From *Un Coeur Simple* to *A Simple Heart:*
An Adaptation of Gustave Flaubert's French Story *Un Coeur Simple* into an English Screenplay

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Many movies today seem to be based on a novel or short story. After viewing a film based on a novel, an audience member might respond, "It wasn't as good as the book." When someone reads a novel or short story in English, he or she creates an image of the story, a personal adaptation. The main character may be described in excruciating detail by the author, yet each person will come up with a slightly different mental image, this is his or her individual variation of the story. When watching a film that has been based on a foreign novel, the language barrier and cultural differences make it hard for the author's intentions to be transferred onscreen. In this thesis, I will discuss the process of adaptation, taking a novel or short story and making it into a film. This purpose of this thesis is to show the differences between literature and how it is performed onscreen, and then discuss the difficulties posed with translating the text before adaptation, and finally, I will reveal challenges specific to my journey in adapting a screenplay from *Un Coeur Simple*, a short story by Gustave Flaubert.

George Bluestone, in his revolutionary findings in the film-literature field, describes the concept 'Two Ways of Seeing,' which illustrates one of the main differences between how a novel presents a story versus how a film presents that same story. The invented audience member previously mentioned in the introduction created an adaptation of the character, based on the novel he or she read. The mental image of the character was not accurately portrayed on screen and therefore he or she did not like the film. 'The Two Ways of Seeing' claims that "between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media" (McFarlane 4). Bluestone states that adaptations are subjective; each person can read a story differently and put emphasis on different scenes, images or characters.

To continue with the aforementioned character example, let's look at director Jean Renoir's depiction of the character Henriette in his film *A Day in the Country,* which is an

adaptation of "Une Partie de campagne" (A Country Excursion,) a short story written by Guy de Maupassant. Jean Renoir created a mental image of how he thinks Herniette should look and act. Seymour Chatman goes in depth when discussing how Renoir depicts Henriette, taking a passage straight from "Une Partie de campagne" and breaking down each sentence with the scene presented in the film. Chatman first makes a physical description of Henriette as an attractive girl. "She was a pretty girl about eighteen; one of those women who suddenly excite your desire when you meet them in the street, and who leave you with a vague feeling of uneasiness and of excited senses"(Chatman 452). He then describes how "pretty" is subjective, one person's "beautiful" can be another person's "plain." (452). This depiction of Henriette is decided solely on the opinion of those who create the film. The director may not find this actress physically attractive, but through reading the story can see her playing the role of Henriette well. In order to show the attractiveness of Henriette on film, Renoir places cuts of men and boys eyeing her as she swings on a swingset innocently, oblivious to the attention she draws. In one example, Renoir shows the beauty of Henriette by focusing the camera on Rodolphe, a young man who peers through his window to see her on the swing.

> Since seductiveness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, Renoir requisitions Roldolphe's point of view to covey it. It is not Henriette so much as Rodolphe's reaction to Henriette, even on first seeing her, that shall establish her seductiveness and not only in his mind but in ours, because we cannot help but look on with him. (Chatman 454)

Through Rodolphe, the audience sees how men view Henriette, even if they don't personally agree. This scene with Rodolphe creates a convention for the audience, meaning an agreement between the actor and audience. Another example of a convention

is exhibited through the film *Shakespeare in Love*. When the character Viola, playing

Juliet, stabs herself with a knife onstage, she flourishes a red scarf protruding from her

abdomen in the same spot where she was stabbed, symbolizing blood. Both the knife and

scarf are conventions, the audience knows the actress playing Juliet during the play

Romeo and Juliet is not actually killing herself, but it's for the play; therefore, the

audience uses a willing suspension of disbelief to continue viewing the story and

therefore immerse themselves in the story. Film adaptation creatively expresses what the

written story contains through a visual medium.

Novels depend on certain word choices to best portray their stories. Movies, however,

depend on visual images and sound. There are many differences in presenting a story through a

novel as opposed to a film. According to Chatman, there is a cart in the beginning of

Maupassant's story "Une Partie de campagne" which contains three determined details: roof,

four iron posts, and rolled up curtains. The narrator focuses in on those three specific details and

therefore the reader is able to expand the picture in their mental image. When the story is adapted

into film, the details become indeterminate. The film is going by so fast that the audience

becomes more concerned with the plot of the story rather than with specific details. In the case of

the aforementioned cart, someone watching the film looks for what the cart is going to do over

the details about the cart itself. Only those who see the film many times or are fortunate enough

to have the proper equipment to show the movie frame by frame can take in the particulars, much

like those viewing in an art gallery.

