

## Final Paper

When I signed up for this course, I thought “Children’s Film and Literature,” that sounds interesting and applicable to my elementary teaching. Then I saw the book list and was excited to see so many familiar titles of beloved books and films on it. I hoped that this class would allow me to be a critical analyzer of children’s film and literature, something I think is extremely important as a teacher and someday as a parent. To be educated on how to analyze and assess the films and literature being “read” by students is essential in making informed decisions about my classroom library and comprehension discussions. I am pleased to say that not only has this course allowed me to revisit some of my favorite childhood texts, but it has also helped me grow as an educator. I feel that I have become a more knowledgeable “reader” of children’s literature and film, allowing me to make informed decisions, provide the tools I need to have a critical eye when reading and viewing books and films, and ultimately enjoy these avenues of culture with my students.

I would like to first, then, reflect back upon my learning throughout the course, understanding how things fit together for me as I moved through the weeks. The first week of class required a rereading of *Charlotte’s Web*, which I attribute to my inspiration and draw to the education profession. My second grade teacher read this text to my class with such passion and gumption; she made me love reading and made teaching children look like the best job in the world. From that day forward, I dreamed of being a teacher and here I am about 18 years later, living out that dream as a second grade teacher. So I find it necessary to remember my roots and share the story of *Charlotte’s Web* with my own students, presenting it with what I hope is an equal amount of passion as my second grade teacher did. With that then, I was very familiar with the text and had viewed both film versions. I would say that I had considered the themes and analyzed the characters of the book presented by E.B. White, but had not necessarily taken all of the literary elements of plot, setting, and style too carefully. This was the week that I was able to realize that all of these literary elements were important to consider when reading a children’s book because they contribute to seeing a more complete view of the original text. I was able to reread the book with these elements at the forefront of my mind, and I think this introduction helped me throughout the remainder of the course. I was able to keep these five

crucial literary elements in mind while I read the rest of the course literature, helping me gain critical analyzing skills necessary for comparisons and valuable reflections.

In addition, this was the first time I was introduced to the very technical language required when discussing a film's elements. This film language made me view the films based on the original text much differently than I had ever watched them previously. I was suddenly aware of the camera angles, the sound effects and character voices, and the impact of the shots taken in order to gain perspective from various characters, helping to tell the White's original story. I think it is safe to say that after this first week, my ability to just "watch a movie" has been taken from me! The critical eye that I now have in order to try and understand what the filmmaker did and why weighs heavy as I watch films, which ultimately gives me credibility as I discuss and reflect upon them. I was given the opportunity to think about *Charlotte's Web* (both film versions) and its filmmaking in the context of many kinds of interpretations and how texts are converted into a visual medium.

Over the course of the next three weeks the issue of fidelity to the original texts was brought to my attention. This concept of fidelity first came up through Van Allsburg's picture books, *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express*. I began to think about the original texts and the films through literary elements learned in the first week of the course. I asked myself questions like "If the plot/settings/time periods are slightly different in the film than they were in the original book, does that mean the fidelity of the film is lacking?" and "If there are different characters introduced in the films than in the original text (as there were in both *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express*), does that put the fidelity of the film into question?" As I navigated through the week of material, I started to realize my feelings about fidelity to the original book when a film is made based on a text. I guess I would say that what I have felt most strongly about throughout the past several weeks after talking with my group and having my own reflections is how fidelity comes into question mostly when the theme(s) or message(s) of the original are changed or altered in a way that deemphasizes them for audiences. When this is done, I feel that the filmmaker has taken too many liberties and in a sense has questioned the relationship between the original and their film. When watching a film that is based on a book, I want the filmmaker to remain faithful to the main messages. In my opinion, that is what generates feelings from the

reader and viewer, setting the overall tone of the story. If this is lost when creating a film, whatever else occurs loses its credibility.

