Adaptations: The Graphic Novel and Shakespeare's Hamlet

Candice Boren

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ADAPTATIONS: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL AND
SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET

by
Candice N. Boren

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English Department
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Advisor: Brandie Siegfried
Honors Coordinator: John Talbot
ABSTRACT

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Candice N. Boren

English Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis covers three main ideas. First, there is a discussion of how an adaptation should be studied, using the film adaptations of The Lord of the Rings in comparison to the books written by J. R. Tolkien. This establishes what relationship an adaptation has to its original text and the capability of achieving fidelity. The second section focuses on graphic novels and the unique characteristics they possess, looking specifically at two graphic novels, Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi and March by John Lewis. This section ends with an analysis of how the graphic novel could prove to be beneficial to Hamlet. The final section focuses on Hamlet itself and how two graphic adaptation, one illustrated by Nicki Greenberg and the other by Neil Babra, present this story in creative ways that express complex ideas using the characteristics of the graphic novel mentioned previously.
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Introduction

“The book was better.” This is a comment often made when looking at a film adaptation of a book. Whether the book was read before the movie was watched or after, this phrase is still the most common opinion given. What causes this preference for the novel over the film? Often, adaptations are judged based on their similarity to the original story, and since books are more commonly the first to be created, they typically take precedence over films. However, this method of examining the worth of an adaptation significantly restricts the value that an adaptation has and its contribution to both the story and the audience. To appropriately give adaptations the attention they deserve, they must be studied in terms of what value and insights they add to the story itself. Similarly, it is important to understand that adaptations do not only appear as movies that have been created from books, but are also operas, ballets, YouTube videos, and even graphic novels (the focus of this paper), each of which contributes unique characteristics to the experience of the adaptation. For the purpose of this paper, there will first be consideration of what an adaptation is and how it should be studied. This will include a justification of the choice of the graphic novel as the focus of study, before going to the extended analysis of two graphic novels (one illustrated by Nicki Greenberg the other by Neil Babra) and their contributions via adaptation to the story of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

Studying Adaptations

As mentioned above, the worth of an adaptation should not be measured by its fidelity to the original text. For the purposes of this paper, fidelity will specifically refer
to adherence to the original text as the author intended it, whether through dialogue, presentation (the way information is displayed), ideas (topics or messages), etc. Regarding this, Thomas Leitch, suggests, “Fidelity to its source text – whether it is conceived as successful in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole – is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense” (Leitch, 161). This shows that fidelity not only cannot be obtained in a full and complete sense, nor would it be desirable to do so. This is the case of The Lord of the Rings franchise, whose movies are praised for their adherence to the novels originally written by J. R. R. Tolkien, much of what is present in the books does not appear in the films, details are added, and focus is placed on aspects Tolkien did not emphasize. For example, in both the book and the movie Gandalf is captured by Saruman, yet the appearance of this segment differs between the two media. In the book, Gandalf recounts his experience at the Council of Elrond, while the film shows his story happening in real time, meaning the audience is able to observe events as they transpire rather than just experience a retelling of it. The additions and subtractions that are present between the two media suggest the necessity of changing aspects to best fit the opportunities and characteristics of the new medium.

If fidelity cannot be achieved, one can’t help but then question what the purpose of the original text is. If it is not to establish exactly what a story is meant to contain, then why have it at all? The role of the original story, whether it be text or film, is to create a framework for the reader or viewer to work within. It is a base layer built upon as the reader/viewer creates their own adaptation within their heads as they experience the sto-
ry. In the case of a novel, the original text will establish the number of characters, a broad idea of the location, general features of a certain character or their surroundings, and so forth. The reader then has to fill in the gaps with specifics (what each character, building, and other surroundings look like, how many trees abide in the cluster a few feet away, etc.), the original text acting as a cue to tell them when to do so by drawing the reader’s attention through general descriptions of what is to be focused on. When it comes to film, the visual features and surroundings are well-established, but the viewer now has to imagine what is going on within the minds of characters, or what may be happening that can’t be seen at that moment (which also often has cues through glimpses of actions occurring in the background or through short cuts). The original version of the story acts as a box where creativity expands, and concepts can be experimented with within the confines of established boundaries. When these boundaries are crossed, it often results in backlash and is deemed an unfit adaptation, such is the case with films like The Heroes of Olympus: Percy Jackson and The Lightning Thief (2010) or The Last Airbender (2010), both of which greatly strayed from the novels they were adapted from.

Within this box of creativity, the question still remains: Is fidelity possible? Could the scene mentioned above where Gandalf retells his adventures be presented in the movie exactly how it was described in the book? And if it can be, then should it be? In a sense, this scene could be presented in the film and book similarly. The actor playing Gandalf (Ian McKellen) could easily recount word-for-word what Tolkien wrote in The Fellowship of the Ring, achieving fidelity in this sense, but it still would not meet Tolkien’s exact intentions for this speech. McKellen would change the phrasing, speed, tone, and
inflection to fit how he pictures the lines being delivered, often with guidance from the
director (who is considered the main adapter for film). He would be interpreting the
passage in his own way, just as each individual would read this section differently from
one another, including Tolkien himself. Tolkien’s intentions, that is, may be irrelevant
to readers’ individual perceptions and imagination: each reader comes to the book with
differing backgrounds and experiences and will therefore not take away the same mes-
sages or meanings. Each time somebody approaches a book or movie, they are creating
an adaptation in their own mind: they do not see what is presented to them the same
way somebody else does. Strict fidelity, in short, is unattainable not only in transmission,
but in reception as well.

