

SCRIPT REPORT

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Title: DESPERATE REMEDIES
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GENERAL COMMENTS

Adapting one of Thomas Hardy's lesser-known novel is definitely a good idea, especially as there's a strong demand for scripts based on known IPs these days. In fact, scripts based on original ideas are far and few. Furthermore, Cytherea is a character who has strong kinship with one of Hardy's most popular heroine Tess of D'Urberville.

Before we discuss your script, I have one caveat: I have not read the source material. However, I have read a long synopsis of the book to familiarise myself with the story. This also gives some idea of how you've approached your adaptation.

No doubt that you have successfully grabbed the main gist of Hardy's novel: A young woman becomes the victim of an elderly lady intent of marrying her to her illegitimate son. As a result, your script has got all the "juicy" elements of the novel.

However, there are issues which need looking at. The first one is that your script is way too long at 124 pages. It also reads like a rough draft (some scenes are not scripted). Here are some examples:

Page 9, scene 13: He asks for Mr. Gradfield – There should be dialogue here.

Page 10, scene 15: He asks the woman a question – What's his line?

Page 25, scene 35: This whole scene needs scripting.

This is all fine because a rough draft is all part of the process.

However, the real issue is that you have chosen to remain as faithful as possible to the book. That also goes for the dialogue. As stated above, I have not read the novel, but very large parts of your script felt like I was actually reading the novel. Obviously, this needs to be addressed. We will discuss this below.

Screenplay style is also a problem. There's a tendency to overwrite throughout the script, but this is easily solvable.

Lastly, and most importantly, we need to think about your audience. Adapting an old novel is all about finding connections with a modern audience, so it resonates with them.

For these reasons, I strongly feel that you need to go back to drawing board. Does this mean that you need to throw out your current draft in its entirety? Absolutely not. There *ARE* very good things in it. It's all about reshaping your script, and this is what my script report will mainly be about: giving you the tools and pointers for a new approach to your adaptation.

Let's start...

1 – STYLE AND FORMAT

Even though story is the most important thing in a script, the way you communicate it is just as important. After all, a script is all about “projecting” the film in your reader(s)’s mind. Action lines (or stage directions) and dialogue must be tight, lean and mean throughout the script. The reason is simple: reader(s), producers, distributors, actors, financiers, etc. love a quick and easy read because of time constraints.

Here is an example from your script:

EXT. STREET – DAY

A pretty, blonde, young woman of around eighteen is walking in the direction of the town hall which is immediately opposite to a small church with a new spire being built.

This is a convoluted, hard to read scene. So, how about:

EXT. STREET – DAY

A pretty, blonde, young woman of around eighteen is walking in the direction of the town hall. Across from it, the spire of a small church is being built.

Tighter and shorter sentences. I am sure you can do better, but I hope you get my gist. However, this still has problems. A golden rule is: never use the progressive tense and/or passive voice in a script. Always use the Present Tense: it's more immediate and... easier to read. So, let's tweak this some more:

EXT. STREET - DAY

A pretty, blonde, young woman of around eighteen walks in the direction of the town hall. Across from it, the spire of a small church is under construction.

Better but it can still be tighter. Perhaps something like:

EXT. STREET - DAY

A pretty, blonde woman of around eighteen walks towards the town hall. Across from it, the spire of a small church is under construction.

If you write: "young woman of around eighteen", you don't need "young" because "eighteen" already suggests that she's young. However, we are missing another rule of screenwriting: when you introduce a new character, always and *immediately* give us their name in capital letters. Once you've done this, write their names in small letters. Incidentally, after you've named a character, always stick to their name (in your script, Edward is referred as Edward or Springrove Jr., and this is very confusing).

Also, avoid generic names for your characters. "A man" could be referred to "FAT BLOKE". "RECTOR" should perhaps be "REVEREND SMITH".

Anyway, back to the scene. So, it could become:

EXT. STREET - DAY

CYTHEREA, a pretty, blonde woman of around eighteen, walks towards the town hall. Across from it, the spire of a small church is under construction.

As a script should always be visual, never hesitate to add visual flourishes in your prose. Let's try this:

EXT. STREET - DAY

CYTHEREA, a pretty, blonde woman of around eighteen, saunters (hurries? Strolls?) towards the town hall. Across from it, WORKERS build the spire of a small church.

Let's dig deeper here. When describing a character, it's always better to avoid physical descriptions. Concentrate on the *essence* of the character. What if your producers want to target a well-known actress who is a brunette or a redhead? And believe me, they will. Raising money is all about securing bankable actors. Also, "pretty blonde" is very generic. On a more subtle level, nobody likes a character who is reduced to their physical attributes these days (especially female characters).

So, let's try this:

EXT. STREET - DAY

CYTHEREA, an 18-year-old who radiates softness, saunters towards the town hall. Across from it, WORKERS build the spire of a small church.

