Never Seek to Tell Thy Love: E-Adapting Blake in the Classroom

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*Never seek to tell thy love*
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears –
Ah, she doth depart.

Soon as she was gone from me
A traveller came by
Silently, invisible –

He took her with a sigh.

- William Blake[?].

Adaptation studies as a discipline has opened up texts to critical examination, based on relationships of exchange between source and target texts. Despite a significant canon of methodologies, the fidelity approach still seems the dominant discourse when appraising adaptations. Some theorists have sanctioned more medium specific approaches, such as Brian McFarlane and Sarah Cardwell.[?] Others, such as Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders argue that adaptations should be experienced as adaptations, therefore in direct comparison with their source texts.[?] On the web, new forms of fanfic (where contributors adapt and appropriate aspects of popular film and television shows) are proving very popular, particularly with younger audiences and in some cases have led to amateur films being produced with relatively high production values. Some authors such as J.K.Rowling encourage this engagement with their work. All of this provides a rich wealth of material for the teacher wishing to explore this new terrain of adaptation studies, and beyond, with their students. Emerging forms of digital media have also provided new tools in enabling our students as more independent students.

This chapter is based on a case-study where second year Interactive Media Production, Scriptwriting for Film & Television and Television Production undergraduates at Bournemouth University in the United Kingdom were asked to adapt William Blake’s poem, *Never Seek to Tell Thy Love* as a means of exploring medium-specific and comparative theories of adaptation. Almost all of the students concerned have studied English Literature and Language to Advanced Level; this is a mandatory condition of entry for the Scriptwriting program. The students are generally aged between 19-24 years, and have already studied narrative structures and theories of authorship in their first year. The adaptation course then is offered as a discrete elective in the second year and is generally taken by around 60 students who are divided into four seminar groups of fifteen each. The students will have already had an introduction to the theories of adaptation in their first year and so are well aware that most adaptation studies discourses focus on the relationship between literature and film. As Peter Reynolds writes:

The student is encouraged to recognise that meanings in novels are fluid and unstable, made and not given, and that their study may involve exploring parallel texts (such as
paintings, film and television) without a dominant hierarchy that assumes literature as origin. Even now, there is little work on other forms of adaptation, such as comic books and video games. Our course encourages students to apply adaptation theory to other media and explore these ‘parallel’ texts as they occur elsewhere.

In my teaching all the students are expected to keep a blog, where they reflect on their own learning and their own learning journeys. So, the blog effectively becomes a narrative in itself. However, with a lot of e-learning, or blended learning there is a temptation to deterministically build in such activities just for the sake of it. In my teaching of adaptation theory I use the blogs as a space where students carry out a number of tasks loosely defined by me, which act as the framework for the whole course of study. The trick here is not to be too prescriptive, but at the same time to ground the student’s own journey in clear debates about adaptation and to act as an arbiter of quality, as there are still clear learning outcomes for the students to meet so that they can obtain the credits they need. The material generated in these exercises is incorporated into my own teaching and the material is used to generate the content for subsequent sessions. This builds over a period until the students are providing 100% of the content for their own teaching.

In her book Technology, Literacy and Learning (2006) Carey Jewitt argues that e-learning can reinforce ‘traditional’ relationships in the classroom. In this instance, instead of writing theoretical papers, the students used their creative and production skills to interrogate theoretical ideas and to understand that adaptation can be seen as a form of reception. This focus on the process of adaptation – and the subsequent reflection on that process - becomes quite a sophisticated pedagogic tool with many possible applications. The array of different ideas and proposals generated in this exercise allows for the students themselves to challenge ideas of supreme source texts and supreme authors on their own terms and drawing from their own experiences. As we shall see, such judgments originate from both from the culture they have been exposed to, and their previous and concurrent studies. When writing about such reader response criticism, Elizabeth Freund notes that Literary texts in general […] constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms.

As we shall see, the students’ own adaptations are certainly significant texts in themselves, as they both respond to the ‘source’ material of Blake’s poem, Never Seek to Tell Thy Love, as well as events important in their own lives. Here I will argue that encouraging students to produce their own adaptations deepens their understanding of a subject and the theoretical matrix it occupies. For the adaptation scholar such student-centered texts can constitute a rich array of reader responses to set texts.