However, let’s say that fidelity can be achieved, and interpretations of readers/
viewers are not a problem, the question still remains: what use is fidelity? Let’s say that
Ian McKellen was able to deliver this passage in exactly the way that Tolkien intended
it to be delivered, assuming that Tolkien did have a thoroughly clear idea of what he
imagined for this scene. How entertaining would that be? Imagine watching Gandalf sit
in front of the screen and recite his experience, no visual effects, no music, nothing. Just
an old man telling a tale. Certainly, there is some entertainment value when it comes
to storytelling, but this is not what a person looks for when turning to cinema. Leitch
describes movies as “audio-visual”, meaning that the value of a movie relies upon not
only what one hears, but also what one sees. While the words that are said in a movie are
vastly important, it is their presentation that will make or break the film, both how they
are given by the actor and what is going on visually (blocking, lighting, camera shots,
camera angels, cuts, etc.). Take Aragorn’s speech at the Black Gate in *The Return of the King*. This powerful and moving speech only had the effect it does on the audience because of the filmic features accompanying it. The low angle shot on the Black Gate before the speech is given, establishing the fear and intimidation the soldiers must feel. The extreme long shots in a panoramic perspective displaying each army in turn, the Enemy’s army looking foreboding and overpowering, while Aragorn’s shrinks into itself. Reaction shots displaying soldier after soldier as Aragorn proceeds with his speech, showing the buildup of courage. Finally, the cuts from one soldier to another as they imitate Aragorn’s determined sword thrusting in the air, delivering courage and resolve to both the soldiers and the viewers. Without all of this, how impactful would this scene be? Would the audience watching the film be moved? None of these aspects are apparent in the book. There isn’t a detailed description of the Black Gate or the army, Aragorn’s movements are not presented, and the music is nonexistent. However, these are what make the film strong and allow the textual source to expand in new cinematic ways that help carry the magnificence and hardships of this scene. Fidelity is not ideal when switching between media because it eliminates the characteristics that make each medium unique and valuable.

This elimination of the desired audio/visual aspects occurs when Gandalf simply tells everyone at the Council of Elrond his tale in the film as he does in the book rather than it being shown to the viewers. As Chatman states, “film cannot reproduce many of the pleasures of reading novels, but it can produce other experiences of parallel value,” such as that of the visual and auditory additions presented above (Chatman, 163). If the speech were to be taken straight out of the book word for word, visual and audio
elements would still have to be added to make the scene impactful and entertaining.

Recognizing that I am still adapting it, I picture the scene progressing like this: Gandalf sits down in front of the council and begins to tell his tale. Slowly the camera zooms in on his face as Gandalf begins, and then cuts to various images that show what happened. You see Radagast delivering his message from Saruman, unintentionally sending Gandalf to his imprisonment. Then there is Gandalf leaving a note for Frodo before riding off to meet Saruman. He approaches the gate and begins his conversation with Saruman, attention being drawn to the things he notes in his speech: the ring on his hand, the scorn he feels, the change in the color of his clothing. Eventually, the guards come in and take Gandalf away, locking him up on the roof of the tower where he is able to see all the orcs and destruction that Saruman has created. It ends with Gandalf boarding a giant eagle that was sent as a messenger, getting a horse from Rohan, and making his way to Rivendell to meet the others. All through this, there is a voice-over of Gandalf, still sitting in Rivendell while the audience is taken on through this ordeal he previously suffered. Both the audio and visual aspects are apparent here and it is their inclusion that makes the story more than just a retelling but actually shows the viewers what is happening.

At first glance, this seems like a good solution. The text is being taken straight from the book, details included in the book are found in the film, fidelity must have, for the most part, been achieved. However, problems still arise. For example, it is hard to time changing the color of Saruman’s robes in a way that would give the same effect in the film that it does in the novel. A reader is able to accept that the robes had been faintly multi-colored from the moment Gandalf entered the room even though this detail is
not mentioned until Gandalf notices it himself. This allows them to feel the shock that Gandalf feels at this revelation without becoming confused by the appearance of the sudden change. Since the audience of the film is able to see Saruman throughout the entire scene, the timing for this revelation is harder to pull off. Should the change in color be visible from the moment Gandalf steps in, or after he makes the observation? If it is done from the moment Gandalf enters, then how is the audience meant to know that this is not normal? If the color changes the moment Gandalf acknowledges it, then there is a chance the audience will interpret this as the clothes altering at that moment, not having been so the entire time. It is hard to preserve the affect this revelation has in the book when the medium is changed to film without changing certain aspects and characteristics. Similarly, how should the characters move? Their actions are described very generally within the book, so there is no way to determine exactly when they walk or lift a hand, roll their eyes, turn their head, or even what facial expression to make. The story that is being told is so much more than just the words being read, and film has the responsibility to take what is between the lines and bring it to life.

