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## LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Inference and narrative processing in fiction and film: (Where) (does) narrative reading part(s) ways with its viewing and vice versa (?)

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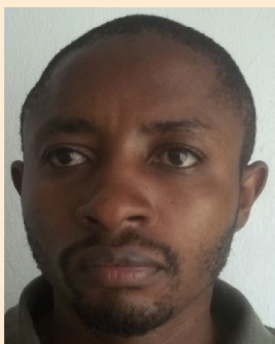
**Abstract:** Narrative analysis in Fiction and Film has attracted narratologists' research interest since the last part of the twentieth century. It has focused on the renderability of narrative in these two different media and established features of similarity and difference for the rendition of the same narrative. From that perspective, this paper aims to compare the degree of demand for inference in narrative processing between fiction narrative and film narrative. The analysis of an excerpt from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is compared to its equivalent film part and demonstrates that the film narrative requires more inferential processes on the part of the viewer, compared to the reader whose interpretive task is facilitated by the narrator's descriptions, reports and any other techniques.

**Subjects:** Arts; Humanities; Language & Literature

**Keywords:** inference; narrative processing; film; fiction

### 1. Introduction

The second title of this paper seems decidedly "undecidable" not for partisanship of aporetic style, but in this way it better captures the ideas to be developed, with two main questions: "Does narrative reading part ways with its viewing and vice-versa?" and "Where does narrative reading part ways



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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper will be of interest to people who love narrative in all its forms, in general, and those who love it in written and filmic versions from a comparative vantage point, in particular. It might be thought that the processing of a narrative in its written form is the same as processing it in its filmic form. But research has proved narrative processing varies depending on its medium of rendition and this paper showcases one such differences. It provides basic ideas about how different demand for inference between narrative processing in fiction and film narrative is. The analyses and results are of importance to anyone interested in understanding key concepts on narrative processing in fiction and film, but leaves the field open for prospective researchers and readers interested in this domain.

with its reading and vice-versa?” Besides these questions, the title provides the position taken in this paper by stating that narrative reading parts ways with its viewing and vice versa. When redefining the concept of narrative agency and designing a new taxonomy of “text types”, Chatman (1990) categorizes narrative texts on the basis of what is believed to be Plato’s two narrative modes: *mimesis* (the direct presentation of speech and action) and *diegesis* (the verbal representation of events). He considers narrative texts as divided into *diegetic narratives* with novel, epic, and short story as subtypes, and *mimetic narratives* with movies, cartoons and plays as subtypes. Mimesis and diegesis are important characteristics of narratives and it emerges from this consideration that the same narrative can be rendered in these two different modes. Many narratologists have studied the features of similarity and difference for the rendition of the same narrative in these two different media. However not much, to my knowledge, has been said about how processing a narrative in its written mode differs from processing it in the filmic mode. This paper is an analysis of the differences in the degree of demand for inference during the processing of narrative in fiction and film.

From the outset, a clear distinction between fiction (narrative) and film (narrative), as used in this paper, proves useful to dispel confusion as throughout the history of literary study it has been believed that most, save a few, literary genres are fictional. Actually, “anyone who has read a major anthology of literature will discover that a substantial amount of the material in it is not imaginative. One is as likely to find political, historical, or scientific writings as poetry, fiction, and drama” (Castle, 2007, p. 6). What is commonly included under the heading of literature goes beyond imaginative writing. Seventeenth-century English literature includes not only Shakespeare’s, Webster’s, Marvell’s and Milton’s imaginative writings; but also the essays of Francis Bacon, the sermons of John Donne, Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography and whatever it was that Sir Thomas Browne wrote, as well as (to be taken at a pinch) Hobbes’s *Leviathan* or Clarendon’s *History of the Rebellion* (Terry, 1995). Fiction is therefore to be understood as just one of the literary genres referring to imaginative writing. As used here, it is considered as a general term for imaginative or invented stories in novels, short stories, novellas, romances, fables and other narrative works in prose. This view excludes poetry and drama, and by extension film, albeit most poems, plays and films are also fictional inasmuch as they are moulded and contrived—or feigned (Habib, 2013). This vantage point is the one espoused by narratologists and film critics such as Seymour Benjamin Chatman in his *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978), and *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (1990). I stop this distinction discussion at the idea that fiction generally refers to the novel, the short story, the novella and related genres while film refers to narrative movies or movies used for narrative purposes. Common for such movies and practical for comparative narratological studies are adaptations (films adapted from novels), i.e. the source text is a novel transformed into a motion picture.