Most student-generated material seeks to ‘close the loop’ between teaching and learning and to forge a greater dialogue between theory and practice. In a sense the students end up writing their own lectures, over time, but through being directed - initially by me, but as the weeks develop, by each other - to some key readings and texts. Good teaching then is about discovery on the student’s part, not in the ‘reveal’ of the teaching. While Timothy Corrigan notes that “In most discussions of adaptation, a key term is fidelity.” Joy Gould Boyum correctly surmises that “Adaptations themselves reflect very different notions of ‘fidelity’.” Robert Stam goes further by asking whether “strict fidelity is even possible.” These are the key ideas I want the students to unpack and critique, and one way of doing this is to problematize the whole notion of a ‘source’ text. By doing this, I hope the students will themselves get close to Hutcheon’s more plural definition of adaptation: “Like classical imitation, adaptation also is not slavish copying; it is a
process of making the adapted material one’s own.”

The students I teach are predominantly production students. They spend most of their time in creative activity. There is often a perception among them that they always have to produce ‘original work,’ and that adapting and re-purposing existing material is somehow inferior to starting from scratch. So, there is a wider purpose here, through teaching adaptation studies, to get the students to challenge notions of ‘originality’ and privileged texts. This reflection on the process of adaptation can be used to frame debates and discussions relevant elsewhere in the students’ studies. If used effectively as a pedagogic tool, this method can forge links between hitherto perceived discreet units of study making for a much more cohesive (and logical) educative experience.

**The Interpretation**

The first part of the task, which ran for two weeks, involved the students writing in their blogs about what they thought the main themes expressed in Blake’s poem (“Never Seek To Tell Thy Love”) were. This phenomenological approach allowed the students to problematize the whole notice of a fixed ‘source’ text and this material was used in the formal teaching sessions that ran alongside this task. The responses to Blake’s poem were very varied, as expected. The main reason for selecting such a poem was initially for its polysemic potential:

- While the male in the poem has confessed all his ‘heart’, the female presence in the poem returns the gesture instead with an obvious display of ‘ghastly fears’ suggesting that her feelings are quite contrary (Josh).
- A cautionary tale of love and loss with potentially supernatural undertones (Tex).
- Maybe the person we should be paying attention to is the girl, who has suffered these incessant advances from a man that she feels nothing more than apathetic towards? (Dan).
- [Blake] is talking about how love is too great to be described and explained to someone (Charlotte).
- Consequences of not taking risks…both want to take it further, but neither can pluck up the courage (Jennifer).
- A love that doesn’t seem honest or right (Charli).
- [Blake] is advising that people should never force love onto someone, or tell a person you love them just for sake of telling them, it must be said at the right time to ensure that person will feel the same (Alan).

Some of these responses to the poem privilege the author, which can be seen as a consequence of the students’ own education and experience; they live in the world of the ‘auteur,’ based on their experience of the ‘authors’ they studied in high school to the names of the film directors that emblazon the posters they have on their bedroom walls. There is a sense perhaps in the student that authorship is something of a received truth, but it’s a truth that adaptation studies can challenge very effectively. In the adjacent online discussion forums which further supplemented the classroom discussions, students debated Foucault’s notion of ‘author function’ and Barthes’ ‘death of the author/birth of the reader’ position, as well as more general ideas of ‘auteurism.’ The general consensus seemed to be that ‘originality’ depended on a secure authorial voice.

- Some of the students took a far more cynical view of the poem’s themes and meanings: [An] Eerie presence within the poem…images of stalkers and pedophiles spring to mind! (Katie).
- And of course, there were more humorous ones:
  - And then he takes her with a sigh – I think we all know what than means! (George).
Don’t tell someone you love about your weird perversions (Colin).
He’s very frustrated! (Kevin).

Some students read the poem as not being one single narrative, with one authorial voice, but as three different stories:
Three mini-stories, each separate yet all…from a overarching narrative (Mateusz).
A slightly different part of the story in each verse (Vykkii).
First verse: paean to the ethereal and ephemeral qualities of love; second verse: warning of the ethereal and ephemeral qualities of love; third verse: lament for the ethereal and ephemeral qualities of love/time heals all wounds (Dean).

So here, the students are not only questioning the subject matter of the poem but also its structure, which must have a profound impact on any adaptation or reception of such an adaptation. It becomes clear in this stage of the course that the students’ previous and concurrent learning has an impact - in this case their high school studies and the narrative and authorship theories they had engaged with in their first year undergraduate work. While this is encouraging, is does perhaps highlight the often narrow focus of high school education.