To help explain why this transition of focus from the textual to the visual between the novel and film is necessary, Leitch states that “characters are by definition figures whose gaps allow readers or viewers to project for them a life that seems more vivid, realistic, and complex than their explicitly specified thoughts and actions” (Leitch, 159). I would say this statement not only applies to characters, but to a story in general. Nobody can encompass every detail in a story, there will always be things that are left up to the audience’s interpretation. What is left up to interpretation is different for both
film and the novel, in fact they are opposites of one another. Film, as stated above, covers the visual aspects of a story particularly well, showing how a character moves, carries themselves, what they are doing while having a conversation, how they do it, etc. A novel is more adept at showing the inner thoughts of a character, what they are thinking about a certain situation, how they are processing the information put in front of them, and so on, all of which are difficult to show in film. It is up to the audience to fill in the gaps that are left in both a film and a novel, and it is the process of filling these gaps that leads to the differences found in adaptations, proving that there is a greater emphasis placed on how a story is received than how it’s created.

An adaptation relies on the interpretation of the person who has created it. “Recognizing an adaptation” as Dennis Cutchins and Dennis Perry suggest, “is not the result of structural elements of the text” so much “as it is the result of perceptions of an audience” (Cutchins 6). This statement concludes that an adaptation is created by a person (or group of individuals) who have developed their own interpretation of a particular narrative and have sought to make it available to others. Each time somebody reads The Lord of the Rings, they develop a new adaptation. This also occurs when they watch it. How they view the story, the details they use to fill in the gaps, are what creates an adaptation. As a result, every story is set up to be an adaptation, even to the point that there isn’t an original story that can be identified. The moment a story is released to the public, whether it is through film, novel, or any other media, it is an adaptation. Even before then it can be seen as an adaptation, since even the creator themselves doesn’t look at what they have written the exact same way twice. This is desirable. It is part of the cre-
ative process: to step away from the work and come back later to look at it with new eyes, with new ideas filling the mind, with a adaptation ready to take form. A story is adapting from the moment it begins, so it is only natural for adaptations to continue to emerge every time the story is read or viewed and for people to bring their interpretations to life. Adapting is an integral part of storytelling.

The adaptive strategies reviewed above in *The Lord of the Rings* came about because those involved in creating the film interpreted moments in the book happening a certain way or wanted to place emphasis on certain features which they deemed important. For example, Radagast, the wizard who alerts Gandalf to Saruman’s summon in the book, is not included in the movie at all. The producers determined that this was an unnecessary character and took him out. While there are many factors that play a part in this decision, such as the cost of hiring another actor, the length of the film, and how the main characters are to be presented (there is a difference that occurs in Gandalf’s character when he is summoned by Saruman as opposed to seeking him out for aid), ultimately the decision to take this character out came from the idea that he was not a vitally important character. This is widely agreed with; while Radagast is a fun and interesting character, removing him doesn’t change things the way Legolas’ or Aragorn’s exclusion would. However, it’s possible that a reader of the novels might potentially find incredible value in Radagast as a character and view his deletion as a major fault. If a person such as this was in charge of adapting the novel into film, then Radagast would have been included. This would potentially result in changes to various aspects of the story, as would any adjustment that occurs in an adaptation. This shows how the adapter’s interpretation
plays a vital role in what messages are being sent through the adaptation and how these messages are to be perceived.

On a smaller scale, most of the movements that characters within the film make are a result of an actor/actress (typically under the director’s instructions) filling in the gaps of what is not disclosed in the written story. While J. R. R. Tolkien may include some movements that characters perform, he cannot include the majority of them without his audience losing interest and his book becoming considerably longer than it already is. As the producers adapt the book into a film, great care is put into filling these visual gaps, because it is the visual that is the focus of film (setting aside audio of course) and movement is the basis of what we see. This determination of where each character is and how they move is known as blocking and is determined by both the director and the individual actors themselves and is just one small portion of the many decisions that are involved in creating a film. Even the smallest of details are carefully thought out and planned, whether it be in costume design, set design, camera movement/angel, character movement, delivery of lines, etc. The leaves that are shown in close shots throughout The Lord of the Rings film have all been wired into a tree after the live leaves were removed. When Frodo pauses before confirming with Gandalf that nobody else is aware of their possession of the One Ring near the beginning of the first film (at which point Gandalf reveals Gollum’s awareness of such a thing), he doesn’t turn around to look at Gandalf until given the cue to do so. When trying to determine how to block scenes shot at Bag End, the director used a miniature of the set and a small camera to determine the easiest course of action before filming (Mix Media, 2018). Each moment in the film was care-
fully considered to determine the best way to get the desired messages across. In the case of a book, readers do this automatically in their head to some extent, at least enough that they get an idea of what is going on, though not to the extent that a film would. It is this insertion of actual movements that proves the impossibility of complete fidelity, because nobody is capable of doing precisely what an author intended or imagined when information is not provided. The shift from one medium to another requires fidelity to be lost.