This paper aims to show that compared to a written narrative it is difficult for a film to tell every physical or mental status and/or events that have happened. The film viewer’s inferential power is more highly on demand to process film narrative than with the fiction narrative reader whose part of the interpretive task is facilitated by the narrator. The paper starts with this short introduction, followed by some literature on Storytelling, Description and Inference in Fiction and Film, then the discussion of Demand for inference in two versions of *Pride and Prejudice* and ends with a Conclusion.

According to Parrill (2002), *Pride and Prejudice* is Jane Austen’s most popular novel and the most often adapted for television and film. The adaptation used in this paper is the 1967 BBC version based on a screenplay by Nemone Lethbridge, which, unlike most earlier other adaptations, had some scenes shot on location and has a record existing in the BBC Written Archives of location shooting in Bath, in Lacock Village, and at Dyrham Park in Wiltshire. BBC showed the same version later again in 1969 before presenting the adaptation in two new mini-series in 1980 and 1995 and these remain the only BBC versions currently available for viewing.

## 2. Storytelling, description, and inference in fiction and film

Narrative is storytelling, a form of communication presupposing two parties: The sender who tells the story and receiver who listens, watches and reads the story (Chatman, 1978). It is narrative communication, which indicates a process of transmission from the author as addresser to the reader as addressee (Lothe, 2000). There are countless forms of narrative in the world and these narrative forms also belong to a prodigious variety of genres. The genres branch out into a variety of media or vehicles of narrative, including articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures and an ordered mixture of all those substances (Barthes & Duisit, 1975). Any sort of narrative message, regardless of the process of expression which it uses, manifests the same level in the same way. As implied above, it may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: The subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it (Chatman, 1978). If any narrative can be actualized in any of these, as a matter of fact, narrative texts have the property of translatability from one medium to another. And yet, a narrative actualized in diverse media keeps constancies in structure but also exhibits differences pertaining to the nature of the medium of rendition (Chatman, 1980).

Much as narrative exists in many and diverse media and those who attend to it enjoy narrative in any media, Deleyto (1996) contended that it is through cinema, television and video, and not through novels that most stories are “told” nowadays. Film has become, he claimed, a legitimate successor (and competitor) of fictional literature insofar as it is capable of employing complex subject constructions, developing parallels in the *fabula*, enacting changes of any given action, accentuating details, etc. It appears that Deleyto is lured with the film narrative’s property of making people see (Giddings, Selby, & Wensley, 1990) by naturalizing a counter-intuitive experience, creating the illusion that the viewer has acquired a privileged window on reality, a window through which one is supposed to see not objects and actions, but see instead a story (Nadel, 2008). The film’s “signifying material (visual patterns shaped in variations of colour and of light and dark) has a much closer relationship to that which is signified. The film (or video) image resembles in visual terms the reality that it signifies or depicts, and so its relationship to reality seems more obvious, direct and easily intelligible” (Montgomery, Durant, Fabb, Furniss, & Mills, 2007, p. 298). Similar to real objects in the world, film narrative is some sort of “ready-formed and hence relying to a large extent on the bottom-up process of patterns of light striking the retina” (Burke, 2011, p. 57), thus making some people prefer it to literary narratives which are mere linguistic symbols. On the other hand, “[w]hen viewing the film version of a novel or play, viewers with a literary training want to find in the film what they valued in the literary work, without asking whether this is the sort of thing film can do” (McFarlane, 2007, p. 6).