When adapting a story from novel to film, it is the director's and screenwriter's job to

best represent the overall feel of the story. This brings up issues of "fidelity," or staying faithful

to the original novel (McFarlane 9), versus fertility, taking creative license. Screenwriters can

choose to follow the original author's interpretation faithfully by performing plenty of research and understanding the text beyond the written word. Conversely, a screenwriter can be inspired by a story but choose to change the setting or even the ending to make another statement. Returning back to the previous example "Une Partie de campagne" (A Country Excursion) by Guy Maupassant, this short story was made into a short film *A Day in the Country* by Jean Renoir, son of August-Pierre Renoir, a famous painter in France. Renoir the artist is known for many different impressionist paintings, some of his most famous works include, "Luncheon at the Boating Party" and "The Umbrellas." Jean Renoir created this short film with the influence from his father's paintings. Certain scenes in "Une Partie de campagne" are almost identical to the paintings of his father. Since Renoir's paintings were not mentioned in the story, some may say the film is not an accurate portrayal of the story. On the other hand, Maupassant's story takes place in the 19th century, the same time as Renoir's impressionist paintings. The director and son of the famous painter, Jean Renoir, utilizes his father's paintings in film to help enrich the story.

Screenwriting becomes incredibly difficult when adding the translation of a language to the adaptation process. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe explains the translation of the French language best in this quote, "In the same way that the French adapt foreign words to their pronunciation, they adapt feelings, thoughts, even objects; for every foreign fruit there must be a substitute grown in their own soil" (Biguenet & Schulte 61). Sharon Sloan translates Goethe's "Translations" essay from German to English explaining *parodistic*, which is the translator's attempt to transport himself into the foreign situation. The translator can only appropriate the foreign idea by translating into his own culture (Sloan 60). In the above quote, Goethe states that there is meaning or context behind every French word. The above quote can apply when

translating French to any language, not just German. French words cannot always be translated into English directly because the connotations in French might not match those in English.

Goethe's quote matches the concept of Bluestone's in "Two Ways of Seeing." The difficulty in translating lies in transferring the overall mood and understanding from one language to another. For example, there is a saying in American English that, "boys will be boys." It contains the cultural meaning of young boys acting like young boys or more immature compared to grown men. Now the French equivalent of this saying is not the literal word-for-word translation, "les garçons seront les garçons," but, "Il faut que la jeunesse se passe," literally meaning "It's necessary that youth follows its course." Translation does not work word-by-word but rather by capturing the feeling of the sentence that corresponds best with the rest of the story. This can be accomplished through knowing the culture of the country where the saying originates. Along with translating the meaning of the text, one must think about how the text is spoken in another language. The French language has a certain musicality that is not always present in English. If the translator can capture that musical feeling by changing word flow or word usage, then this creates the best translation of the dialogue. The style and flow of the French language tells much about the culture of people in France.

When combining both the arts of translation and adaptation, a screenwriter can run into several of the issues described. Fidelity versus fertility can affect a translator as well as an adapter in terms of the words and dialogue chosen. The screenwriter may remain faithful to the original story or add elements to enrich the story on film. 'Two Ways of Seeing' can affect the translator by having an audience who speaks both of the languages not agree with the translation provided. "[Walter] Benjamin tells us that the original always precedes the translation, and, by

extension, the adaptation; that is not to say that the latter embodiment of plot, character, theme, story or action is necessarily less authentic, beautiful, or becoming in its own, autonomous way" (Plantus-Runey 16). Plantus-Runey, who is also my thesis adviser, goes back to the opinion of the typical audience member, that "it wasn't as good as the book." This statement applies to a film adaptation of a story just as much as a translation of the text from its original language.

These aforementioned differences prove that these two mediums are hard to compare. Even though the same story is being presented, a novel is its own medium of story-telling which is different from that of a film. A novel can dive into deeper details of the character, setting and background information. The reader creates the image of the story in his or her head, therefore basing all future opinions off of the first read-through. Professor Plantus-Runey explains her sentiments about translating when she created a screenplay for the story she loved.

