



From page to screen

Literary adaptations in early cinema

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Since the first lights flickered on the silver screen producers and directors have plundered the treasure trove of literature left to us by the masters of the written word.

As early as 1902 George Melie produced his classic film *Voyage to the moon*#, loosely based on the work of Jules Verne.

Though Melie's work was only partly drawn from Verne's novel, it set a standard for using literature as the basis for films.

Of course not all adaptations have been true to the source material. Indeed, some films (which we will look at later on) barely have any semblance to the book upon which they were supposedly based.

Other films have matched the quality of story-telling. Some even excelled. Others are debated among film scholars to this day, and yet others failed dismally.

So, let us have a look at the good, the bad, and the ugly of literature transferred to the silver screen.

Although many classic stories were adapted for the screen even before the advent of sound in motion pictures, it makes sense to rather concentrate on those films made in the era of the 'talking' picture, since we are after all discussing literature in cinema.

Perhaps the most famous adaptation of a novel in those early days of cinema, and certainly one of the most widely anticipated of these has to be Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the wind*†.

The publicity machinations behind this 1939 film was quite phenomenal. Not least of which included the nationwide search for the actress to portray the heroine Scarlett O'Hara. Many actresses were considered for the part (Bette Davis, Joan Fontaine, Paulette Goddard and many more), but the part eventually (and quite ironically) went to an English lass by the name of Vivienne Leigh. At that stage of her career she was still very fresh from the United Kingdom indeed.

As to her male counterpart, there was no doubt in the public mind who should play the part of Captain Rhett Butler: Clark

Gable was box office gold, and there simply was no one better for the part. The problem that arose was that Clark Gable was under contract to MGM and the film version of *Gone with the wind* was being produced independently by David O Selznick. Eventually, after much hype and inter-studio negotiations, Leigh and Gable were cast in the leading roles.

The question which remains to be answered is what makes *Gone with the wind* a good literary adaptation? Those who have read the source material will know that many aspects of it were changed and/or left out of the filmed version. Yet, what makes *Gone with the wind* a winning adaptation is perhaps a congruence of all the artistic contributions to the film: George Cukor and Victor Fleming's direction; Sidney Howard's screenplay and Ernest Haller's technicolor cinematography; and, of course, Max Steiner's unforgettable, stirring soundtrack.

Gone with the wind is one of those miracles of synergy that happen once every hundred years in world cinema. Where, despite daunting source material, high

hopes from the viewing public, and behind-the-scenes drama and intrigue, a masterpiece is produced.

Let us remain in that magical year of 1939 for just a moment longer. Another great film was directed that year by Victor Fleming (the director of **Gone with the wind**), namely Frank L Baum's classic **The wizard of Oz***

This example of screen adaptation is perhaps one of the few times where the screen version became as much of a classic as the literature it was based on.



The story of Dorothy and her dog Toto in the strange land of Oz

has become part of popular culture to such an extreme extent that books could be written about that phenomenon itself.

Though to modern audiences the special effects may seem middle of the road, given the limited resources filmmakers had in 1939, the result is spectacular. Add to this the talents of Judy Garland singing her key song, *Somewhere over the rainbow*, and vaudeville stalwarts like Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Burt Lahr and the now legendary Munshkins and the success of **The wizard of Oz** should come as no surprise.

The 1930s and 1940s were decades in which literary adaptations flourished. Many of the classic works had not yet been filmed, and rights to these novels were extremely cheap (compared to today, where novels are sold to producers for millions of dollars), and indeed many of the works were in public domain, not least of which were the works of William Shakespeare.

One of the earliest filmed versions of Shakespeare's works was **The taming of the shrew*** which was filmed by legendary trailblazing director DW Griffith in 1909.

With the advent of sound in the late 1920s, the floodgates were opened and The Bard's collection of work was raided by Hollywood producers.

In 1935 **A midsummer night's dream*** was followed shortly by **Romeo and Juliet***

with Norma Shearer (aged 36) and Leslie Howard (aged 43) as the teenaged starstruck lovers.