This might not be what you want to write, and I am sure you can do ten times better. However, I must insist on the importance of mastering screenplay format and rules. This will mark you as a pro. Writing tight, entertaining, and visual prose is also of paramount importance: it drags your reader(s) into the story and makes sure they stay in it. Talking from experience, I rarely read a script past page 10 if the prose is not sharp, punchy, and visual and/or if the basic rules are not applied. This also goes with decision makers in the industry.

My apologies for being a pain about this. If you want to delve deeper into that aspect of screenwriting, I'd recommend reading David Trottier's THE SCREENWRITER'S BIBLE.

Now onto the story.

2 – A MODERN ADAPTATION

As stated above, adapting an old novel is all about making sure that it resonates with today's audiences. Furthermore, you are in luck: "revisionist", female-led versions of old novels are very hot these days.

The first problem with your adaptation is that Cytherea still is a 19th century heroine: weak, innocent, and barely in control of her destiny. This is very apparent from page 78 in your script: Cytherea disappears from your narrative, and who sorts out her problems? The men (Edward, Owen, Rector, etc.) I might be completely wrong, but I don't think that this will go down well with a modern audience.

Furthermore, Cytherea is your main protagonist, so she should lead your story from beginning to end. Audiences like a strong heroine. Vulnerable, yes... but not weak.

The second problem is the novel is fairly melodramatic. This is very much reflected in the dialogue: page 94, Springrove Jr.: 'My stolen pet lamb!' I am not sure about you, but my instinct tells me that such line would spark unwanted laughter. And your script is definitely not a comedy. An emotional story is fine. A melodramatic story, not so much.

The third problem is that the script doesn't make enough of the darkness of the novel. It might be that the novel is primarily a love story with all its melodramatic elements. But what about Mr. Manston and Mrs. Aldclyffe? These are quintessentially Gothic characters.

A strong heroine and a darker story might be the solutions for your next draft(s). On this point, I am not sure that your adaptation can be a light comedy (such Austen's film adaptation of EMMA, for example). It has murder, deceit, arson, etc. Hence my suggestion to go for a darker story.

Now onto the next stage:

3 – RESHAPING THE SCRIPT

In order to reshape your next draft, I'd strongly recommend the following:

- a) Tell your story exclusively (or at least, as much as you can) through Cytherea's Point Of View. Unlike novels which are quite at ease with many point-of-views in terms of storytelling, a script works a lot better with one point-of-view (unless you're writing an "ensemble" film which your script is not).

Some explanation: a script tends to be protagonist-led simply because it needs a bankable actor (a star) to raise finance. If a producer is interested in a script, their first question is always: who do you see playing the main part? And a star, well, is a star precisely because they want to carry the film (or your story) from beginning to end. They want to be absolutely central to your story.

Another thing to remember is that a script is most exclusively one character's journey. Everything that happens happens through your main character. The reason is simple:

your audience wants to be taken on a ride. They want to live an adventure vicariously... through your main character. In many ways, a writer's job is to seat their audience next to the protagonist before taking them on a rollercoaster. In other words, an audience wants to experience and live your protagonist's trials and tribulations. And that's why a script doesn't do multiple point-of-views very well.

There is no doubt that telling story purely from one point of view is very challenging, but it's dramatically far more satisfying for a film.

On this point, it's worth noting that the adaptation of *TESS D'UBERVILLE* did exactly that: the script (and the film) was all about Tess. She drives almost every scene and story beat from the beginning to the end. It was a successful film with the critics and audiences.

- b) List the main events of the novel – especially the ones pertaining to Cytherea – and... throw out the novel. You only need to work with these “events” otherwise known as “Story Beats”. Reshaping and telling your story by going back forth between your computer and the novel is not something I would recommend.

You need to be ruthless. The novel is the novel, and the script is *your own take* on the story. Successful adaptations are rarely faithful to their source material. A good writer takes the bare bones of the novel, and then they do their own thing.

- c) Delve deeper into the Gothic elements of the novel. “Gothic” contains many commercial elements: horror, psychosexual drama, thriller, etc. Although it's an entirely story, *LADY IN BLACK* is a great example of a Gothic film (it was also very successful): dark, scary, mysterious, etc. Your script as a Gothic story would play very well with a modern audience.

Now let's look how we can reshape your script in concrete terms.

4 – A NEW STORY STRUCTURE

Our mission here is to aim for a tight, pacy, female-led story. Our first question is: what is this story about?

The bare bones of the novel are clear. The story roughly goes something like this: after the death of her father, a young woman takes up a job as maid for a rich lady. She is also in love with a young architect. The rich lady and her son destroy the young woman's relationship and manipulate her to marry him. However, the young lady discovers that she has been lied to. Will the young lady and the architect be reunited?