Ultimately, I saw a common theme throughout my thinking not only when analyzing *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express*, but in the weeks that followed with *The Wizard of Oz* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. That theme was that I continued to need for the filmmaker to keep the core of the book, the message, the foundation of the emotional side of the book the same in order for me to consider it loyal to the original. For example, in *The Polar Express*, the filmmaker takes some liberties with the plot, such as the stamping of the words on the ticket and the multitude of troubles the Polar Express experiences on its journey to the North Pole. However, the lessons and themes of friendships and believing are very clearly communicated in the film, which are the messages at the core of the original written work. This allows for me as the viewer to connect in a similar way to the film and the original text, keeping the message of believing powerful.

I felt similarly to this desire for the filmmakers to keep the themes and messages presented in Dahl's book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* the same. When reading the original *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* story, I felt strong themes of the importance of family, the everlasting need for kindheartedness and loyalty, and the importance of good parenting. To keep the films fidelity to the original, these themes had to shine through all of the plot changes, interpretations, and liberties that the filmmaker decided to take. I felt that the plot lines and the interpretations of some of the characters, especially in the 2005 film version, were radically different than Dahl's original writing, and the endings of the films varied greatly as well. However, what held true for me were the messages and themes that I picked out from the book, that provided me with an emotional attachment to the original text.

So then, thoughts of if fidelity to the original a good thing or a bad thing to me naturally came into question? What I ultimately decided throughout the course is that fidelity to the original can be both a good thing and a bad thing! As a viewer of these films throughout the course, I continuously wanted them to be closely connected to the texts, especially the ones I have grown to know and love like *The Polar Express* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. *The Polar Express*, for example, is a book that I grew up listening to and reading every

Christmas growing up, a sort of tradition and lesson in belief. Therefore, when the film came out in 2005 when I was 18 years old, I wanted it to give me the same feelings that the book did. I wanted the film to bring to life the sound and the action that had played out in my mind for years and keep the same joyful spirit of Christmas magic as the original. Therefore, I would say that when you are attached to an original book because of its play on your emotions, fidelity of the film to the text is crucial and necessary in feeling connected to the film and ultimately “liking” it.

This questioning brings me to the third and fourth weeks of the course, where I watched *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Little Mermaid* for the hundredth times and read the original texts for the very first time. This created an interesting point of view on both of these films and original texts due to my attachment to the films. I obviously had an intense attachment to the films here and because of this I think I was more critical of the original texts. For example, the fact that Dorothy’s shoes were silver instead of “ruby red slippers” in Baum’s original book left me feeling disappointed. Similarly, in *The Little Mermaid* I was disappointed and caught off guard at the violent aspects of the original story, such as cutting Ariel’s tongue. These two stories brought my thoughts about emotional attachment to what I know as “the original” not the actual original works. I noticed here that these two very popular films had been all I knew and so when I heard very different versions of them through the original text versions, I had difficulty excepting them.

Throughout the course I was also compelled to think about what the films offered that the original books did / could not. What I found was that through the use of music, I became attached to certain films, adding something that the books could not. For example, music plays a huge role in *The Wizard of Oz* film and is used to set the tone for what is happening in the plotline. I would argue that the music in this film was created to be listened to on its own, especially songs like *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. These songs create feeling in the audience that accompany the joys or struggles that the characters are experiences, helping viewers to feel connected to the characters in the film. For example, when Dorothy’s house falls on the Wicked Witch a joyous and triumphant song is sung. When Dorothy feels lonely she sings *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, where lyrics add to her desire to experience something different and exposes her imagination. This establishes mood in the film, a primary function of music. Although these

feelings can be brought on through descriptive language in the text, the music just adds something that viewers can attach and hold onto, and something I personally seem to really connect with. This type of emotional connection drawn out by music is also presented in *The Little Mermaid*. The songs that Disney writes are also a soundtrack to be enjoyed independently of the book or film. They sing out the main themes and provide insight into who the characters are, especially Ariel and Ursula. I think throughout the course, I have found that the musical soundtracks of the films are significant and impact my “reading” of films.