> My instinctive impression was that the book was better. But the screenplay clearly
>
> had a life of its own in a new and separate space, as a re-created version of
>
> Teodorenu's fictional reality. Yes, the book is definitely better, perhaps, simply
>
> because it is more, because it was the first experience by virtue of its place
>
> alongside (or above) the screenplay. In some ways it seemed greater *because* of
>
> the adaptation... (Plantus–Runey 227)

With the guidance of my mentor Stacey Hahn, a French professor who has taught *Un Coeur Simple* for many French literature classes at Oakland University, and my adviser Doris Plantus-Runey, who translated and adapted one of her favorite stories into a screenplay, I undertake this project of creating a short English adaptation screenplay of *Un Coeur Simple* (A Simple Heart) by Gustave Flaubert. This screenplay is influenced by the 2008 French movie *Un Coeur Simple*, the actual French text and an English translation of the story. This project will help those who

speak English to see *Un Coeur Simple* through the visual medium of film as opposed to reading the story.

Un Coeur Simple (A Simple Heart) is one of three stories in the collection *Trois Contes* by Gustave Flaubert. He wrote the pieces in 1877, just three years short of his death. *Un Coeur Simple* has been translated into English by various translators over the years and has sparked two feature length films. One, *Un Cuore Semplice*, was made in Italy and performed in Italian in 1977. *A Simple Heart* then inspired a remake, *Un Coeur Simple*, made in 2008 in France by director Marion Laine. Currently, there is no English film adaptation of *Un Coeur Simple* listed on the Internet Movie Database.

To summarize the story of *Un Coeur Simple*, a simple servant, Felicity, experiences the heartbreak of lost love, then moves forward with her life, working as a cook for Madame Aubain, a strict upper class lady with two children. Felicity grows fond of the family and her own nephew, Victor, who visits on Sundays. As the children grow up, they leave the household and Felicity transfers the faith and devotion for the children into Catholicism and taking care of Madame Aubain in her old age. Finally, a parrot from America named Loulou is brought into Felicity's arms; she loves that parrot more than anything in the world. When Felicity dies, she envisions the Holy Spirit as her beloved Loulou.

Before starting my screenplay I outlined a few ideas of how to depict the story. The first idea that came to me was to include a narrator. When discussing this idea with my mentor Stacey Hahn, she replied that having a narrator (who is seen onscreen or heard as a voiceover) would be the exact opposite of what Flaubert is trying to create. Flaubert wrote *Un Coeur Simple* during the period of realism in French literature. He used "le style indirect libre" (semidirect discourse) (Chaitin 1024) when writing *Un Coeur Simple*, Flaubert is objective; he doesn't want the reader

to pinpoint a certain narrator. Realistic writers were against romanticism, where emotions were embellished and occasionally considered over-dramatic. Realistic literature was often written using different narrative voices (direct, indirect and semidirect), like Flaubert utilized in *Un Coeur Simple*, this was used to separate the thoughts emotions of man to portray reality faithful rather than through the tense of an omniscient narrator. The reader observes Felicity through various perspectives. When deciding to include a narrator in the screenplay, I also looked to the French film version of *Un Coeur Simple* (2008) where a narrator was not present. Thinking about the visual metaphors film can provide which novels cannot; I reversed my decision and did not end up creating a narrator. So I began to write the story, showing some background information on the lead character Felicity.

I created my own English short film screenplay in an attempt to achieve the most comprehensive transfer of the French language and author's intent. Utilizing my knowledge of French culture and history, I added visual metaphors for the audience (those who have read *Un Coeur Simple* in its original language). These visual metaphors include creative ways of placing scenes, adding or using original dialogue from the text and setting up the scene through the screenplay. The goal of both the visual cues and metaphors is to enable the audience to understand and relate to Flaubert's story.

Now, American and French culture is clearly quite different; therefore, some of the scenes have words specific to making the French culture accessible to Americans. In *Un Coeur Simple*, there is a huge class distinction between Madame Aubain, the mistress of the house and Felicity, her servant. I could not show the differences of classes through Felicity saying outright "I'm poor and can't speak well or write." Instead, I showed this idea to the audience through the difference in speech between Madame Aubain and Felicity. In American culture, people of a

higher class are better educated and therefore speak proper English. In my screenplay the

character of Madame Aubain speaks in full, well thought out sentences, as opposed to Felicity

who speaks the best she can, being that she has not had any formal education.

       I originally planned for an English screenplay that would range from 8 – 12 pages long.

