

Essay

“The fact that composers transform texts suggests that no text can continue to be meaningful as contexts change.” Texts certainly do reflect the society in which they were produced, and as values in society change, so must the texts. Hence, transformations like the one involving Geoffrey Chaucer’s 14th century works to a modern film will always involve a transformation of form, values and themes.

Chaucer’s The Pardoner’s Tale has been transformed to a form suitable for a modern audience by director Sam Raimi in the 1998 feature film, A Simple Plan. The film takes the heart of the original and puts it in a new body so that it may beat for many years to come.

Chaucer’s The Pardoner’s Tale was written in the fourteenth century, an era that was renowned for corruption inside its highest authority, the Catholic Church. Chaucer uses the pardoner as a vessel to convey his political opinion about the church of the time. The pardoner himself, despite being an official one, uses lies and deceit to trick the poor country folk out of their money. His trickery is shown when he states that “*lewed peple loven tales olde*”, highlighting how he leeches money out of the poor with his preaching tales.

Despite the church being ideally the model of good, the pardoner uses the church only as a front. “*Oure lige lordes seel on my patente, that shewe I first, my body to warente.*” He uses his papal bulls to provide his cover for his trickery and deceit. The quote also shows how he is much more concerned with his own self preservation than saving the souls of those he ‘pardons’ from sins. He states that he doesn’t care if the children of the “*povereste wydwe*” “*sterve for famyne*” as long as he can “*drynke licour of the vyne.*” This is quite a contrast to the actual values of the church that have now become corrupted through people like the pardoner.

He harangues his audience about the devils of “*hasardrye, swerying and lecherye*” before preaching that “*radix malorum est cupitas*”, or ‘greed is the root of all evil.’ But Chaucer goes even further in exposing the corruption of the church by not only portraying a dishonest pardoner, but also a hypocritical one. Despite his preachings against the “*vices*” of the devil, the pardoner himself claims he would love nothing more than “*moneie, wolle, chese, and whete*” and a “*joly wenche*” in every town.

In one particularly hypocritical moment, the pardoner promises to tell a moral tale, preaching against the vices of evil, but only after he has had his “*drynke.*”

This is transformed by Raimi to a modern audience, where a tale of church corruption would not suffice for contemporary audiences.

Instead, the power of the church is transformed to local law enforcement and its corruption and wealth to big corporations. A story of church corruption was relevant to the society in which Chaucer wrote his tale, but in a modern society, a new spin must be taken.

In the film, the lure of wealth is the corrupting power that overcomes Hank and Sarah, and ultimately sends them on a downward spiral.

Hank is an honest man with an honest job, but when he discovers the money, things change. Initially, Lou tries to talk him into taking it by describing it as the “*American dream in a goddamn gym bag*,” to which Hank replies that you’re supposed to work for the American dream. Lou replies with “*well this is even better then.*”

But perhaps the scene that shows the corrupting power of money more than any other is the scene in which Hank brings home the bag to show Sarah. Hank asks Sarah ‘metaphorically’ what she would do if she had found millions of dollars and she replies that she would hand it in. However, Raimi sets up an extremely clever shot from the table height looking up at Sarah as Hank dumps the cash on the table. A shadow crosses Sarah’s face as the money eclipses her initially honest side.

The local sheriff, who is supposedly the epitome of good law enforcement, is gunned down by a man who uses an FBI agent as a false alias. The false FBI agent is the substitute for the pardoner as both characters use a false front to gain wealth.

Another way in which the texts are valued differently by their audiences is in their form. Chaucer's work was written in a time when only limited numbers had access to literature. For this reason, the text was designed to be performed and this is evident in Chaucer's use of iambic pentameter, a technique resembling the rhythm of everyday speech.

This has once again been transformed by Raimi to suit a more contemporary audience. In our modern society, film is the most popular of textual mediums and Raimi chose the film medium for that reason. The use of mis-en-scene and non-diegetic sound replaces rhetoric and iambic pentameter to create a text more suited to a modern audience.

By using the mediums they did, the two composers were able to have their texts valued by their respective audiences.

Another quite noticeable adjustment from Chaucer's time to now is the addition of a female character.

In Chaucer's tale, the pardoner regards women as either easy targets for his preaching's or there for his own amusement. Indeed, no female characters play any critical role in the tale and this is a reflection of the role of women in the society of the time.

For a modern audience, where responders are generally much more open minded, a female character was needed so as to ensure that our modern society would value the text the same way Chaucer's audiences did.

Hank's wife Sarah, who draws comparisons to Lady MacBeth, is a cunning and conniving character that would not have been present in texts in Chaucer's time. In one particular scene, the recurring motif of red is used along with clever lighting to 'highlight' Sarah's dark side. The joy of her baby daughter is eclipsed by her traitorous brain that plots against Lou. She is the primary instigator in almost all of the conflicts in the film.

Sarah is a character who is valued and appreciated by modern cinematic audiences but would not have been considered by Chaucer as a result of the attitudes towards women. This is but another of the attitude changes in society that needed to be considered for the transformation operation to become a success.

So, while it is true that values can be exclusively applied to different societies, for texts such as Chaucer's The Pardoner's Tale to be valued into the future for what it was, a transformation of form, values and themes must take place to ensure the success of the heart of the original text.