It was not until the final week where I read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, along with many scholarly articles, that I truly began to consider the impact popular culture and media hype could have on a book. Here, I rethought about interpretations of books, but in the case of Harry Potter, it was much more than a filmmaker’s reinterpretation, but rather an entire media interpretation. The amount of material and commodities that surrounds the “Harry Potter Craze” is almost unimaginable. What I realized through all of my work with Harry Potter is that no matter how much popular culture plays a role into the marketing of an original book, at the core is still a piece of writing that was worthy of reinterpreting. I think this one major thing I learned throughout the course, especially brought home by the final weeks work with Harry Potter. It is easy to question fidelity and analyze these films by way of comparison to their original books, but at the end of the day these original stories had something that many texts do not. That is, many people other than the original author believed in the story and what it could become either on the big screen, in an action figure, or in a song. I think this is significant in and of itself. In some ways these books have huge staying power because they were reinterpreted and therefore continue to resonate with mainstream culture.

With all that I have learned and reflected upon with regards to children’s literature and film within the context of this course, it is then important for me to transfer my knowledge into my own classroom environment. As a second grade teacher, I begin to think about how I can carry what I have learned and experienced in this course and apply it to my second grade students. I have done quite a bit of comparison in this class between original books and films and between two different film versions of a book. The comparisons have been deeply rooted in literary language and film elements. I believe that this skill of comparison could definitely be

implemented into my classroom teaching. Students are required in many standardized exams such as the MEAP and the NWEA to compare two different reading passages. They have to carefully read each passage (often fiction vs. non-fiction) and are asked to answer questions about similarities and differences between them. Many times, the questions surround similar literary language discussed throughout this course of plot, themes, and especially characters. These questions are often difficult for students because they have to read deeply into the texts since they are usually not “right there” questions that they can quickly find the answers to. Therefore, because of these standardized tests as well as some of the common core standards that ask students to be able to compare piece of literature, it is important that students begin learning this skill in the lower elementary grades. One way I can see myself introducing this skill is through the use of children’s literature and film. After reading a story with students we could watch the film version. As a class we could discuss some of the differences and similarities using a Venn diagram or character comparison chart. This would provide a source of comparison for students without being overwhelmed with a great deal of actual text to read. When students are young, they might feel taxed after reading just one passage, so this would be a way to ease them into reading and comparing.

As my district moves into a reading workshop format, I am continuing to build ideas and knowledge about motivation in young readers. The first unit of study presented in reading workshop outlines how students should be learning to love and enjoy reading. It is a unit designed to engage students in building their reading lives through finding their likes and dislikes with regards to books. Therefore, last year in the beginning of the unit / school year I had students bring in their favorite book from home and we displayed them as “Room 207’s Favorite Books.” Throughout the first few weeks then students shared their favorite books with the class, providing oral and written reasoning as to why they would recommend them to others and why they were in fact their favorite stories. The class was exposed immediately to a large range of books and reasons why you might like a book. After taking this course, I could see myself furthering this activity or maybe even replacing it to try something new. I might have students share their favorite book that is also a movie. From experience, I have learned that students become super excited when books are made into films because what they have pictured in their imaginations is now something they can enjoy in the movie theater or on TV. I can picture

students bringing in and having conversations about recent books that have been reinterpreted and turned into films such as: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Ramona and Beezus*, *Where the Wild Things are*, and *The Lorax*. These stories were ones that my students could hardly wait to talk about this past year as they came out and they naturally began drawing comparisons with the book version if they had read it. What a great way to be talking about their reading lives after a long summer vacation. I can see students being interested in reading the books in class if they know there is a movie they could watch after reading it. This could have the potential to connect with students in the beginning of the year even more so than just bringing in their favorite book from home. It could provide significant motivation for students and allow them to look at books differently than they have in the past.

This exposure to books and films in the beginning of the year plays into my student's lives. Giving them the opportunity to discuss and share movies with the class as well as books is relevant to their lives. They might begin to share things they are exposed to outside of the school day that are in fact connected to literature. For example, students might have gone to Disney World and experienced the Harry Potter Park or might have a stuffed animal that is a "Wild Thing" or maybe they have a bell that is similar to the one in *The Polar Express* that they received at Christmas time. These commodities play into their real lives and could actually help motivate them to read the original books that these toys and places have already exposed them to. It might build their curiosity about a particular book or book series, hooking them on the enjoyments of literature and the various avenues it can take. This helps me to consider students background knowledge of a particular book, film, or media commodity, which will allow me to know my students on a deeper level and help gain insights into their young lives as readers.

