**The Fusion of Main Character and Narrator: The Power of Voiceover in Film Adaptations**

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**Abstract**: In film adaptations, voiceover usually replaces the omniscient narrator of the story. When employed in filmic adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels, voiceover comments are delivered by the main character who is thus empowered since she fills in two roles, that of a character and that of the narrator. Due to this the character alters to a certain extent as in the 1980 BBC adaptation of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Elizabeth Bennet becomes a slightly grave, thoughtful character. The paper interprets this adaptation in light of the voiceover employed in the film.

**Keywords**: film adaptation, cinematic rhetoric, voiceover, Jane Austen

The five-part, 1980 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries, directed by Cecil Coke and featuring Elizabeth Garvie as Elizabeth Bennet and David Rintoul as Mr Darcy presents most of the characteristics of a heritage film: small scale events, no physicality, emphasis on conversation and characterization, and a historically accurate setting (Huszár 86). The costumes and furnishing, similarly to the topics of invented conversations, reflect the period depicted by the film. The adaptation centers on the idea of familiarity. The first shot presents Longbourn seen from an angle that suggests peering from behind the bushes. Hence, the spectator is about to see the story of a familiar environment.

The 1980 adaptation remains faithful to the plot of the novel as far as the plot, the discourse, and the characters’ thoughts are concerned. Despite the fact that the film presents small-scale actions and has an episodic nature, it attempts to be tight as far as storytelling is concerned, applying various means to achieve a sense of tightness. For instance, the last character to be mentioned in a scene becomes the first to appear in the next one. These scenes are usually introduced by means of discourse, even if it requires adding extra lines to help the transition. Following the Meryton assembly, Elizabeth, while discussing the Bingleys and Darcy, wonders “what they are saying of us;” thus, the next scene reveals the Netherfield party talking about the Bennets. The mise-en-scène of the two shots highlights the contrast between the two environments; the intimacy of the bedroom where Lizzy and Jane appear to prepare for bed stands in sharp contrast with the scene in which the Bingleys appear formally dressed and sitting at the cards table. Camera position also underlines the contrast: the middle and close-up shots in the Longbourn scene differ from the sequence at Netherfield presented in long shots. In addition to discourse, visual elements may also help to hold the scenes together. For instance, Darcy is shown with a hunting dog on his way to Hunsford Parsonage before the first proposal scene. The same dog foreshadows his sudden appearance in the Pemberley-visit scene.

Middle shots dominate the film keeping spectators at distance from characters, thus, curtailing viewers’ emotional involvement. The character’s faces are rarely shown to the spectators in close-up shots which focus spectators’ attention on the emotion the character’s face expresses. Visual storytelling techniques and cinematic language are applied to transcode emotions or reactions only at the end of scenes. Usually, the characters’ reactions and emotions are expressed verbally either in direct or indirect speech rarely employing close-up shots. For example, after the Meryton ball Caroline Bingley declares Jane Bennet to be a bad choice for any eligible young man, and Bingley’s reaction is not put into words, instead the camera notes his reaction.

As far as the Austenian text is concerned, the production is a faithful rendition of the novel due not only to the faithfully transposed dialogue, but also to the retention of the important letters present in the source text. Letters are transcoded to the screen in the form of voiceover discourse, the character being seen and heard to think while writing the letter. Voiceover replaces the omniscient author giving spectators access to Elizabeth’s reflections. Since she also conveys some of the authorial remarks, her role is expanded; she is both the heroine and the narrator of the novel.

In 1980 Elizabeth Bennet becomes an empowered character. She is both a character and a substitute of the narrator of the source novel. Her status is implied already at the beginning of the film, since it is she who utters the first sentence of the novel, “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (Austen 2). In the 1980 adaptation, the sentence is redistributed to Elizabeth and her friend, Charlotte Lucas:

Charlotte Lucas: “What a wonder! A single man in possession of a good fortune coming to live in Netherfield.”

Elizabeth Bennet: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that such a man must be in want of a wife.”

Charlotte Lucas: “Of course. He’s rightful property of one or other of the neighbourhood daughters.” (Ep. 1)

Charlotte also assumes the role of the narrator-character as her cool-minded, wise demeanor suggests. Elizabeth also dominates the adaptation through the frequent dramatizations of her thoughts presented in non-diegetic discourse, that is, in voiceovers.

