***Northanger Abbey*: A New Movie Musical**

In adapting Jane Austen’s novel *Northanger Abbey* from book to film the goal will be to avoid subjecting the story to adaptation sickness, “the various maladies and problems that afflict films adapted from books” (Olson). Adaptation sickness occurs when the team creating a film adaptation loses sight of the elements that make a book’s story important to its readers. There are three elements of a story that should not be changed in adaptation: anything involving character development, plot development, or the author’s thesis. With these key points in mind we can adapt *Northanger Abbey* in a way that connects it with modern audiences while still respecting Austen’s work.

In this adaptation I intend to make *Northanger Abbey* into a movie musical. The story’s setting gives the opportunity for large group songs, which can quickly convey the story’s tone and Bath’s distinct character. And Catherine’s dramatic imagination will be better served by music’s ability to evoke emotion than it would be by plain dialogue.

When adapting a work to film it is easiest to start by breaking down the plot into its core moments. *Northanger Abbey*’s story has eight key sections: (1) Catherine’s youth, (2) a young woman in Bath, (3) lovers and brothers, (4) imagination and reality, (5) adventures in Northanger Abbey, (6) the very model of a murderous Major General, (7) expulsion, (8) resolution. These eight segments will transform into the movie’s three-act format. These acts are the setup, the confrontation, and the resolution (Moura). The setup covers segments 1 and 2, and includes our inciting incident, which “provokes a change in the protagonist’s routine” (Moura). The incident is Catherine’s trip to Bath. The first act also involves our film’s first plot point: meeting Henry Tilney. The second act, confrontation, builds in the story’s subplots: John Thorpe’s infatuation, Isabella’s engagement to James, and Catherine’s fantasies about the fate of Mrs. Tilney. This section also includes most of the plot’s segments, 3 through 7, and our story’s second core plot point: the General’s rude dismissal. The story’s final segment is its resolution: the crisis of Catherine’s return to Fullerton and the story’s subsequent falling action.

Within this framework we can decide which elements of the story to include or edit out. In Catherine’s youth it would be easy to cut her development in favor of skipping ahead to the heart of the plot, but this part of the story must be maintained to develop the film’s setting and establish Catherine’s basic character traits. It will be difficult, but important, to convey the character Austen describes. “She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without color, dark lank hair, and strong features . . .” (Austen 5). An introductory song conveying the Morland family and Catherine’s developing personality would start the movie. Think of “Maria” (*The Sound of Music*), “Do You Wanna Build a Snowman” (*Frozen*), and “Where You Are” (*Moana*).

Once we have established Catherine’s background the story will progress to the inciting incident. This moment is also where we will insert Catherine’s “I Want” song, which informs the audience “what characters desire, what motivates them” (Kenrick). Within this song we will include an explanation of the expectations set for women in Austen’s time. Catherine will express her excitement for the trip, the possible engagement opportunities, and her trepidation for leaving her home for the first time. We can also use this scene to visually show Catherine’s development at seventeen: “her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind” (Austen 12). Think of this song as “For the First Time in Forever” (*Frozen*), “How Far I’ll Go” (*Moana*), and “The Wizard and I” (*Wicked*).

During Catherine’s time in Bath we must take great to what to include in the film. This is the beginning of Austen developing her thesis about how the struggles of finding love can strengthen a relationship instead of weakening it. It would be easy for a film adaptation to turn this novel into a simpler love story, but our script will take care to establish Catherine’s opinions and show their consequences. We will open her time in Bath with a large group number to quickly convey the setting and portray the people in town. The song will be reminiscent of “One Short Day” (*Wicked*), “Belle” (*Beauty and the Beast*), and “Carrying the Banner” (*Newsies*). Modern audiences will have trouble relating to the importance of balls and socializing in early-19th-century Bath. To alleviate any confusion, the song will express society’s expectations for young men and women in the town. During this piece the film will take moments to focus on Catherine’s relationship with Mrs. Allen. Their conversations serve to develop their characters and therefore meet the criteria for inclusion

We will include all the major plot points of sections 3 to 4: meeting the Thorpes and Tilneys, the carriage ride to Blaize Castle, Isabella and James’s engagement, and Catherine’s invitation to Northanger Abbey. Within these scenes the script will include key quotations from the novel, and focus on character and plot development. In the effort to focus the story the film’s script will cut Catherine’s first ride with John Thorpe. This moment does not develop his character more than can be done in other scenes. He talks about his horses and gig in their first meeting, which conveys information about his character and the story’s time period, but the audience does not need to hear him explain horses again on their subsequent trip.

