any form of media that has the ability to affect them. Thoman directs us to ask a series of questions that help us begin to understand the "media message" that is before us. These questions are pertinent when looking at books and movies as we have done this past six weeks and they are valuable questions to implement into classroom curriculum in order to give students direction on some of the key factors that influence media.

A great starting point for students is to help them understand "who" is behind creating the book or movie. Any kind of glimpse into the author's motives can help give insight into why certain aspects of a book or movie are implemented. For example, reading about Hans Christian Anderson's life and, specifically, his difficulties with love and relationships gave me tremendous clarity about why the Little Mermaid did not ultimately win the heart of the prince whom she loved; this was a tragic message to send children, but, nonetheless, it becomes understandable when we familiarize ourselves with the authors and their lives and ideals which most often get hidden behind the pages of the book. Movies can also be looked at beginning with the "who" question and by focusing on the techniques of the individual in charge of producing it. Having insight into Tim Burton's methods of filmmaking and Johnny Depp's methods of acting can give

a good indicator as to some of the issues that are brought up during the interpretation of the story. This is a critical start to our acceptance or rejection of the original or the interpretation. Teaching students to begin with this step will open the door for them to understand that media messages are not the starting point, but that they are "constructed" out of something else— personal experiences, global issues, ideologies, etc.—and that the "something else" can set the tone of the entire message.

Following Thoman's ideas for questioning the media message, the next critical area for a student to address is "what techniques are being used" in order to influence the audience through the book or movie; this does not always involve what the books or movies influence us to see, it sometimes involves what the books or movies have omitted from our view. For books, the influence is done with choices of setting, characters, and themes and even more vividly through their style of writing. The language of Charlotte's Web makes us sympathetic towards Wilber, inspired by Charlotte, and disappointed in Fern. For movies, the techniques are camera angles, lighting, sound and other special effects. *The Polar Express* used these techniques to an extreme and made the audience feel as though they were actually part of the ride to the North Pole. If students can gain insight into how their ideas and emotions can be influenced by techniques, they will be better equipped to avoid manipulation.

The best way to gain insight in this area is to do what we did for this class by learning the film language and applying it to examples. Students would love to look at media examples in the classroom such as commercials, advertisements, television shows, web sites, and movies and this would be a great opportunity to teach students to recognize the "embedded values and points of view" found in media. The activities from our class provided great examples of how to approach these issues in the classroom, especially looking at movie reviews and seeing what other's opinions are concerning the use of such techniques.

Dissecting a book or movie for how it represents "lifestyles, values and points of view" and understanding that not everyone will see the messages the same or have the same value system when they approach a text or movie is another aspect of Thoman's advice. She states that "the choice of a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become 'embedded' . . . ."This was a critical part of this class and it should be a critical part of teaching literature to students, especially under the conviction that what one reads can so easily become what one believes. I would want my students to have the same eye opening experiences as I did when I read *Harry Potter* and all the scholarship articles and arguments that surrounded it. Since we tend to think about those issues which are "normal" to us, it is difficult at times to pinpoint areas of abnormality that others may feel strongly about unless we take time to listen to other points of view. Doing this in the classroom would not only allow for a stretching of perspectives, but it would also allow

students who may not feel as though they have a voice outside of the "norm" an opportunity to express their thoughts and concerns.

Thoman's questions can help us understand how to interpret books and movies; they can give us direction about how to "look" past what we see or do not see and be critical about the message and how it influences the way we think. Students so often miss the richness of literature because it is presented as just a single piece of work, rather than a piece of work with an assortment of layers to uncover. Once students discover that they must either have power over texts and the media or texts and the media will have power over them, they may find new inspiration to keep themselves aware and alert of what is constantly before them. The greatest thing we can teach our students is to become critical thinkers. Since it would be inappropriate and impossible for us to tell them what to think concerning all issues, it is vital that we train them on how to come to their own conclusions by being thoughtful and reflective on their own.

Children are bombarded with much of the same issues that adults are faced with. They get caught in the same war of stereotypes, the same ideological influences and the same merchandise market. In the article, "Is There a Text in This Advertising Campaign?: Literature, Marketing and Harry Potter", Philip Nel shows that children may even be more of a target than adults. He states that "there has been a proliferation of child-targeted marketing over the last few decades." Nothing emphasizes this explosion quite like the *Harry Potter* phenomenon. Children are trained to see literature and film as merchandise rather than something constructed and thought out or full of ideologies and stereotypes. This training by the media circles back around to be what is expected by the children. Good literature becomes for them that which is popular and accompanied by advertisements and merchandise, rather than what is known for its literary merit.

This is not good for children or literature. Children miss out on the depths of what literature can teach them, and they miss out on everything addressed at the beginning of this paper that deals with children becoming critical thinkers. Instead, they become consumers as Joel Taxel pointed out in his article "Children's Literature at the Turn of the Century". Children become "victims of the velocity of fashion"; they are manipulated into believing that if the market promotes it as a "need", then the demand for it is high. Plus, if Taxel's article is correct, then literature has suffered in this process as well. His article sets out to prove the impact of the publishing industry on the types of books that are "commissioned, written, produced and marketed" and which directly influence the types of books that make their way into the education system of children, whether through curriculum, bookstores or online venues. Ideals have changed within children's literature and this has changed the way children's literature is written. While money is part of the incentive behind this "complex process," other factors include how drastically the publishing industry has changed and the growth of the "mass-market"—i.e. licensing and merchandizing. The change has brought about what is known as *fast capitalism* where products are "created, perfected, and changed at ever faster rates." At this

point, the product is valued for its profit rather than its possibilities of positive influence for what lies at the heart of the product. Children's literature becomes a victim of this process as well as the children who fall prey to falling into the markets trap of making them consumers rather than conscientious individuals.

While the future of children's literature may be in question, there is still a great amount of quality literature for children to read—literature that will guide students into becoming critical thinkers, which will help them connect the past with the present, and assist them in working out their beliefs concerning stereotypes and normative or non-normative behaviors and lifestyles. My concern for this type of literature is not that it is unavailable, but that it is becoming forgotten. It is hidden behind action packed movies that are more interested in portraying the latest CGI than making sure the valuable messages of the original books are being represented. The new interpretations that are birthed forth through the movies, however, are not completely negative. They can provide incentive in the classroom for children to gain interest in revisiting the original text or reading it for the first time. As proven by this class, incorporating both the original book and the movie(s) into our thinking tells much about how individuals and culture work to change the messages and ideals. The important thing to learn from this, and to afterwards teach our students, is that in order to maintain control of our own thoughts, we need to be aware of all that surrounds the issue; that would begin with the original text and include the film(s) as well as other's ideas regarding issues of depth and symbolism and themes that will help us reflect on topics and ideas we otherwise may have missed.

As teachers, we enter the classroom with our own values, interpretations, faiths and ideals which undoubtedly will come across in our teaching style. Unless we are under strict restrictions, we will choose literature that addresses issues that we deem important for students to learn. However, one of the many lessons I drew out of this class is that teaching should even more adamantly promote interpretation from the students. Students should have opportunity to read and analyze and critique both books and movies and articles containing ideas and thoughts from a variety of individuals concerning a variety of topics. Since neither teachers nor students can separate themselves from their convictions there will inevitably be moments of disagreement, but if we can teach students (and some teachers as well) to listen more and speak less, then we can create an opportunity for growth and an opportunity to understand new points of view. While this may not cause us to embrace everyone's ideologies, nor should that be expected, it should promote an environment where at least we embrace everyone as an individual. Both literature and film are great avenues to encourage this type of environment.