Spectators have direct access to the omniscient narrator’s insights into Elizabeth’s thoughts; thus is the fusion of character and narrator realized in Elizabeth’s voiceovers. On these occasions she appears alone in a middle shot either being in a pensive mood or writing a letter. The meditative sequences present her thoughts or her assessment of a situation. For instance, voiceover discourse conveys her thoughts after the first proposal. Angry because of Darcy’s involvement in separating Jane from Mr Bingley, she finds Darcy’s regard gratifying and the tone of her voiceover softens. Similarly, voiceover discloses her thoughts during the Pemberley visit, both while watching Darcy’s portrait and after having met him as opposed to the novel, in which her thoughts are presented by the omniscient narrator. Elizabeth’s voiceover replaces the narrator when reading her letters, and in most of these scenes she summarizes events and explains them to the spectator. In a letter written to Charlotte, she explains her attitude toward Wickham after the latter is engaged to a rich lady. Voiceover discourse substitutes the omniscient narrator’s remarks and since these are attributed to Elizabeth most of the times, she becomes a filter through which spectators receive the story, and which renders her both a character, and a powerful cinematic element.

Elizabeth’s empowerment leads to obvious changes in her character. She becomes more assertive and openly critical of her parents. Incorporating the authorial remarks about her parents in her discourse turns her character into a rather controversial one. Her apparent obedience to her parents counterpoints her critical attitude towards their behaviour especially after Darcy’s letter, the turning point of her change in opinion and attitude. For instance, in order to introduce the Bennet parents, Elizabeth openly criticizes them, specifically Mrs Bennet, to Charlotte Lucas, “my father is remarkable. So odd a mixture of quick parts and caprice […]. [Mrs Bennet’s] mind is less difficult to comprehend” (Ep. 1). Originally part of the authorial description of the parents, these remarks now belong to Elizabeth. As the adaptation moves on, criticism of her father becomes more and more evident, surfacing in bitter remarks to Jane on the Bennet girls’ inability to draw a fair picture of conjugal happiness and domestic comfort (Ep. 4). At this point, Elizabeth openly disapproves of her father’s attitude. The tone of her voice reflects the bitterness she feels when realizing how their chances of marrying well are lessened by the follies of their parents. She sees their father as a “true philosopher [who] derives benefit from mother’s ignorance and folly” (Ep. 4). Later, in the same part, invested with the authorial voiceover in the first person singular, her criticism of Mr Bennet seems ever harsher than before.

I cannot be blind to the impropriety of behaviour as a husband. I always see it with pain. He exposes his wife to the contempt of her own children. It is so unsuitable a marriage. She of weak understanding and an illiberal mind; he captivated at first by youth and beauty and that appearance of good humour what youth and beauty generally give; quickly to lose all respect, esteem and confidence, then to devote all his many talents to contempt, talents which might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife. (Ep. 4)

Her judgmental attitude signifies her empowered position since in the novel the character was exempt from the directness and assertiveness it is given in the film. The presence of an authorial voice in the novel softened, Elizabeth’s character; she was shown to be less critical of her parents than in the adaptation. She is aware of their follies, but criticism is the narrator’s prerogative. The absence of a narrator allows the drawing of a more mature character in the film than Austen’s novel.

Yet, despite Elizabeth’s disapproval of her parents’ behaviour, she is never portrayed as disrespectful to them. Small actions present her as her father’s favourite daughter. They also portray her as an obedient daughter despite her criticism of her parents. Elizabeth appears quite often alone with her father, playing backgammon or having tea together. She is the only one Mr Bennet willingly invites into his library to discuss important matters. Not only catalyzers reflect the profundity of their relationship, but also sequences revealing how well they know each other. For instance, at the beginning, Elizabeth notices her father leaving and knows that he is going to visit Mr Bingley. The close-up shot on her face in the following scene next morning, when Mr Bennet announces his family of having visited Netherfield, reveals her kind regard for him.

Elizabeth’s relationship with Mrs Bennet, however, is more problematic than her relationship with her father. Her attitude towards Mrs Bennet is two-folded since at times she is critical of her mother, yet in certain scenes she seems to have a harmonious relationship with her mother. Though she openly disapproves of her mother’s lack of understanding – even though only to intimate friends –, it is Mrs Bennet she first complains to after she overhears Mr Darcy’s disparaging words at the Meryton assembly. Her character-narrator status triggers her controversial attitude toward her mother.

Mrs Bennet’s conduct embarrasses Elizabeth both in private and in public. When shown by herself, Elizabeth admits in voiceover that she is “mortified” (Ep. 1) since her mother’s calculations in connection with Jane being forced to stay at Netherfield have proven to be correct. Despite her low opinion of Mrs Bennet, Elizabeth never speaks rudely to her, and she always listens kindly to Mrs Bennet’s trivial complains. Her only reproaching remark occurs the morning after Jane’s visit to Netherfield, when Elizabeth decides to see Jane. She confronts her mother in a slightly irritated tone, saying that “I shall walk since I am obliged to!” (Ep. 1) as a response to Mrs Bennet’s cold remark that Elizabeth is not to use the carriage. In this scene Elizabeth is not portrayed as a misbehaving child, but as an equal to her mother. This justifies Mrs Bennet’s complaints after Elizabeth’s return from Hunsford Parsonage. Elizabeth patiently listens to Mrs Bennet’s melodramatic chatter about Jane dying of a broken heart, and her complaints about Mr Bennet’s refusal to take the Bennet girls to Brighton after the regiment. Finally, when Mrs Bennet recalls the young Colonel she was in love with as a young girl, Elizabeth becomes her *confidante*, and the two women are shown giggling together.