The script will also lessen the time spent developing Catherine’s friendship with Isabella. Much of their relationship is explained through exposition, and film is better served by visuals, so their time together will not take as long to convey. That said, the script will still include the moments necessary to develop Catherine’s character and capture Isabella’s flirtatious nature. Through a montage the audience will see the two women in the Pump Room and strolling about town, attracting young men’s attention. They will also see Catherine reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which she will discuss in her later conversations with the Tilney siblings. Such moments could be boring to modern audiences, but by conveying them quickly in a montage we can show the key moments and settings without slowing the story through exposition.

Before that montage begins Catherine will have already met Henry Tilney, a scene that the film will convey, as in the book, with an emphasis on the witty dialogue. Another important moment to include is when Catherine meets Eleanor Tilney and their promise to walk together. This scene builds to the dramatic moment when John lies to Catherine about seeing the Tilneys in town. Before the audience reaches this moment, the film will show another ball. This time we will see Catherine find Tilney at the expense of John. The subsequent fight over Catherine’s attentions develops both men’s characters and sets up a later conversation between Catherine and John.

The confrontation at the ball and subsequent carriage ride convey important character details for the entire main cast. The heroine’s only consolation on her unwanted trip out of town is the chance of visiting Blaize Castle: “the happiness of a progress through a long suite of lofty rooms, exhibiting the remains of magnificent furniture…or even of having their lamp, their only lamp, extinguished by a sudden gust of wind . . .” (Austen 81). These thoughts are important in developing Catherine’s obsession with dark romance but nigh impossible to convey in film without having her state them in boring dialogue. A solo song here will serve to capture her excitement, which is still mixed with disappointment over missing the chance to walk with the Tilneys. This piece would be reminiscent of “Far From the Home I Love” (*Fiddler on the Roof*) in that it expresses both the desire to move ahead with the current situation and the drive to choose a different path.

After returning to Bath, the film will go through Catherine’s apologies to the Tilneys and take a moment to focus on John’s interaction with General Tilney. It will be important to include them in a close-up, as their conversation factors so heavily in the story’s conflict. This section of the story will end with Catherine finally taking her walk with the Tilneys, learning of James’s and Isabella’s engagement, and her confused talk with John. During the walk the film will continue to focus on Austen’s witty dialogue, as well as take advantage of the English scenery. James’s and Isabella’s engagement will be captured through another song, though their love ballad will be cut short when Isabella realizes her beau is not as wealthy as she had hoped. Having a song here will further lessen the book’s exposition, as well as cut down on the time needed to reach Isabella’s disappointment. After Isabella leaves, dejected, we will take a moment for John’s confused almost-proposal. This scene is valuable in showing Catherine’s inexperience with men, and it furthers the plot towards John’s eventual betrayal.

As the script moves into the novel’s second part we will take the time for another ball, during which the film will introduce Captain Tilney and lay the groundwork for his relationship with Isabella. The film will take time to include John’s intention to propose to Catherine, as her refusal is another step forward in the plot, but we will quickly move along with her trip to Northanger Abbey.

During the ride toward the abbey Catherine can spend time with Henry. Her time with Eleanor on the trip is not as important to the plot, so the film will place her with Henry for the entire journey. That said, we will still take a moment to remark on how it may be inappropriate for her to ride alone with a young man, for that concern would hang over a woman of the time. Modern audiences may forget the dangers of gossip to young women like Catherine, so taking a moment to assert it is important to maintaining the film’s setting. During the trip we have an opportunity to create a song for Henry. His playful description of the abbey, used to tease Catherine about her gothic fantasies, is better suited to a dramatic song than to dialogue. Instead of watching the characters talk, there is the opportunity for music to convey the proper tone. Think of songs such as “Hellfire” (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), “Be Prepared” (*The Lion King*), and “Epiphany” (*Sweeney Todd*), but in the *Northanger Abbey* film the song will be more playful in tone. Henry wants to tease Catherine, but his intent is not malicious.