Laurence Olivier, a stalwart of Shakespeare on stage and screen, appeared in **Henry V*** in 1944, and as the tragic Prince of Denmark in **Hamlet*** in 1948.



Previously he had also appeared on screen as Orlando in **As you like it*** in 1936.

The subject of Shakespeare on film is so incredibly vast that indeed more than a few books have been written on the subject. Considering the confines of this article, suffice it to say that probably no other author/playwright's works have been filmed as many times, and indeed, re-made as many times as those of William Shakespeare.

Other classic works filmed during those heydays of early Hollywood include Charlotte Brontë's **Jane Eyre*** (filmed in 1934, and again ten years on in 1944).

Her sister Emily Brontë's **Wuthering heights*** had been filmed many times before the classic 1939 film with Laurence Olivier in the lead.

Jane Austin proved to be a popular choice in source material too. And, indeed, continues to be so, as can be seen by the many recent films of her work. **Pride and prejudice***, **Emma*** and **Sense and sensibility*** prove to be the most popular with film



makers and the first two mentioned were filmed in the 1930s and 1940s. The great master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, was not immune to the trend for filming novels. In his long career he filmed three of the works of Daphne Du Maurier. For the last film he made in England before emigrating to the USA, he filmed Du Maurier's **Jamaica Inn**# in 1939. The film wasn't a great success, and Du Maurier herself is said to have detested it.

Upon his arrival in the United States Hitchcock again delved into Du Maurier's oeuvre for source material. This time, his American debut film **Rebecca**+ made it in 1940. The film was a rousing success, aside from the ending being changed slightly. Du Maurier seems to have approved of this version of her gothic romance.

Twenty-four years later Hitchcock again tried his hand at a short story by Du Maurier. He called it **The birds**+. The 1963 film was a smash hit with audiences despite its threadbare storyline, but again Du Maurier herself disapproved.

Other filmed versions of Du Maurier's work include 1944's **Frenchman's Creek**#, 1952's **My cousin Rachel**+ and many others.

Adaptations of novels became par for the course in the 1930s and 1940s, as can be seen by the information listed above, yet the trend continued very strongly in the following decades too.

One book, a bestseller in its own right, which needs mentioning here is of course the **Bible**. The grand drama and spectacle of the stories contained therein proved irresistible to producers at a time when Hollywood was struggling very much indeed.

The so-called 'studio system' of the preceding decades had collapsed by the 1950s causing studios to lose out much revenue and causing them to lose their proud list of stars under contract to them.

In addition, television was becoming a true threat. Almost every household in America owned a set and audience attendance at the cinema plummeted.

To counter this threat inventions like 3D, stereophonic sound, and, most spectacularly, cinemascope were used to lure audiences back into the empty theatres.

Biblical tales were extremely popular with producers and audiences alike, and soon the market was flooded with these. Some of them were truly magnificent productions, while others were scraping the bottom of the barrel, looking for stories



from the **Bible** which had not yet been filmed.

Successful adaptations from the **Bible** include **Samson and Delilah**⁺ (1949), and **The ten commandments**^{*} (filmed twice in 1923, and again by Cecil B De Mille in 1956). **Ben-Hur**^{*} (though not strictly speaking a Bible story) was filmed successfully in 1927, and again in 1959. **Ben-Hur** held the record for the film with the most academy awards (eleven) until **Titanic**^{*} was released in 1998.

Giant productions like **Cleopatra**⁺⁺ (1963) almost brought Twentieth Century Fox Studios to its knees. The fraught production was further troubled by the antics of its two major stars, Elizabeth Taylor (who became the first woman to be paid \$1 million), and her soon-to-be husband, Richard Burton.

Some minor entries in the genre include **The story of Ruth**[#] (1960), **Sodom and Gomorrah**[#] (1963), **The silver chalice**[#] (with a young Paul Newman in his Hollywood debut in 1954), **Esther and the king**[#] (1960 ... look out for a young Joan Collins as Esther), and a myriad of others.