A standard length for a short film is typically 10 pages, which is the usual length for

approximately 10 minutes of completed footage. Instead, I ended up with 14 pages total because

of my adamant desire to stay faithful to the original work. I found it difficult to edit scenes from

the short story because each scene was written by Flaubert to make an otherwise ordinary, simple

servant seem lively and important. Flaubert as a realist and artist created a work of art based on a

very simple and humble subject. There are certain scenes that I did leave out or even

compressed to stay within the original page limit. In the beginning of the story, Madame Aubain

does not appreciate Felicity and simply views her as the help. To show the change in relationship

between Madame Aubain and Felicity, I compressed two important scenes into one. When

Madame Aubain has not heard from her daughter Felicity for a few days, Felicity says she

"understands" because she has not heard from her nephew, Victor. Madame Aubain is furious at

this comment as she does not want to identify her daughter Virginia with her lowly servant's

nephew Victor. In the screenplay I wrote, Madame Aubain's attitude quickly changes when she

views the letter saying that Victor has died. In the story, these were two different scenes and

spaced quite far apart. Because this is a short film, I condensed the two into one to foreshadow

the later compassion Madame Aubain has for Felicity that appears later. This scene also shows

the audience that Felicity is illiterate because Madame Aubain is the one who reads the letter for

her.

To achieve what Flaubert was trying to set forward best I hypothesized that I would remain faithful to the story but exhibit some fertility while creating the screenplay. Remaining faithful to the piece, I did add a scene to try to exhibit the feelings Flaubert displayed for Felicity through the narrative voices of the bourgeoisie in his story. Flaubert describes Felicity as a truly altruistic person. She loves everyone and always does the right thing, not expecting praise or anything in return. In the story she saves Madame Aubain and her children from an errant ox in the field. In Flaubert's story, he tells the reader about the heroics of Felicity. "For years, this occurrence [Felicity saving the family from the bull] was a topic of conversation in Pont-L'Eveque. But Felicite took no credit to herself, and probably never knew that she had been heroic" (Flaubert 6-7). Flaubert's intention was not exemplified in the full-length film version. I felt that the above quote was very important in describing Felicity's character, so I added the new scene of Paul celebrating Felicity's heroic qualities (see page 5 of screenplay).

Because the original story is about 30 pages and the full-length French film version is 105 min (i.e. the equivalent of a 100-110 page screenplay), many scenes had to be cut for my screenplay. There were elements of both the story and the full-length film that I enjoyed and others I did not care for. My favorite part of the French film is the first time Felicity takes Virginia to catechism. In the film, the religious leader was a younger man who tailored his lesson to be child-friendly. When reading the short story, the catechism lesson seemed boring and it was only used to show the importance of Felicity's growth in religious faith. The lesson in the film was about St. Francis and his love of animals, specifically in this example, the love of a bird. I loved this scene because it helped foreshadow the importance of the parrot Loulou to Felicity. I really wanted to include something similar to this in my screenplay, but due to constraints

regarding script length, I chose to show Felicity's growth in religious sentiment through her attendance at church and wearing Virginia's cross.

After completing the screenplay, I strongly believe I have captured the most faithful adaptation allowing an American to understand the French story of *Un Coeur Simple*. My goal was to create a screenplay that most accurately transposes the French language and culture into an English piece. I kept the fact that Gustave Flaubert wrote *Un Coeur Simple* in the era of realism in mind. I researched the differences between how stories are conveyed through literature and film, which really helped me to format my screenplay. There were some difficulties regarding length and time constraints. While simultaneously attempting to best portraying the story through film, I tried to combine scenes in the short story to remedy this situation rather than cut them out. Personally, I had a difficult time remaining faithful to the story. It's easy to enrich the story to make it more exciting on film or to change the outcome to appease the audience. Fertility was not the goal of this project, so I kept the story right by my computer for reference as I typed the screenplay. To my surprise, watching the French feature film of *Un Coeur Simple* really helped me realize the story onscreen. I could not visualize the look of certain scenes and by critically analyzing the film; I could create choices for my English screenplay.

I used to be one of those people who preferred the novel to the film adaptation, but now I see them as two separate works of art. The portrayal of a story cannot be justly compared as novel versus film. To sum up my feelings on the adaptation of a novel into film, I must say that this project has broadened my response to film adaptation. I have gained newfound respect for directors adapting a classic story into a film. It is no easy feat to maintain the essence of the story through an entirely different medium to the same audience. I fervently hope my endeavors have been successful in bringing this text to life.

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