Once we arrive at the abbey it will be important to focus on Catherine’s disappointment with its normalcy. She could have a reprise of Henry’s song, in which she tries to find the abbey’s mysteries but is stymied. The film will include Catherine’s tour with the General, but will not focus too heavily on featuring every aspect. Using film’s visual advantage we can convey the abbey’s look and Catherine’s reactions in less time than is needed in the novel. During the tour the film will still take care to focus on Catherine’s growing suspicions about Mrs. Tilney’s demise. After she decides to investigate the late woman’s apartments, Catherine could have a second reprise of Henry’s song, in a final hope of finding gothic adventure.

At this point the film is at its seventh section and reaching the second main plot point, which ends the confrontation act: General Tilney’s sudden change of heart and Catherine’s subsequent expulsion from Northanger. Before we reach that point we will see Catherine’s relationships with the Tilney siblings grow. During these scenes I would add a moment that Austen does not: Eleanor revealing her beau. This subplot is essential to the resolution of our heroine’s story, yet receives no build up. While it is important for the film to honor its source material and include as much relevant information as possible, it is also reasonable to add moments that the novel lacks in the interest of furthering the plot’s logic. In her remaining time at the abbey the film will also include Henry scolding Catherine for her insulting fantasies about his mother’s death. This scene is essential to showing that the pair has a real relationship. They care for each other enough to scold when one behaves inappropriately. This moment both serves to relate the pair as a realistic couple that modern audiences can relate to, and it furthers Austen’s thesis that true love is strengthened by hardship.

A key point in the film’s rising action is when we learn of the end to James’s engagement. Instead of showing Catherine reading the letter, the film will have James sing a solo, bemoaning love’s risks. At some point, John could enter the song as well, revealing his dissatisfaction with Catherine’s refusal and hinting at his role in her future crisis. This would be dramatic irony for the audience to build tension as they wait for the third act; Catherine would not know of John’s thoughts. The subsequent letter from Isabella would not be handled with a song, as it is the conclusion of her arc, and she ends with a thud. It will still be included as an important character moment, but the tone of their relationship’s end is best conveyed with a drop rather than a prolonged discussion or musical piece.

Catherine’s expulsion from the abbey should be dealt with brusquely to convey its jarring discourtesy. Eleanor tells Catherine of her father’s order, Catherine says she can be ready to leave by morning, then we cut to her out on the front lawn, waiting for the carriage in shock. The film will show her alone. In the time period she may have expected help with her luggage, but it would be more effective to show her struggling with the bags alone. A modern audience will see her as more desperate if she has as little help as possible. When she reaches her family their worry can convey the full brunt of the General’s inappropriate treatment and will show how risky Catherine’s journey could have been.

*Northanger Abbey*’s ending is the novel’s weakest section. Since almost the entire resolution is narrated in prose, the film will have to add dialogue and scenes that Austen did not write. We will include all the key moments in the plot’s final section, but build up to Henry’s arrival and Eleanor’s reveal. Henry’s affection is barely detailed in the novel, which may reflect sensibilities of the time but does not approach the levels of love expected by modern audiences. A love song is required. A song along the lines of “I See the Light” (*Tangled*), “All I Ask of You” (*Phantom of the Opera*), and “The Next Ten Minutes” (*The Last Five Years*). After the couple’s dramatic reunion and declarations the film can go into the explanations of what happened. Flashbacks to key moments the audience might have missed earlier in the film will help bolster the story’s exposition. We would highlight John’s two conversations with the General, Eleanor writing letters to her beau, and the General’s affected attentions toward Catherine. The novel does not show these moments, but film can hide them in background shots.

To heighten the resolution’s tension we would perhaps send Catherine back to Northanger Abbey for a confrontation pitting her against the General. Eleanor would petition her father to accept the match, using her logic and references to her own successful marriage. Catherine and Henry would also have to stand up for themselves, a character moment we don’t see in the novel. Films love to have their heroes face a final villain in the third act, and adding this moment creates that opportunity. The film would end on the pair’s happy union, perhaps with a reprise of the love song to wrap a bow on the whole affair.

In adapting a novel to film it is easy to miss key moments and themes to make something more visually impressive. To turn *Northanger Abbey* into a movie musical the film will keep tight focus on the book’s themes of love and constancy, its core character development, and main plot-advancing moments. Intermingled with these key elements will be songs to heighten the story's emotions and lessen its exposition. The film will hold the novel’s heart by maintaining its key elements and expanding its existing themes.