East of Eden⁺ (1955) was an adaptation of John Steinbeck's saga of the Trask family. The film only dealt with a small middle portion of the sprawling novel. Despite this it stands as a wonderful example of character study, with outstanding performances by James Dean, Julie Harris, Raymond Massey and Jo Van Fleet.

Of course, modern authors such as Steinbeck were also immensely popular sources for screen material.

Of mice and men⁺ was turned into a very successful 1939 film (re-made in the 1980s and again in the 1990s).

The grapes of wrath⁺, Steinbeck's Great Depression era novel, became an icon of American cinema in 1940. The film starred Henry Fonda and John Carradine, and was nominated for (and won) various Oscars.

Tortilla flat[#] was filmed in 1942, followed by **Lifeboat**[#] in 1944 (directed by Alfred Hitchcock), and may others in the decades to come.



Other contemporary authors who saw their works transferred to film include Truman Capote, whose **Breakfast at Tiffany's**⁺⁺ (1961) and **In cold blood**[#] (1967) became iconic films of their era.

Capote's lifelong friend Harper Lee also saw her nostalgic book about childhood innocence, **To kill a mockingbird**[#], lovingly transferred to the silver screen by director Robert Mulligan.

Of course it was not only high to middlebrow reads that caught the attention of Hollywood. As the social climate of America changed in the 1960s and 1970s so did the source material.

Perhaps the first, and most influential of these was Grace Metalious' novel **Peyton Place**[#] which was filmed in 1957 with Lana Turner, Hope Lange, Diane Varsi and Russ Tamblyn. This novel was considered very shocking at the time as it dealt with issues of teen sex, incest and rape. Naturally it was watered down for the screen, but audiences flocked in their thousands see it, and the film even managed to be nominated for eight Oscars (though it didn't manage to win any).

With this fairly mild trailblazer, the stage was set for many more 'sleazy' novels to be filmed in the 1960s. Authors who ruled the roost here include Jacqueline Susann, whose **Valley of the dolls**[#] raised many an eyebrow in its book format, whilst Harold Robbins' **Never love a stranger**[#] and **The carpetbaggers**[#] set a new standard for the film industry.

Horror literature has also left its mark on the world of cinema. Most notably the two standards of Gothic horror, namely Bram Stoker's **Dracula**⁺ and Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**⁺.

Mary Shelly has fared considerably better when it comes to adaptations of her work. The 1931 film by Universal Studios treated the source material fairly well, and Kenneth Brannagh kept very close to the story in his 1994 version.

Bram Stoker didn't fare quite so well. Though the character of Count Dracula has appeared in countless films throughout the decades, the story has never been done



proper justice until Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film **Bram Stoker's Dracula**[#]. Even then some elements of the story were not portrayed as in the original novel, but it caught the mood and atmosphere of Bram Stoker's novel, and remained fairly true to its source.

There are literally hundreds of thousands of books that have been filmed since the start of cinema; so many that we can barely scrape the surface of this genre in this article. Novels and literature continue to attract filmmakers. One only has to think of the recent blockbuster filmed versions of JRR Tolkien's **Lord of the rings**^{*} trilogy, and JK Rowling's **Harry Potter**^{*} series. Not to mention CS Lewis' **Chronicles of Narnia**[#], and the **Nanny McPhee**[#] stories.

Also some highbrow adaptations of books such as Michael Cunningham's intricate novel **The hours**^{*} which was filmed in 2003 with an all-star cast consisting of Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore and Ed Harris.

In 2002 director Spike Jonze (**Being John Malkovich**⁺⁺) even directed a film called **Adaptation**⁺⁺ detailing the frustration of the screenwriters who are left to bring the pages of phenomenal works of literature to the screen.

As long as there are authors who write novels, and people who read them, the cinema will most certainly continue to adapt them (or at the very least try to) for the big screen.



* Available on Video/DVD

+ Available on Video

++ Available on DVD

Not in CPLS stock



*A good book is the
purest essence of a
human soul*

Thomas Carlyle, 1840