So, this task serves to open up a text in a way perhaps not experienced by the students to date. Much A-Level teaching in the UK is ‘teaching by rote’ and is fairly dictatorial and unimaginative. Students are encouraged to commit facts about the texts to memory, while writing essays in a particularly defined way. In this task, by opening up texts and locating the learning as an experiential process, the student gains confidence and begins to see the creativity inherent in application of theory to texts. The knowledge a student has gained previously or elsewhere can be revisited, recontextualized and reapplied. Consequently for the purposes of exploring the very idea of source texts, or originality, some students used adjunct material in their interpretations, drawing on Blake’s own life and other works:

Blake believed in the concept of ‘free love’ and many of his other poems (e.g The Sick Rose) reiterate this (Flaura).

Blake…was well known for a few common themes: the innocence of children, the belief in free love, using nature to convey his ideas, and the firm belief we should not restrict our minds and creativity (Emma).

It was these last comments that provoked the most debate, as students began to question the fixity of source material in any adaptation, and again the notion of authorship. This allowed the students to explore Julie Sanders’ view that “Encouraged interplay between appropriations and their sources begins to emerge, then, as a fundamental, even vital, aspect of the reading or spectating experience, one productive of new meanings, applications and resonance.”[?] The students were beginning to understand the idea of multi-sourced texts, and most agreed at the end of this element of the activity, that, “a text could be adapted by fundamentally changing the original.”[?]

This served to prepare the students for the next task, which was to create their own adaptations of the poem.

The Adaptations
The next task, which again ran for 2 weeks, was one where the students had to pitch their ideas for an adaptation based on Blake’s poem. The brief was as follows:

The BBC is celebrating seminal British poets and is commissioning work based on, or adapted from key poems. Your poem is William Blake’s Never Seek to Tell Thy Love. Your task is to write a treatment (400 words maximum) for either a television program for BBC Two; a film for BBC Films/BBC One; a documentary for BBC Four [the specialist culture channel] or a piece of interactive media/art for BBCi [BBC
Interactive]. The best work will be challenging, but at the same time will be grounded in your own interpretation of Blake’s poem.

As expected, the students’ adaptations were very varied. This serves to further highlight that no one adaptation is the same as another, as well as problematizing notions of definition and textual supremacy. Hutcheon notes that

An emphasis on process allows us to expand the traditional focus of adaptation studies on medium specificity and individual comparative case-studies in order to consider as well relations among the modes of engagement: that is, it permits us to think about how adaptations allow people to tell, show, or interact with stories.

In this activity I wanted to highlight the dialogue between an interpretation of a text, and its subsequent adaptation, and I wanted the students to reflect on that process, as Hutcheon suggests, supported by Wolfgang Iser’s view that the, “reading process is a dynamic interaction [original italics] between text and reader.”

The following are the summaries of the treatments I took from the blogs and used in the teaching sessions. Interestingly there were some attempts at fidelity versions:

- A short animation which illustrates Blake’s poem in voiceover (James).
- An animation which uses the metaphor of the wind to illustrate the poem’s love triangle (Rosanna).
- A period piece set in the sixteenth century about a competition to win a lady’s affections (Kevin).

Some students went for a ‘period adaptation’ and others overtly referenced other texts and adaptations in their interpretations, again drawing form their own educative and cultural experiences:

- A supernatural demonic serial killer is pursed through the underworld by…himself… - like Jacob’s Ladder/Underworld (Luke).
- Ellena Blake is hurtled into a parallel universe in the aftermath of 9/11. Can she prevent the 100 year war? A bit like The Sarah Connor Chronicles (Dan).
- Loosely based on real-life events, and the murder of Milly Dowler – a bit like Boy A (Flaura).

There were also some versions which depended on some element of interaction to ‘complete’ the adaptation:

- You are Death, and you have to piece together a dying woman’s memories, and ultimately judge her. In the style of Myst (Ben).

Other referents, or sources, came largely from other visual media, rather than from literature and many students drew upon Guerric DeBona’s view that “as a general rule, those writing about film adaptation tend to think of the ‘precursor’ text in purely literary terms, not recognizing that every move is conditioned by a large set of influences from other media.”

Again, furthering the problematizing of source texts, some students drew upon references that sat outside the scope of the poem, often in the factual arena of current affairs:

- A Marine in Afghanistan sends a video message to his mother, the night before he is killed on patrol (Richard).
- A young filmmaker receives and anonymous email which is a script based on Blake’s poem, but set in Ceaușescu’s Romania (Dean).

