



# “Reimagining Stories: The Value Of Literary Adaptations In Visual Arts Through Reception Theory”

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## The Value of Adaptation in Literature and Visual Arts: A Reception Theory Perspective

Adapting literature into visual arts- whether through paintings, films or graphic novels- is a fascinating way of reimagining stories for new audiences. How do we engage with stories that have been retold, reimagined, or transformed? Reception theory offers a fascinating way to explore this question, focusing on the role of the audience in interpreting stories rather than just the creator's intentions or the text itself. When applied to adaptations—whether a novel turned into a film, a myth brought to life on canvas, or a classic rewritten from a new perspective—this theory highlights how stories remain relevant by resonating with audiences across different times and cultures.

### What Is Reception Theory?

Reception theory, developed by literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss, suggests that the meaning of a story or artwork isn't fixed. Instead, it depends on the audience's "horizon of expectations," shaped by their cultural background, personal experiences, and the era they live in. For instance, consider Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Readers in Regency England might have seen it as a sharp commentary on class and marriage, while a modern audience may focus on Elizabeth Bennet's independence as a proto-feminist stance.

This evolving reception is especially significant in adaptations, where creators reinterpret a work to speak to new audiences. The goal isn't merely to replicate the original but to engage with its themes in a way that feels fresh and meaningful for a different time or medium.

### Literary Adaptations: Breathing New Life into Stories

Adaptations in literature often shine by offering new perspectives. A striking example is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which revisits Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Bertha Mason, the so-called "madwoman in the attic." Rhys delves into Bertha's backstory, exploring themes of colonialism, identity, and oppression that Brontë's Victorian readers might not have fully grasped. Rhys doesn't just retell *Jane Eyre*; she expands it, inviting readers to rethink their understanding of its characters and context.

This kind of reinterpretation can spark debates. Some readers prefer adaptations to stay as close as possible to the original, valuing faithfulness over creativity. Others celebrate the freedom adaptations take, seeing them as

opportunities to explore untold stories or reinterpret themes for a modern audience. Reception theory helps us navigate these debates, reminding us that every audience brings its own lens to the work.

### **Visual Arts: Adapting Stories in New Mediums**

Visual arts adaptations—whether through film, painting, or digital media—often reinterpret stories by taking advantage of the strengths of their medium. For example, Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rebecca* (1940) adapts Daphne du Maurier’s gothic novel into a cinematic masterpiece. While some fans of the book might lament changes in plot or tone, others praise the way Hitchcock uses lighting, framing, and music to evoke suspense and psychological depth that go beyond the text.

In painting, adaptation often involves reimagining themes or narratives. Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) is a powerful adaptation of the horrors of war, drawing on history, mythology, and his own artistic vision. Its stark imagery transcends language and culture, resonating with audiences worldwide as a timeless statement against violence.

More recently, filmmakers like Greta Gerwig have adapted classic stories for contemporary audiences. Gerwig’s *Little Women* (2019) blends fidelity to Louisa May Alcott’s novel with bold storytelling techniques, such as non-linear timelines and modern feminist undertones, to make the story feel fresh and relevant.

### **A Dialogue Across Time**

Adaptations thrive on the interplay between past and present, creating a dialogue between the source material and contemporary audiences. Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* (2013), for instance, transforms F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel into a visually opulent film, using modern music and dazzling effects to capture the excesses of the Jazz Age in a way that resonates with today’s audience.

Reception theory helps us see how these interpretations are shaped not only by the creators but also by us, the viewers and readers. Our reactions to an adaptation reflect our own cultural moment—our values, priorities, and the stories we want to hear.

### **Why Adaptations Matter**

Adaptations remind us that stories are living, evolving things. They allow us to revisit familiar tales from new perspectives, connect with different cultures and histories, and keep narratives relevant for future generations. Whether they stay faithful to the original or take bold creative leaps, adaptations enrich our understanding of the source material and of ourselves.

As reception theory shows, the value of an adaptation lies not just in what it says but in how it engages us, inviting us to think, feel, and see in new ways. In this sense, adaptations are more than just retellings—they are acts of transformation, bridging the past and the present while keeping stories alive for the future.