So, let's go back to your script and see how we can reshape the next draft. Here are what I think should be the main movements of your story:

- a) I would cut the first scene and start with Scenes 2 to 5 (pages 1-3): the death of Cytherea's father. It's a strong, dramatic opening.
- b) From then on, the story takes way too long to get going. It mainly deals with the aftermath of the Father's death and Cytherea & Edward's budding relationship. Until page 31, when Cytherea meets and takes up a job with Mrs. Aldclyffe. That's 28 pages in which we are not getting to the point of the story: Cytherea falling into Mrs. Aldclyffe's clutches. In other words, the quicker you get to that Cytherea and Mrs. Aldclyffe's first meeting, the better.

Here, I'd really boil down the main story beats: Cytherea & Owen have been left no money. They leave town. Owen finds a job, introduces Edward to Cytherea, Cytherea looking for a job and, of course, Cytherea and Edward falling for each other.

Let's not forget the point of view of your story. No need to show Owen meeting Edward at work. One day, Cytherea is at home, and Owen come in with his colleague Edward in tow. Again, live and tell your story through Cytherea.

(A quick note here: avoid all the "letters and Voice Overs" business to tell your story. It really slows down your narrative unnecessarily. There must be immediacy and urgency about your story).

- c) **Pages 32-58:** This part of your script works well. Cytherea gets deeper in Mrs. Aldclyffe and Mr. Manston's world as they weave a web of deceit around her.

However, I wouldn't deal with Cytherea & Edward's relationship with letters and voice overs (Scene 45 and scene 56). Too easy and convenient.

Scene 45 deals with Edward hesitating to tell Cytherea that he is engaged. Wouldn't it be more dramatic if this was done in a face-to-face meeting between Cytherea and Edward? Cytherea feels there's something not quite right, but Edward can't bring himself to tell her the truth.

Same with Scene 56: wouldn't it be more dramatic if Cytherea meets with Edward and tells him that she doesn't know what he is hiding so it would be better they don't see each other?

Face-to-face meetings are certainly more dramatic, and actors love them.

- d) **Pages 58-80:** This part is hugely problematic. 22 pages of script and **no** Cytherea. This is like another story altogether. Of course, this segment is connected to Cytherea (Mr. Manston has a dark secret: he has a wife!), but this part of the script needs to be told through Cytherea. The disappearance of your protagonist for over 20 pages half-way through your script is really not advisable.

I am guessing that this is how it was written in the novel, but this is a script. The challenge here is to keep these major story developments (Manston has a wife. His mother knows about it. Mrs Manston shows up and "dies" in the fire)... but you need to tell these story beats from Cytherea's point of view. How does Cytherea find out? Through a villager? Maybe she has doubts and she breaks into Manston's mansion (that would be a tense, scary scene because it has suspense, action. It's also very visual) where she discovers papers or clippings about Manston's American actress wife?

Or keep it simple: Cytherea overhears Mrs. Aldclyffe and Mr. Manston in scene 61. She sees Mr. Manston pining for her in Scene 65. She also sees Mrs. Manston arriving in scene

66. She sees the fire and the mayhem in scene 71... Then she learns about the death of Eugenie (perhaps, create a new scene for this story beat?)

What is no doubt is that Mrs. Adclyffe and Mr. Manston's "scam" (the insurance money & getting Edward out of the way so Mr. Manston can marry Cytherea) must not be revealed to your audience at this point. This is something that Cytherea (and us, the readers and the audience) must discover. This is a major turning point in the story... I'll explain why below.

- e) **Pages 90-124:** From the moment Cytherea marries Manston, the script needs to be restructured. Again, this part of the screenplay must be told from Cytherea's point of view. Today, reader(s) and audience(s) would find it offensive that the people saving Cytherea from her sham marriage are... men. Being married to Manston is Cytherea's problem, and she must solve it herself.

So, she marries Manston, discovers that he and Mrs. Adclyffe engineered this wedding with blackmail and lies (a major turning point as stated in my point above). From then on, she must fight back: she discovers that Mrs. Manston is still alive & looks for her, exposes her marriage as sham, etc. etc. until she wins back Edward.

Of course, these are only suggestions. I am sure you can do better and find/create better story beats and organise them in a more efficient, dramatic manner. However, I am convinced that telling your story through Cytherea's point of view and making it her journey is absolutely the way to go.

And that's the end of my notes.

CONCLUDING:

Your script has some good things. A Hardy adaptation is also a viable proposal for the market (female-led stories are the rage). However, now you've done a first draft close to the novel, it's time to throw out the novel. You need to focus entirely on Cytherea's journey even if this means taking away story beats from secondary characters and giving them to her. Nobody ever expects an adaptation which is 100% close to the source material.

Lastly, it is also important to tell your story in a punchier, more visual way and show absolute mastery of screenwriting rules and conventions.

In any case, I strongly believe that you're definitely onto something with this project. With some more work (be ruthless!), you would have a really cool, interesting script to sell.

Best of luck with the rewrite(s)!