This last treatment generated some discussion in the online forums where some students seemed to automatically adopt a fidelity position by pointing out that there was no email in Ceaușescu’s reign (1965–1989). So, it seemed that license could be taken with the text, as Cartmell
suggests, but when using specific historical instances, the adaptation had to be faithful to the
temporal and spatial context, if not the poem itself.

Some of the work critiqued theory which one version explicitly exploring Roland Barthes’
‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts[?]:

An interactive version of the poem where people can upload their own interpretations, and
adaptations and can view/comment on each others. The public then become ‘authors’
(Patrick).

Several students were of the view that new media had changed adaptation, and that was what they
wanted to explore in their versions, a position which chimes with Stam’s view that “the digital
media have further undermined the notion of original and copy by making virtually everything
‘copyable,’ so that the language of ‘originality’ gives way to a language of cut ‘n’ mix and
sampling.”[?] So, there were several ideas for ‘dating’ and relationship websites based on the
poem and a raft of video-game treatments which all had a romantic bittersweet narrative at their
core.

Reflection

During the final two weeks, the students were asked to reflect on their own adaptations
and the adaptations of their peers. Again, these comments were used as the primary content for the
supporting lectures and seminars. The students had to draw upon adaptation theory to explore and
critique their own work. The students were quick to start categorizing the work into different
‘types’ of adaptation.

As well as the obvious fidelity versions (or attempts at ideas of ‘faithfulness’ to a defined
source) a popular tool was Geoffrey Wagner’s (1975) three categories with many students
deciding that some of the adaptations were clearly offering a ‘commentary’ on Blake’s poem, as
Sanders notes: “Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source-text.”[?]

One such commentary was as Swpnil’s idea of making a documentary where the philosopher
Slavoj Žižek deconstructs each line of the poem, based on the 2005 documentary
Žižek! Colin’s “Complicated love-triangle, where one of the characters dies, another
becomes an alcoholic and the other gets arrested for indecent assault” was thought to be an
‘analogous’ adaptation by the other participants, again drawing on Wagner’s rubric. Other
analogous adaptations included this from Katie:

Existential narcissistic drama, where a man suffering from a multiple personality
disorder falls in love over the web. But it’s with his other personality. He kills
himself.

So, over the two weeks, in the blogs, and in the online discussion forums, some almost natural
categories started to emerge, based on the adaptation theories the student had been reading. As
well as the fidelity, commentary and analogous adaptations, there were also ‘interextual,’
‘heteroglossic’ and ‘participatory’ adaptations. Some interesting arguments developed online, and
in the formal teaching sessions as to what constituted a heteroglossic, or intertextual adaptation
and whether or not they were the same thing. Also, some students claimed that their adaptations
were ‘readerly’ with others stating that all adaptations must be ‘readerly’ in some way - therefore
all texts must be ‘readerly’ and therefore fidelity comparative positions are dishonest.

Many students wrote about the way in which their adaptation had altered the poem, citing
Cardwell’s view that adaptations can “rewire, review, re-activate and reconfigure” their source
material.[?] One student even went as far to state that: “I predict that [this adaptation] has so much
quality to it that I feel it threatens the poem and could become ‘canon’” (William). This rather
provocative view began a discussion which focused on the impact an adaptation could potentially have on the reputation of the adapted work, or source text, and its author(s). One student posted that she had not read Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* because she had found the Brian De Palma’s 1990 film adaptation so disappointing. Others felt that adaptation served to enhance an author’s status with many commenting that the reason for Jane Austen’s continuing popularity was entirely due to the Austen adaptation ‘industry.’

**A New Adaptation Studies?**

After six weeks of preparation and reflection the students were set a two-thousand-word essay – the traditional method for assessment on undergraduate courses. However in encountering the list of essay questions, the students realized that they had already completed the research for their essay. I had set the questions myself, but I took my cue from the online discussions and often posed the same questions the students were asking themselves and each other. Most of them found that they had already answered pretty much all the essay questions - often in great detail - in the blogs. This was especially true of an essay question which asked if an adaptation could damage or enhance an author’s reputation or status, as this was a popular thread. This was a deliberate design of the course as often the essay is seen as the end or ‘exit point’ by both teachers and students. Here it is much more part of the dialogue of learning and the essay questions were designed to respond to students, not the other way around which is often the case.