“Despite the history of interconnection, techniques of film narration and prose narration are in many ways quite different from each other; and these differences can be identified at various levels, from differences at the level of the institutions of literature and cinema to differences at the more formal level of the contrasting media themselves” (Montgomery et al., 2007, p. 296). Actually, “[f]ilm has its own qualities, its own elements that are used to put together a narrative meant to have an impact, to move its audience” (Snyder, 2011, p. 138). That being, it cannot be ascertained, predicted nor, even wished that cinema narrative will ever supplant literary narrative effectively since some people may prefer fiction narratives to film ones for what novels can do that films cannot (and vice-versa), as Chatman’s (1980) title says. Chatman has long shown commitment to elaborating the differences between narrative in fiction and film in his seminal books and papers (see, for example, Chatman 1978, 1980, 1990). He presented description in fiction and in film as one of the aspects of difference between the two narrative media. Starting with description in fiction, Chatman (1978, p. 17) says that “description is, in literature, a reasoned résumé; it must be done in such a way that the principal traits of the object are not omitted and indeed emerge even more evidently”. Chatman (1990, p. 38) then classifies description as follows:

Text theory needs to distinguish between express or explicit description and tacit description. Sentences that explicitly describe are cast so as to focus on or even assert the properties of whatever they describe. Sentences that tacitly describe, on the other hand, direct our primary attention to something else—in the case of narrative, to the story events; the properties of characters, objects, or ideas are communicated secondarily.

The difference between explicit and tacit description as Chatman elaborates above equates what Lodge (1977) calls description in seeing and doing. In Lodge's terms, the first focuses on the properties of what is described and creates some picture in the reader's mind. The second type of description focuses on the actions, and/or movements of what is described. Narrative description interrupts the normal course of the story time and literary narratives have the temporal freedom to interrupt and freeze story-time to indulge in detailed descriptions or asides (Chatman, 1980; Mittell, 2007) to let the reader access every detail of what is described. For description's sake, "events are stopped, though our reading or discourse time continues, and we look at the characters and setting elements as a *tableau vivant*" (Chatman's, 1980, p. 123). Description in narrative, explicit and implicit combined, often becomes so striking that it gives the reader the illusion that they are watching what is described. Mittell (2007) says that some writers, like Baum, use a vocabulary which might be called "cinematic" with language that evokes visual and aural details while explicitly alluding to the motion of the beings (birds and brook) in the novel.

Whereas written narratives use words for description, there is nothing in film that corresponds to the word in verbal language. "The most important contrast between film and prose, however, rests on the distinctive features of the two media and upon the different kinds of signification involved in them. Prose as a medium depends upon linguistic signs where the relationship between the material of the sign (sounds or letters) and that which is designated by them is quite arbitrary" (Montgomery et al., 2007, p. 298). Comparatively to verbal language, film is a language without a code (Lothe, 2000). Mostly, films aim to make readable the gestures, movements and expressions of the characters. The latter are given traits intended to be communicative, expressive, evocative and comprehensible and their external behaviour is largely designed to convey interior states (Neill, 2005). Film utilizes, often telling, if any and, more specifically showing, or what is called "narration" and "monstration" (Branigan, 1992). Films become then more visually specific than novels, and film-makers prefer visual to verbal representation. Films are said to keep characters and props persistently before our eyes and ears with virtually limitless sensory particularly. Therefore, films seem not need to describe as by nature they show a cornucopia of visual details. Some film critics are even said to have firmly claimed that the idea of description has no equivalent in cinema. However, insofar as description depicts what is described, in a sense the very cinematic projection of images entails description. It is not that cinema cannot describe, but rather cannot help describing, tacitly though it is. Cinema's evocation of details is incessantly rich (Chatman, 1990).

But the fact that cinematic description is tacit, with the pressure on the viewer to follow the unfolding events, makes it possible for the viewer to access only some descriptive details to the detriment of others. Conversely, the narrator provides all that he or she deems necessary for the reader to grasp about the described events and existents. "There is thus a basic difference between the processing of literature and film" (Burke, 2011, p. 58). While in written narratives the narrator tells in details what is deemed necessary for the reader to grasp about a character, a setting, an event, etc., in films the viewer is left without specificities of properties of what is described. Chatman (1980, p. 128) has said that [i]t requires special effort for films to assert a property or relation, the dominant mode being presentational, not assertive. A film does not say, "this is the state of affairs", it merely shows you that state of affairs. In its essential visual mode, film does not describe at all but merely presents, or better it depicts, in the original etymological sense of that word, renders in pictorial form. About this difference, Chatman (1990, p. 40) says:

Film gives us plenitude without specificity. Its descriptive offerings are at once visually rich and verbally impoverished. Unless supplemented by redundancies in dialogue or voice over narration cinematic images cannot guarantee our ability to name bits of descriptive information. Contrarily, literary narrative can be precise, but always within a relatively narrow scope.