The result of fusing the character with the narrator renders Elizabeth acutely aware of the social status of her family and of the others. Unlike the other characters, she quickly realizes the nature of the Darcy-Bingley connection: “Mr Bingley sees in Mr Darcy a man whose breeding, if not his manners, are superior to his own. The Bingley fortune, after all, is acquired from trade … unlike Mr Darcy’s” (Ep.1). The bitterness in her tone reflects Elizabeth’s keen awareness of social positions and hints at her revolt against the injustice of the generally upheld view of social status. Her indignation surfaces in a livelier manner during her visit at the Collins’ after she finds out about Mr Darcy’s objections against her family and his role in separating Jane from Bingley; Elizabeth’s realization makes her resent that her uncles are not powerful enough for Mr Darcy.

After the first proposal scene Elizabeth becomes most aware of how careful the Bennet girls should be about their conduct, her concern surfacing in her expressed care about what people say. Thus, she reprimands Lydia, who would like to go to Meryton every day, arguing that people might say that the Bennet girls are always in pursuit of officers. The change in her character is perceived by Lydia, who claims that Lizzy has been “in passion since she came back from Charlotte’s” (Ep. 1). What Lydia refers to as “passion” is a realization of the frustration Elizabeth feels because of the impropriety of her family’s behaviour. This is more acutely felt since she desires Darcy’s good opinion.

The 1980 Elizabeth Bennet, although very kind and amiable, is very often chagrined because of Darcy’s alleged dislike of her. While at Netherfield, she complains to Jane that Mr Darcy has not spoken ten words to her and she regretfully puzzles over why he dislikes her. Later, at Hunsford Parsonage, her bafflement at his behaviour continues. The plaintive song she plays on the piano while loudly wondering to Charlotte that she does not understand why Mr Darcy seeks her company suggests her preoccupation with him. Fear of his disapproval surfaces in a small sequence at the beginning of the story. In the scene in which Mr Darcy and Wickham meet at Meryton, the Bennet sisters, accompanied by Mr Collins, meet a few officers with whom they have a chat. When she notices that Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley are also approaching, Elizabeth begs Jane to leave. In the source novel, Elizabeth is more preoccupied by Wickham’s and Darcy’s reactions when noticing each other, and she displays a defiant attitude toward Darcy. The altered scene renders Elizabeth apprehensive of Mr Darcy and reflects her inability to laugh at herself or at others’ follies. Thus, Elizabeth Bennet becomes a fearful heroine.

Though pivotal scenes display visual storytelling elements – close-up shots of characters’ faces, – the basic form of cinematic rhetoric used to transcode the novel to screen is discourse. One of the important sequences is Elizabeth’s visit to Pemberley. Elizabeth’s voiceover dominates the entire sequence from the minute she stands in front of Darcy’s portrait and asserting in the garden that she regrets nothing, to her reaction at Darcy’s sudden appearance. Visual elements combine with discourse to communicate her thoughts in this scene. In the novel Elizabeth’s musings are presented by the omniscient narrator, while in the film spectators have access to these insights through voiceover combined with close-up shots on her face. Furthermore, as the Pemberley-sequence reveals, in this production Elizabeth assumes an assertive role. As opposed to the novel, after accidentally coming across Darcy at Pemberley, Elizabeth takes the initiative and introduces the Gardiners to Darcy. Furthermore, after reading Jane’s letter about Lydia’s elopement, Elizabeth runs to Pemberley; thus, the scene does not take place on neutral ground, but on Darcy’s territory. Elizabeth realizes that she has lost him forever on his ground. Just as it has been suggested in the opening scene of the film, Elizabeth is not a passive receiver of experiences, but one able to take matters into her own hand. Spectators see an active Elizabeth instead of a passive nineteenth-century woman who is at the mercy of circumstances.

We may argue then that the use of voiceover gives spectators an assertive but thoughtful Elizabeth Bennet. She utters almost all authorial remarks from the novel, making a strange fusion possible. As a result of the replacement of the narrator with Elizabeth’s voiceover, she becomes graver than the playful character from the novel. In the film adaptation she is less able to take matters in a cheerful manner. She runs to Mrs Bennet to complain about Mr Darcy’s infamous slandering remark at the beginning of the film and though she teases him at a following reunion, she worries too much about what he thinks of her. In addition to this, she is often shown alone, in a pensive mood.

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