This reinforces the more traditional aspects of teaching and makes student participation and response central to the understanding of the subject. The students naturally dig deep into the literature to find support for their own creative work, rather than to find support for writing an essay. This I would argue is a far more meaningful way of teaching and one that facilitates a far deeper understanding of a topic. This teaching then, grounded adaptation studies in a more relevant context for today’s students and ultimately led to a more fruitful, enjoyable and critically productive experience than other forms of more directed study as Iser suggests that, “the reader’s enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive.”

However, beyond pedagogy, I would also suggest that these methods have something to offer adaptation studies and scholarship too. Adaptation here then is situated as a form of reception. These tasks can be read as reader responses to Blake’s poem. As Freund (1987) discusses, there has been the perception that the ‘text’ is in a privileged position, surround by the ‘universe,’ the ‘artist’ and the ‘audience.’ She argues then that any focus on the reader can look as if it is de-centering the authority of the text. I would suggest that this is no bad thing and the approach outlined in this chapter perhaps offers a more plural way of understanding the relationship between different media, and the texts that are the result of that relationship; this position therefore does not privilege one text, or one media, over another.

Through these adaptations we can see how Blake’s poem can be received and interpreted by different audiences, as for Claude Lévi-Strauss: “The function of repetition is to render the structure of the myth apparent.” Also, by its very nature, this exercise imbuces a text – in this case *Never Seek to Tell Thy Love* – with what Walter Benjamin (1999) calls an ‘afterlife:’ “An adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise.”

Over the six-week course, the students applied a range of methodologies in critically examining their own and each other’s work. Questions were posed throughout the period, asking
the students if their treatments should be compared to other adaptations (as argues Cardwell[?]; if their adaptations are dependent on a prior knowledge of the source-material (Hutcheon[?] and Sanders[?]); if these adaptations highlighted mutual dependencies between mediums (Corrigan[?]) or if their interpretations stood as autonomous works of art. More significantly the students discovered that adaptation can be seen as a response to a text where the reader becomes the writer. It also shows that there are no preferred readings of any text. Just as reading any fan fiction (fanfic) on the web can tell us much about the reception of film and television programs, allowing students to create their own adaptations can tell teachers how texts are received and interpreted. Adaptation furthers our understanding of a text and a focus on process serves to illuminate this. Encouraging the students to reflect and document that process furthers this understanding and allows them to learn much about adaptation, literature, television and new media as “fundamental to the practice, and indeed, to the enjoyment of literature.”[?] I would suggest here that the enjoyment of all texts depends on this dynamic dialogue between texts and the continual process of repetition and re-purposing; a process artificially replicated over a 6-week period by second year media undergraduates.

Finally, as a pedagogic tool, this method can be extended into other subject areas: reconstituting literary and other texts for a new application and then reflecting on that process is a very effective way of teaching. Online exercises foster team building and expose participants to the type of dialogue and debate that some never experience, especially if they are apprehensive of more ‘traditional’ forms of classroom interaction. Using the students’ own examples and experiences as part of formal teaching also builds confidence on the part of the student and over time the students will learn far more from each other, than from the teacher. So, here the teacher acts as a guide and facilitator, and no more.

The combination of e-learning and experiential learning, coupled with the framing device of more traditional classroom based practices can foster a host of transferable skills that students will take with them through their educational lives into their working lives, but on a personal note I also hope they will also retain a disdain for the perceived supremacy of one text, form, or media, over another.

**Epilogue**

When I told my students I was ‘adapting’ their adaptations for this chapter, they were amused to say the least, and immediately pointed me towards Sarah Cardwell’s work again: “It would be more accurate to view adaptation as the gradual development of a ‘meta-text’. This view recognises that a later adaptation may draw upon any earlier adaptations, as well as upon the primary source text.”[?] The following year, some students continued their dialogue with texts by attempting to produce adaptations of their own. One student, Chris, made a Flash animation adaptation of the Stephen King novel, *The Running Man*. His reasons for doing so were because he found the 1986 filmed version, directed by Paul Michael Glaser, disappointing. In his accompanying reflective analysis, Chris stated that his animation was more of a ‘commentary’ on the 1986 adaptation than a straight attempt at fidelity to the original novel.

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**NOTES**


year old boys in 1993.


[xi] Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation, 32.
[xix] Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation, 18.
[xx] Cardwell, Adaptation Revisited, 205.
[xxviii] Corrigan, Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader, 1.
[xxix] Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation, 1.