While many adaptations adhere to the original text to a large degree, there are still many others that stray far from it. The question that arises with this is, while complete fidelity is impossible to achieve, shouldn’t an adaptation still strive to get as close as it can to the original text? Shouldn’t it fulfill fidelity to whatever extent it is capable of doing? Again, I would argue that the answer to this is no. An adaptation should not be expected to adhere to the original story as much as is humanly possible. The reasoning behind this is that “writers, filmmakers, new media artists, playwrights, and storytellers of all kinds don’t just keep retelling the same story. Instead they continue to reinvent [these stories] – reinscribing them with meanings, and remaking them in their own images over and over again” (Cutchins, 8). The goal of an adaptation is not to retell a story, but to bring something more to it. To support this claim, Cutchins and Perry use the example of *Frankenstein*. Frankenstein and his creature were created by Mary Shelley in 1817. Since then, there have been countless adaptations, many of which have played a large role in shaping how these characters and their story may be viewed. It is to the point that whenever Frankenstein is mentioned, a whole integrated complex comes to mind and additions that were not in the original story written by Shelley become an
integral part of its identity. The general idea that now comes to mind when Frankenstein is mentioned, how people today identify 'Frankenstein', can no longer be traced to one source, but is the result of multiple adaptations coming together with their different ideas and interpretations. Cutchins and Perry refer to this as the “Frankenstein Complex,” and it shows how adaptations are ideas in and of themselves rather than reiterations of the same story and therefore bring their own value (6).

Linda Hutcheon, a leading theorist on the study of adaptations, also recognizes this complex, not in relation to Frankenstein, but to adaptation studies as a whole. She states that “when we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works” (6). This ultimately shows that the same thing that happens with Frankenstein as a result of its many adaptations happens with any story that has an adaptation or multiple adaptations. Furthermore, it is also saying that an adaptation is not an adaptation unless it is viewed as such, so for those who have never read The Lord of the Rings series, the films are simply that, films, with no ties to anything else. An adaptation is only an adaptation when it is viewed as such. When it is seen as an adaptation, the complex mentioned before forms, and the only question left is just how deep this complex runs. In the case of Frankenstein, the original image of the story has been lost in people’s minds because of the vast number of adaptations that have been made, even to the point that Frankenstein is seen as the monster rather than the scientist.

For The Lord of the Rings, there is only one main adaptation (the films directed by Peter Jackson examined above) and therefore there is not a wide array of adaptations influencing the way the story is viewed. (There are multiple other adaptations, including
a television special and a video game, but they are not as widely known and therefore have not had enough of an impact for me to feel the need to study them in this paper).

Though the gap may be less, those who have read the book still come to the film with things they have taken away from the book, and once they have watched the film, every time they go back to the book, aspects of the film will influence the way they read the book. This is essentially the concept of once something is seen, it cannot be unseen.

While it may be forgotten and not have a direct influence upon the interpretation of the story at that moment, often there will still be an indirect impact through past experiences or the remembrance of it may cause a drastic (or not-so-drastic) shift in the developing adaptation. The same thing will happen as they approach other adaptations: what they took from the book and film will influence the way they view this new interpretation.

Adaptation are constantly building upon one another and creating new adaptations.

The point that is being made here is that an adaptation is meant “not only to remind ourselves of what it has in common with other texts, but also because we hope to be surprised and to find something new combined with something familiar” (Leitch 12).

An adaptation is valuable and worth studying because it brings in new themes, a new point of view, material to study that is not in the original text. This addition of new material and ideas is what leads to the ‘Frankenstein Complex’ discussed above. It may not be an entirely new work itself, but the differences that each adaptation brings, the new lens it provides, has just as much value and gives plenty to study, particularly when viewed in relation to other adaptations or to the original work. Ultimately, an adaptation should be studied not through its ability to be an exact copy of the original story (or as exact as
possible) but rather in regards for what it brings to the story.

**Why the Graphic Novel?**

Previously, a huge emphasis has been placed on the changes that occur as a novel gets adapted to film and the results that accompany those changes. But what about the graphic novel as a form of adaptation, particularly as an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*? The question that now arises is: Why the graphic novel? There is a plethora of film adaptations of *Hamlet*, so why not study those, particularly considering the foundation that has already been built on film adaptations in this paper? While there is much value in film as a form of adaptation, there are many characteristics of the graphic novel that allow more unique and creative methods involving both the visual and textual to be used to tell the story. The graphic novel, like a novel, allows a reader to “linger over a given passage, or look backward or forward; the reader is under no constraint or time pressure, as is the viewer of a film who of necessity must constantly move forward with the images on the screen” (Tabachnick 10). The style of the art sends its own messages and impressions, such as the fact that a more realistic design leads the reader to take the work more seriously while a cartoonish style implies comedy, though this is not a set rule and creators can challenge this idea, as will be seen with Niki Greenberg later (Harris-Fain, 2015). Most importantly, since the graphic novel as a genre is still new, those involved in the creation of them have the ability to branch out and experiment more, which results in many interesting and creative ways of telling a story (Garcia 184-185). In the example above, the use of film was to establish how an adaptation should be studied simply
because the general audience is more familiar with it, which enables a clear understanding of how an adaptation should be studied. With this understanding established, it will be easier to discuss the benefits of the graphic novel, starting with a thorough analysis of what the graphic novel has to offer as a medium in and of itself, then as it pertains to the story of *Hamlet*.