If a written narrative offers more verbal language than film narrative, linguistic analysis is then much easier in written narratives than cinematic ones as Toolan (2001, p. 105) argues below:

Language—and arguably written language in particular—is the best modality for analysis (particularly of characters, their desires, aspirations, fears, etc.). Such analytical presentation of character (“inward” portrayal) is largely denied to film, where we instead get outward or external presentation, from which we must infer the significant details of character. We have to judge characters by appearance, witnessed reactions, displayed emotions, and interpretive visual representations of mental processes—all on offer to us in abundance and (or but) seemingly without teller-interpretation.

But it is not only that film lacks, but also does not need verbal language. “Film is film, a recording of visual images onto a translucent surface that permits projection of those images onto a surface so that, typically, many can see the images. Language is not a necessary ingredient” (Toolan, 2014, p. 455). Along with the above quotations, in reference to the aim of this paper, the issue of language in films makes it a challenge for film, by contrast with spoken or written narratives, to tell whatever physical or mental events have happened. The untold narrative events will have to be inferred and the gaps left out bridged up by the film viewer.

Filling in narrative gaps by inference is grounded in selection as a general characteristic of narrative discourse. “Selection is the capacity of any discourse to choose which events and objects actually to state and which only to imply” (Chatman, 1978, p. 27). From this point of view, in whatever medium, not all narrative details can be presented in the story. The most salient events are presented and the least remain unmentioned for the reader, listener or viewer to infer them and fill in the gaps left out.

Besides bridging up the gaps left out for selection’s sake, inference provides additional details about a character (Chatman 1978) says that a number of additional details about characters may be projected on the basis of what is expressly said. According to him, if, for example, we have been presented a lady as “blue-eyed” “blonde”, and “graceful”, we can infer that her skin is fair and unblemished, that she speaks with a gentle voice, that her feet are relatively small and so on. Some told characteristics will often entail untold ones. For instance, it would be logical for a reader to fill in gaps by inference (in a story where they speak about a monster but with no further descriptions) that a monster has scary body parts. It is to be borne in mind that such gaps are common to all types of narrative in all media.

More specifically, “the cinema can easily—and does routinely—present characters without expressing the contents of their minds. It is usually necessary to infer their thinking from what they overtly say and do. Verbal narrative, on the other hand, finds such a restriction difficult to avoid directly stating the characters’ thoughts and perceptions...” (Chatman, 1978, p. 30). The film viewer is therefore not allowed access to the interior state of cinema narrative characters, while the fiction narrative reader is provided full details about the psychological and/or mental characterization of characters.

Last, but not least, narrative coherence in film also dwells much on inference. The film viewer is not told that one event happened after or before another. Rather the viewer is shown events happening on the screen, one after the other, not necessarily in the chronology of the story line. It requires a mental process, on the part of the viewer, to understand the logical succession of the events and, in Toolan’s words, the way

We do these things is rather less clear, and less stable, than in the case of the novel, where we typically have the text in front of us to refer back to. The reading of a written text is very different from the reading of a film, to a considerable degree because, being in words and sentences, the written text is very “propositional”. A certain kind of work has already been done for the novel reader, by comparison with the film viewer. (Toolan, 2001, pp. 105–106)

Along with this quotation, thanks to the narrator’s interpretive work (through description, report, etc.), the reader is enabled to understand some of the states, actions and reactions of characters while the film viewer has to infer them. The degree of demand for inferential processes in the interpretation then varies between the two media as will be exemplified with the analyses of an excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice*. The excerpt is from the beginning up to the first paragraph of the second chapter and the bit of the film version from 3’:38” up to 6’:48” of episode 1.

