

Jane Austen Adaptations Throughout History

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By Spencer Blohm

The body of work produced by Jane Austen remains as relevant today as the time period in which it was written. Her keen observations of human nature and human conventions as portrayed through the lens of her times have made her works timeless. And of course, her acute ability to satirize those same conventions has preserved their lasting bite. Over the last century, numerous film adaptations have been created based on Austen's novels – some faithful to the source material, others perhaps less so, but wherever there is a trace of Austen wit there is always a plot worth following.

Sense and Sensibility, Austen's first published novel, is the story of sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood as they adapt to living with less, both fortunes and prospects, following their father's death. The sisters portray the characteristics of the title, with Elinor being the sensible one and Marianne being moved by romantic sensibility. The novel is a thinly veiled lesson in the folly of being ruled solely by one's emotions and the wisdom of being level-headed, all the while poking fun at the rules of courtship that prevailed at the time. It was adapted fairly faithfully to film in 1995. Starring Emma Thompson, Kate Winslet, Hugh Grant and a young Alan Rickman, in the movie, as in the novel, sense wins out in the end.

A more creative adaptation is the 2011 film *From Prada to Nada*, modernizing the novel's setting to modern day Los Angeles and featuring Latina sisters Nora and Mary as Elinor and Marianne. The basic theme is the same – the girls are bankrupt following their father's death and move in with a relative in East L.A. Sensible Nora looks for a job and romantic Mary tries to marry her way back to money. However, once again, sense wins, as Mary finds love much closer to her new home.

Pride and Prejudice is next on our list, with several film versions both faithful to the source and high on creative license. Dubbed by Ms. Austen as a "book of manners," surprisingly few of the novel's characters actually have them. Austen may have unwittingly invented the rom-com way before its time, primarily through the adventures of main Austen characters Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. In typical Austen theme, these two only find happiness with each other after he gives up some of his pride and she lets go of her prejudice against him, formed from her believing gossip and hearsay. Of course, had they found love sooner, we wouldn't have such rich material to imitate and adapt.

And adapt it we did. This novel is the most imitated of Austen's works to date, providing several movies over the last century, at least one mini-series, and a reimagining of Austen's classic in an alternative world of a zombie apocalypse. One of the earliest film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* is the 1940 version starring Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson. Considered a product of its time rather than of Austen's vision, it's generally not considered one of the best or most faithful, but it does have the nostalgia factor of early black and white movies going for it.

More recent adaptations include the 2005 film starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen, a version fairly faithful to the source material. And then, there's those creative re-imaginings such as *Bride and Prejudice* of 2004, a Bollywood version of the Austen story set to music, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* of 2001, a modern-day take on the original Austen rom-com. The most recent, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, just out this year, gives us the original Austen story set in an alternate reality. Based on the novel by Seth Grahame-Smith with coauthor credit to Jane Austen, the characters add warrior skills and zombie kills to their list of accomplishments, right alongside making favorable matches.

Other Jane Austen novels that have been adapted to film include *Mansfield Park*, with releases in 1999 and again in 2007. While both attempt to remain faithful to the source material, the general consensus is that neither got the main character of Fanny Price quite right. Nonetheless, in the movies, as in the novel, poor relation Fanny triumphs in the end and marries for love while also bringing some sense of moral rectitude to the rest of her relations.

The novel *Emma* was a bit more successful in staying faithful to the source material with a television movie in 1948 and a more recent theatrical release in 1996. Following the romantic misadventures of Emma, a matchmaking busybody intent on setting up matches for everyone else while being completely oblivious of her own romantic prospects. A more recent and modernized version based on this novel can be found with the movie *Clueless*, released in 1995 but can still be found on local channels.

Finally, Austen's novel *Persuasion* had its turn at a faithful adaptation with the 1995 television episode on Screen Two and again in the feature film released in 2007, both fairly faithful to the original story of a girl forced to break an engagement to a man whom her family considers inferior in fortunes, only to reconnect with that same man some ten years later when the fortunes have been reversed.

Jane Austen is by no means the only author to have works of literature continue to be relevant and be adapted into film for popular entertainment. After all, a great story can, and should, endure long after its author has left this Earth. Austen has proved her works worthy of recognition time and time again, decades and even centuries after her time and with good reason.

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