Furthermore, the graphic novel presents a sort of middle ground between novels and films. It combines the visual aspects of film with the literary strengths found in the novel. This means that the gaps that exists in relation to a novel (movement, surroundings, etc.) are, to an extent, filled in by the illustrations found within the graphic novel. Similarly, the text allows for some insight into a character’s brain, filling that gap that is left by film. However, neither of these gaps are filled entirely. The illustrations that help give the visual appeal of a film are not able to show exactly what is going on because they are stationary; they cannot actually move. However, they are capable of showing a clear image of the space around the character, a character’s reactions (facial expressions), and a character’s general placement within the setting in a more engaging and notable way than words in a book can. As for the novel’s ability to explain what is happening inside a character’s mind, this can’t be done to the same extent in a graphic novel simply because fewer words are used and most of the time the words that are used contain dialogue rather than descriptions. This does not mean that a graphic novel is incapable of showing a character’s inner thoughts, simply that the thoughts must be shown in a different and more concise way. The dialogue is often seen as more important and takes precedence over a narrator or the inner workings of individual characters, though a graphic novel can
have an emphasis placed on a narrator rather than dialogue, as is the case in *Persepolis* (discussed later). In most cases, the graphic novel will select one of these areas to focus on (either visual or textual), yet it is the combination of the two that strengthens the narrative, enabling (to a limited but productive degree) the purpose of both film and the novel to be fulfilled.

Focusing first on textual aspects, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi is an excellent example of a graphic novel looking into a character’s mind. This graphic novel is Satrapi’s memoir of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. As a result of it being her own personal story, her thoughts and observations become the primary force of the story, and therefore are prominent within the graphic novel, with images being a supporting factor, and dialogue being less apparent. For example, in one instance Marjane is talking to her mother about all the death that is going on around them, asking her mother if these deaths mean anything to her since she doesn’t seem to show much of a reaction to them. Her mother’s response is essentially that she does care, but they are still living, war and death have always been a part of their country, and it is just best to lower their heads and let this wave pass. Marjane’s inner conflict is then presented as she states, “I agreed with my mother. I too tried to think only of life. However, it wasn’t always easy: at school, they lined us up twice a day to mourn the war dead. They put on funeral marches, and we had to beat our breasts” (Satrapi, 94-95). Through the text, Satrapi gives us a glimpse into her mind, showing us her inner thoughts and enhancing the complexity of her as a character. It is clear that she agrees with her mother and wants to focus on life and survival, but the reality is that her character is more complicated than that, as can
be seen through the fact that she can’t ignore the death around her, not only because her environment won’t allow her to, but also because she does care, even though she tries not to. Her feelings and inner thoughts are clearly shown through the text provided, just like it is done in a regular novel.

What makes the statement shown above more powerful is the visual representation. In the panel depicting Marjane and her class mourning the war dead, Marjane’s facial expression (second from the left on the bottom row) shows confusion and conflicting feelings, allowing the audience to see rather than just read her inner turmoil. It is the combination of both the visual and textual representation of her inner feelings that gives the readers the necessary information to properly understand all that she is feeling and thinking.

Similarly, graphic novels are also good at representing a story visually, much like film. Such is the case with *March* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate
Powell. *March* tells the story of John Lewis and the role he played in the Civil Rights Movement. During the early stages of his involvement, Lewis decided that he wanted to go to Troy State, a college close to his parents’ home in Troy, Alabama. The problem is, this school does not allow blacks to attend. In order to achieve this goal, Lewis sent a letter to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for help and got in contact with a lawyer named Fred Gray, who represented Rosa Parks and was also Dr. King’s attorney. After several weeks, an appointment was set up for Lewis to meet with Dr. King.

The panels shown below depict Lewis as he travels to meet with Dr. King. The sequence focuses on the movement or journey itself, first depicting a car (which Lewis and Attorney Gray entered the page before) with a cloud of smoke billowing behind it as it leans forward, showing that it is in motion. The car is then seen pulling in front of a church building. The next few panels shows the path that Lewis and Attorney Gray take to get to where Dr. King is. They are first shown at the entrance of the church, where a staircase can be seen just to the left of them a short way down the hall. The next panel shows them descending these stairs, followed by Attorney Gray walking away from the staircase while Lewis is still halfway up it. They then proceed down another hall towards a door. One panel shows them at the end of the hall with the door in sight, the next with them in front of the door and knocking. Finally, they enter, and the reader sees the scene from Lewis’ point of view. The fact that these panels depict the journey that Lewis and Gray take is particularly interesting as this is not typically done. It allows the reader to walk in Lewis’ shoes and contemplate what he must be thinking at this moment. There is little dialogue or text to accompany this sequence, but the anxiety and doubt that
Lewis feels is still apparent as can be seen in close up images of his face, the emphasis on the distance he still has to travel in each panel, and the general feeling of tenseness. The reader gets the impression that at any moment Lewis could change his mind about the whole ordeal, decide that getting into Troy State is not actually worth all of the trouble he would have to go through. However, despite this hesitation, the reader can also see his resolve to keep going as he continues in each panel until he is finally facing Dr. King. This sequence also shows the ability that the visual has in acting as a window into the mind of a character. Not a word was used, but the reader is still able to get a good idea of what Lewis is thinking throughout this journey. The visual representations in the graphic novel not only give an idea of the surrounding, but also allow for a deeper understanding of each character.