### 3. Demand for inference in the two versions of *Pride and Prejudice*

Consider the narrative function of the last paragraph of chapter one, in conjunction with first paragraph of chapter two of the written narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*. These would be located after 6:48” in the movie.

*Mr Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.*

*Mr Bennet was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner. Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with: (Austen, 1990, p. 17).*

The first quotation (the last paragraph of chapter one, see Appendix A) provides a summative interpretive description of both Mr and Mrs Bennet. The reader is presented Mr Bennet as a man of sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, while Mrs Bennet is depicted as a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper. This description allows the reader to understand explicitly what Mr Bennet has so far displayed and opens a way to understanding what may still be seen in him to come in later narrative events. Characterizing Mr Bennet as a sarcastic humourist, for instance, lets the reader understand explicitly the sarcasm and humour in many of his reactions to his wife as provided successively in the first and second sentence of his interaction below:

I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr Bingley may like you the best of the party.

Having been told that Mr Bennet is a man of sarcasm, the reader can already expect some of his utterances to be opposite to what he means. It may be easily understood, for example, that Mr Bennet’s saying “*I see no occasion for that*” is opposite to his plan, especially as this is confirmed in the next paragraph when the narrator states that Mr Bennet was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr Bingley. Furthermore, knowing that he is a humourist, it becomes obvious for the reader to understand the humour behind his saying that Bingley might like Mrs Bennet as the best of the party if she goes with the daughters to visit him. And having also been told by the narrator that Mr Bennet was a man of reserve, the reader can understand why he had planned to meet Mr Bingley but remained cool though. He restrained his emotion, differently from his wife who appeared to be overwhelmed with (and expressed her) joy.

Conversely, any viewer of the movie with no prior knowledge about the novel will need to infer all about this characterization of Mr and Mrs Bennet. The image has powerful possibilities for condensing significance: descriptive detail, character and action can be displayed simultaneously within the single shot, through codes of lighting, colour and composition, whereas prose is constrained by a sequential, piece by piece, mode of presentation (Montgomery et al., 2007, p. 302). Consequently, the viewer is denied access to some overt interpretive information provided by the narrator in the written narrative. They may at first sympathize with Mrs Bennet and think that Mr Bennet is not eager to visit Mr Bingley, but only to be surprised later together with her again when they discover that Mr Bennet has called Mr Bingley. The most the viewer might first come to is doubt whether Mr Bennet is serious in what he is saying as he smiles every time he addresses his wife. But in order to come to full understanding that Mr Bennet's statements are sarcastic, it requires a while and the viewer has to infer from a number of cues.

The viewer can infer from the characters' external behaviour and from what they say and do. External behaviour in the movie version include Mr Bennet's regular smile when addressing his wife, as well as the smile of his daughters when they hear his humour in talks to Mrs Bennet. As for what the characters say and do, the viewer can also infer from one of the daughters' consoling their mother that she thinks her father is teasing the mother; and finally the viewer can infer from discovering, together with Mrs Bennet, that Mr Bennet has called Mr Bingley.

In the same paragraph, the reader is further let know that Mr Bennet and his wife had been living together for more than 20 years. This provides interpretative information about the earlier utterances, "*I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these last twenty years at least*". The last paragraph of chapter one therefore clarifies to the reader why Mr Bennet has made reference to 20 years in these italics while the film remains silent about it. The movie viewer has access to these utterances in italics, but cannot overtly conclude that the couple had been living together for 23 years. To come to know how long the couple had been living together requires the film viewer to infer, albeit it is not warranted that they can come to the exact information, three-and-twenty years, as provided by the narrator in the written version. The film viewer will infer from Mr Bennet's saying that he has heard his wife mention her nerves with consideration for the last 20 years at least, maybe from the age (stated, implied or inferred from other factors) of the daughters, etc. But the quickest inference the viewer is likely to make is that the couple had been living together for more than 20 years, with no further precision about the exact number of years.