When thinking about activities that I could try with my students surrounding literature and film, I think about the potential for technology integration. The common core standards as well as the exposure and knowledge children have with technology in general have created a huge shift in the way children learn in the classroom. I am fortunate to work in a school district that has a plethora of technology available for use and a support team that is willing to guide students and teachers alike through technology projects and integration ideas. As my second grade students move from basic phonics readers into skillful novel readers, activities to

accompany their individual and small group levels are key in pushing their reading to the next level of comprehension. Therefore, I am constantly searching for ideas that will allow students to dig deeper into texts and work with small groups of students that are working at a similar level and pace. I could see students participating in literature circles, where they are reading a book at their appropriate reading level with a small group. As they read they are thinking about ideas about how they could turn the book or maybe just a chapter into a short “film” on the computer. Students could use Windows Photo Story 3 to create their interpretation of the characters, the settings, and the plotline. Why not allow students to reinterpret pieces of literature too? This would be a way to incorporate differentiated instruction, as they would be working on a high interest and level appropriate book. They would also have the opportunity to become a part of a small learning community with other students, an important skill practiced even throughout this graduate level course. Working together in order to reinterpret the literature they have read with some of their classmates and turning their work into a piece of sophisticated technology would incorporate a huge array of skills, especially in the speaking and listening area of literacy instruction. This could be a very valuable activity for students and would apply my knowledge on how people reinterpret original texts into my classroom.

This course has provided me with knowledge that I will be able to creatively apply with my second grade classroom. These classroom activities could bring new life to older activities, revamping them into authentic practices where the student’s backgrounds and interests are the focus. Engagement and motivation are two of the main areas where I feel educators need to constantly be reflecting upon. Without student motivation, I believe little long-lasting learning can occur. Therefore, playing into the interests and background knowledge of my students through the use of film and literature, showing them the relevant connections they have with one another could be a means to motivation. I think this would be especially true for struggling readers. Often, struggling readers are beginning to classify themselves as “dumb” or “not liking to read” by the time they reach second grade. I find they begin to become turned off by literature because they simply “aren’t good at it.” Thus, it is extremely important for me to try help these students see themselves as readers. We discussed in this course the ability to “read” not just a book but also a film. I believe this idea is transferrable with these young readers. How can helping these students learn to “read” a film, that is understand the plotline, the characters, the



setting, the main theme or message, going to allow them to see these elements in written literature? I believe that this could be a form of intervention for struggling readers. Students might be able to experience a theme or see the setting or understand the characters a little better when viewing a film. Then when they go back and read the original text, they might be more confident and able to pick on these same elements. This could eventually then be a stepping stone to having them gain these comprehension skills in texts alone. What a creative way to engage these students and encourage them to love literature through the knowledge gained from this course.

In general, the way that I potentially incorporate children's film and literature into my classroom is yet another form of interpretation. The elements that I have pulled out from this course, reflected upon, and thought about possible activities to engage my students in will inevitably be different from someone else. The way in which I choose to share my own learning with my students is going to depend on my background, interests, and relevancy to the material. It also depends on my audience. That is, I need to understand who my students and their families are and what they bring to the table in terms of exposure to literature and film. I must also be knowledgeable about the district I am in and whether or not my form of interpretation aligns with their methods and philosophies. I must ask myself, *will I have the flexibility to try and incorporate these listening and viewing opportunities with my students within my district with the pressures of today's educational system, providing value and justification to the work that I do?* I am fortunate to be in a district that I do think this would be not only possible but where other colleagues would jump at the opportunity to incorporate authentic ideas into their literacy curriculums. It is clear that my interpretations of children's literature and film will affect my teaching practices and student learning, but I am confident that I have the knowledge and skill base now to present elements learned throughout this course with my students and colleagues with confidence and in a way that will enrich the outlined curriculum.