Figure 2: John Lewis travels with Attorney Gray to see Martin Luther King Jr.
Aside from these visual and textual elements, the graphic novel is also able to present things in a figurative or metaphorical way that adds much to both the visual appeal and the textual significance of the story being told. Since graphic novels are printed, authors/illustrators have a free reign of using the page however they see fit, and often this results in symbolic representations of concepts presented. For example, graphic novels are able to create spaces or settings that do not exist physically in the story but are a depiction of an idea or concept found within the narrative, adding emphasis to what is being said and thought in the book as well as giving the audience interesting points of view that are not often included in books or movies unless a character is going through some sort of psychedelic trip. *Persepolis* has many good examples of this. Just after her uncle was killed, young Marjane distances herself from God, who she had ‘conversed’ with for much of her life but has now lost her belief in. After all of this, her one comment is “and so I was lost, without any bearings… what could be worse than that?” (Satrapi, 71). Accompanying this line is an image of her floating in complete darkness, with only a planet and a few stars floating around her. This simple image adds a great deal to the words that are being presented, helps the audience see their turmoil, while also catching the attention of the reader visually, leaving their eyes wandering around the empty space as they settle on the few objects that are there. The result of this is that it allows the reader to essentially get lost in her thoughts, in imagining what she could be thinking and feeling. This opportunity for imagination is found in all forms of storytelling and it ultimately allows the audience to understand a character’s inner feelings in whatever way they can, to create their own adaptation of what she is experiencing. In a graphic novel, it
is the combination of the visual and textual that allow this imagination to form, particularly when metaphorical scenes are being used.

In relation to *Hamlet*, it is important to remember that plays written by Shakespeare were meant to be performed before being published for reading. The visual is only seen in the script through stage directions that can often be broad and give just enough information for a general idea of how the scene is meant to be blocked. It is this absence of any explanation of movement and the surrounding scenery that makes the performance of the play necessary. However, unlike most playwrights, Shakespeare uses his dialogue to fulfill many of the textual aspects often found in novels. “Shakespeare’s dramaturgy allows him soliloquies and asides that make it easier to dramatize thought,” something akin to what novels achieve (Leitch, 158). Therefore, Shakespeare’s plays already show a balance between the visual and the textual when performed. What the
graphic novel does is allow the visual aspects to support the textual skills already present in Shakespeare’s works uniquely, permitting the audience to better understand and relate to the characters found in the play. To further enhance this effect, the graphic novel’s ability to provide symbolic or metaphorical representations open up an area for interpretation that a regular stage performance or film does not allow, which gives the audience metaphorical representation and also enables huge chunks of text that may have been cut to be included through impressions and subtle representations so that the message the passages contain can still be found (though in some cases this is still not achievable as many ideas are hard to capture when moving across media). Essentially, the graphic novel is a medium well-suited to the performance orientation that Shakespeare’s plays require.

**Hamlet and the Graphic Novel**

As mentioned above, the graphic novel has a unique ability to combine the visual with the textual, enabling distinctive insights into a character’s thoughts and emotions. This is a strength for any story in general, but it proves to be particularly helpful when it comes to enhancing the understanding of characters in various Shakespeare plays, such as *Hamlet*. As is common knowledge, Shakespeare plays are meant to be performed, and the graphic novel allows for a type of performance to take place through the visual elements while including and adjusting the text Shakespeare provides to ensure a deeper understanding of the characters themselves that the members of the audience are meant to connect to and understand.
When addressing the textual aspects of graphic novel adaptations of *Hamlet*, it is important to remember that many of these elements are achieved by Shakespeare himself through the words he chose, which are meant to reflect what a character is thinking. This is not typical of a play. As a result, most of the time the creators of these graphic novel adaptations focus more on the way the text is presented rather than what words they use (though there is still much thought placed into this, and changes can be made). It is the addition of the visual elements that enable a deeper meaning to accompany the words and a clearer and more impactful image of the characters and situations.

The two graphic novel adaptations of *Hamlet* that will be focused on for this paper are done by Niki Greenberg and Neil Babra. Greenberg’s graphic novel has a unique style that presents the characters as blobs of ink which allow for interesting methods to be used to tell the story, breaking through many of the boundaries that both film and novels possess. Babra’s takes a more realistic style, yet still does a great job of using the characteristics of the graphic novel to add greater meaning and express the story in a way that neither film nor the novel can, particularly through abstract or subtle means.