Mrs Bennet, in her turn, is characterized as a woman with less difficult mind to develop, of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper, who when discontented always fancied herself nervous. Such information from the narrator allows the reader to have some knowledge about Mrs Bennet, on the basis of which the reader can understand why Mrs Bennet failed to understand that her husband was using sarcasm and humour in the previous part of the narrative. It also allows the reader to understand why Mrs Bennet got angry at her husband whereas her daughters easily understood the wit in their father's talk to Mrs Bennet. The film viewer, conversely, has no way to such information but through inference. For the film viewer to come to the understanding that Mrs Bennet failed to understand her husband's sarcastic humour, the viewer has him/herself to discover and infer from Mr Bennet's wit in interactions to his wife as in:

"Ah, you do not know what I suffer."

"But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighbourhood."

"It will be no use to us, if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them."

"Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all."

From the second sentence, the viewer can infer that Mr Bennet believes his wife will be fine since her nerves are not a real health issue. In the last sentence of the quotation, Mr Bennet's wit and sarcasm are at play and the film viewer can understand and infer that Mr Bennet is ready to visit all men with fortune who come into the neighbourhood.

The narrator has also mentioned that when discontented Mrs Bennet fancied herself to be nervous. Such information facilitates the interpretation task to the reader and avoids him/her to believe that Mrs Bennet really had a real nerves problem. Yet, on two occasions so far she had mentioned her nerves, first to her daughters when they were arguing about a hat, and then to her husband for the latter's refusal to visit Mr Bingley. The reader is then warned that she fancied herself nervous whereas the film viewer is deprived of such information and might even be tempted to sympathize with Mrs Bennet and blame the daughters and Mr Bennet for not pitying her nerves. For the viewer to discover that Mrs Bennet's nerves were a matter of discontentment, they have to infer from what Mrs Bennet displays in other circumstances that would normally cause her to complain about nerves, but in which she does not complain because she was not discontented. For example, while with real nerves problem she could be allergic to noise and loud music, in no noisy circumstance does she mention her nerves since she was not discontented.

Finally, it is said that the business of Mrs Bennet's life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. This information is provided by the narrator and spares the reader's effort to interpret why Mrs Bennet was so happy to know that a man with fortune, Mr Bingley was in the neighbourhood. While the narrative reader is provided this information by the narrator, the film viewer can only infer it from what Mrs Bennet says as in this interaction

"Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune;  
four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"  
"How so? How can it affect them?"  
"My dear Mr Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome!  
You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

#### 4. Conclusion

To come to the end of this paper, it is worth recalling that it was a discussion of the differences in the degree of demand for inference in the processing of narrative in fiction and film narratives. It aimed to show that film cannot tell every physical or mental status and/or events that have happened, as a written narrative does. That being the film viewer's inferential power is more demanded in film narrative processing than the written narrative reader's is demanded in fiction narrative. In the latter case, the reader's interpretive task is aided with psychological and/or mental descriptions of characters, and reports about events by the narrator, whereas the viewer has to infer these narrative details from the characters' external behaviour, from what they say and do. From the same token, however, readers who have not seen the screen versions of *Pride and Prejudice* will lack a wealth of details of setting and thematic updating. Indeed, no matter the reader's imaginative capacity, it is not warranted that their cognition can provide as clear pictures of the settings as the movie provides. This remains another aspect under research as sequel to this paper.

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## Appendix A

### Excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice*

#### Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.

“My dear Mr Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?”

Mr Bennet replied that he had not.

“But it is,” returned she; “for Mrs Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.” Mr Bennet made no answer.

“Do you not want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.

“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough.

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.”

“What is his name?”

“Bingley.”

“Is he married or single?”

“Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!”

“How so? How can it affect them?”

“My dear Mr Bennet,” replied his wife, “how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.”

“Is that his design in settling here?”

“Design! Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes.”

“I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr Bingley may like you the best of the party.”

“My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.”

“In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.”

“But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr Bingley when he comes into the neighbourhood.”

“It is more than I engage for, I assure you.”

“But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general, you know, they visit no newcomers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him if you do not.”

“You are over-scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy.”

“I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference.”

“They have none of them much to recommend them,” replied he; “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters”.

“Mr Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion for my poor nerves”.

“You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these last twenty years at least”.

“Ah, you do not know what I suffer”.

“But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighbourhood”.

“It will be no use to us, if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them”.

“Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all”.

Mr Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

## Chapter 2

Mr Bennet was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner. Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with:



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