In Greenberg’s adaptation, all of the text found in *Hamlet* is transferred directly from the play and the characters are presented as blobs of ink that have taken unique shapes and have been given faces (as stated previously). Since they are made of ink, these faces are able to be removed and still be operational. Hamlet does just this at the beginning of his “To be or not to be” speech, removing his face right as he delivers the famous line “that is the question” (Greenberg, 169). He then proceeds to have a conversation with his own face. At first, his body is only talking to his face, while the face is held in his
hand and looks as if it is asleep, but then awakens and begins flying around the room as it gives the majority of the speech, the body only interjecting once or twice (see below). This gives the impression of Hamlet’s thoughts actually getting away from himself as his mind (or in this case, his face) explores this darkness that has amassed inside him, leading him to consider suicide. It is only after he approaches the fear of what is found on the other side, when he determines that it is better to “bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of”, that he is able to grab hold of his face again, essentially reining in his thoughts, and move back into the façade that he had before, no longer blatantly considering suicide (Greenberg 166-175). This clearly shows the inner turmoil that Hamlet is having with himself that is present in the text, allowing the audience to see this confusion and lack of surety with their own eyes and the text to be more of a window into what Hamlet is thinking than it would be without the visual representation. The inclusion of the visual gives the audience a better understand of the stress and fear that Hamlet is feeling.
To be or not to be.

To be or not to be.

That is the question.
To die! To sleep—

To sleep? Perchance to dream?

Ay, there's the rub.

For in that sleep of death
What dreams may come! When we have shuffled off
This mortal coil,
Must give us pause.

There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
Babra’s adaptation also makes use of abstract representation, but instead of wrestling with his own mind, Hamlet is shown facing death itself, being consumed by monsters, fighting against them, shedding his mortal form, etc. Therefore, the focus is placed more upon his fear of death and complimentary exhaustion with life rather than the idea of him having a sort of argument with himself. This idea of a contrast between life and death is seen right from the start, as Hamlet kneels on the floor and looks at a skeletal-like reflection of himself, his hand reaching down and meeting the skeleton’s. This is his initial contact with death, a door opening that allows him to interact with the monsters that follow, and it leads to his contemplations on life. Should he continue to let the afflictions that life presents come, and then suffer through them, presented by a monster coming out of the mouth of a man and wrapping its tentacles around Hamlet
as multiple arrows are protruding from his back? Or, should he fight against them and lead them to death, as shown by him slaying a figure with his appearance that then falls and drifts into the waters of death. The portrayal of him facing death after this shows him escaping the confines of a body, only to plunge into the unknown. As he realizes that it is only mystery that lies down that path, a silhouette of him is seen sheathing his sword, much like the ink blob Hamlet in the previous example placing his face back on, as a sign that he accepts what he has to deal with despite his desire to end it all because of his fear of the unknown. Even without the malleability of a character’s form, when realistic images take precedent, the visual can still be used in creative ways that enable deep insight into Hamlet’s feelings in this scene.

Figure 5: "To be or not to be" speech, Neil Babra’s adaptation.
These two different depictions of one scene in *Hamlet* each deals with the same subject matter, but the selected presentation places focus on two separate ideas: a fight with oneself and a fight with death. It is through the illustrations that this is done, that the words take on a different focus and alternate meaning even though they come from the same source. Greenberg does this by splitting Hamlet into two separate entities, one that explores the idea of being freed through death while the other holds on to the reality of life. Babra uses metaphysical scenes to show an actual fight taking place between death and Hamlet while also presenting the idea that death can be both freeing and terrifying. Despite the differences in specific messages and how they are delivered, each still fulfills the objective of seeing inside a character’s brain to better understand them and see just how complex they are. This addition of meaning is the power that is held in the simple act of placing an image with words.

However, the elaborate form that this speech took on cannot always be used. Often times these insights into Hamlet’s mind come in short asides that do not require such drastic images as those used in the “To be or not to be” speech. In this case, both graphic novels have turned these moments from soliloquy, as they would appear in plays and often movies, to thoughts, distinguished as such by either removing the dialogue box and leaving the words floating in midair, or placing the words in a thought bubble, establishing them as thought and therefore as a direct portrayal of their mind and the contemplations that can be found within, rather than the indirect representation that is done through an aside being said aloud, which makes it a depiction rather than an actual thought. The use of the thought bubble or floating words is another visual aid that
changes the meaning of the text slightly, giving it a different context than it had before (Hescher ii-xi).

Another example of the use of abstract images as a way of seeing into the minds of characters is the page from Greenberg’s graphic novel depicting Polonius telling Ophelia that all the affection Hamlet has shown her is false in Act 1 Scene 3. While she is being told this, there is a plant that comes in from the side of the page and literally eats away at Ophelia. This reflects the idea that Polonius’ words are eating away at her faith and confidence in Hamlet, leaving her less sure of both Hamlet and herself. This is a powerful way to show how words can affect the way a person thinks and fill them with doubt. Even as Ophelia tries to defend Hamlet, it is clear that her inner thoughts don’t entirely match what she is saying, and the readers understand her better as a result. Using a simple abstract representation, a deep message is being conveyed in a way that thoroughly sticks with the reader.

Figure 6: Polonius tell Ophelia that Hamlet doesn’t care about her, and his words eat away at her.
Taking a less abstract approach, deeper meaning can also be extracted from the way the characters are shown to move. Body language often reveals much about what a person is thinking and feeling, even more than their words may reveal. When a person’s body language is accompanied by dialogue, a greater understanding of what they are thinking, or what they are intending for others to perceive they are thinking, is even clearer. Take the page on the left shown below. In this scene, Hamlet is walking with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern up some stairs to an overlook. In these panels, Hamlet is shown slumping against the railing and separating himself from the others. These actions show his feelings of defeat and strengthen his words expressing that Denmark is a prison (Babra, 60). A similar situation is seen as Hamlet and Ophelia talk in the page shown on the right. Here, we get clear insight into not only how Hamlet is feeling (or more specifically how he seeks to be viewed), but we also get insights into Ophelia’s inner thoughts as she grows more uncomfortable and confused, as shown by her rubbing her neck, looking away from Hamlet, and overall avoiding him as much as she can while having a conversations with him (Babra, 83-87). In both cases, it is the specific movements that the characters execute that give glimpses into what they are feeling and thinking: their body language, facial expressions, and general movement play a key role in communication, particularly while combined with the words used.
While Greenberg’s style and use of ink blobs makes it harder to escape the abstract, she is still able to show the inner thoughts of a character through small means just as Babra did. In the panel shown below, Ophelia is seen frantically trying to track both her father’s movement and speech as he dashes from one spot to another. At this point, Polonius is creating explanations for why Hamlet treated Ophelia in such a strange manner after she ignored him at his behest, while Ophelia tries her best to keep up with his excited movements. Ophelia’s face is pointing in three directions at once to express the rapid movement, and with each face, her anxiety and confusion about both her father’s words and her recent interaction with Hamlet are evident. To further this sense of insecurity, her arms are held close to her body, which is typically a sign of seeking comfort.
when one is in a disconcerting situation. While no words are said by her in this panel, the frantic actions she takes, accompanied by the story she told before and the words her father is currently spouting off, allow the reader to understand what may be going on in her mind at that moment. Her inner thoughts become clear.

Polonius’ rapid actions also give a glimpse into his inner thoughts but are vastly different from Ophelia’s even though the movements could be explained quite similarly. Much like how Ophelia’s face is seen at three different angles simultaneously, Polonius is seen occupying four different locations on the page, corresponding to where Ophelia is looking. This shows him literally bouncing from one area to another as his thoughts take on a similar path. Throughout the play, Polonius speaks in such a way that shows him to be addled and sporadic, and his movements in this scene are meant to depict that as well.
Both the words and the images used in this instance are a direct representation of his scattered way of thinking, and therefore become insights into his inner thoughts concerning Hamlet and his current actions and begins to develop a plan for how to analyze this. Both of these instances show how even small changes such as facial expressions and posture can convey large, complicated messages.

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. When combining the two, the impressions and ideas that are presented take on a far deeper meaning than either can do alone. Graphic novels enable this joint representation to take shape and engage in creative and unique ways, allowing complex ideas that are hard to present in any one medium to be conveyed to the audience clearly and succinctly. Both Greenberg and Babra have shown that by using the visual in combination with the textual, a deeper understanding of the characters in *Hamlet* is achieved. This middle ground between film and novel enables a greater and more unique understanding to be created than can be found in either of them separately, proving that there is great worth in the graphic novel as a form of adaptation.

**Conclusion**

It is easy to see an adaptation as a mere copy of the original story and make a quick judgement based on that presumption. However, that is not what an adaptation is meant to be. An adaptation's purpose is to retell a story in a new light, to introduce new ideas. The graphic novel is one medium of telling stories that allows for complicated and interesting ideas to be conveyed through the combination of words and pictures,
integrating the strengths of both the novel and the film. The graphic novel’s ability to use visual and textual aspects (such as movement, the expression of a character’s inner thoughts, and abstract representations of complex messages) enables it to convey concepts that neither the novel nor film can do alone. It is through these visual and textual methods that they are able to fulfill Cutchins’ and Perry’s claim that an audience hopes “to be surprised and to find something new combined with something familiar” (Cutchins 12). Even in the case of the adaptations of Hamlet shown above where the story itself doesn’t change much between each retelling, many new ideas are conveyed in a variety of ways, from large, convoluted abstract representations such as can be found in the “to be or not to be” speech, to the smaller, less abstract methods found throughout each adaptation.

Adaptations don’t only come in the form of graphic novels or films, but in every medium that a story can be told in. Each medium, from novel to film, from ballet to play, has its own strengths, its own expectations, its own way of conveying messages, and yet each one is able to effectively and beautifully tell a story. The shift from one medium to another causes some details to be lost, yet this does not ultimately mean that any storytelling method is worth less than another. It is the changes that occur within a story that make adaptations meaningful and worth their production.


