

**From Austen's Narrative Mediation to Cinematic Discourse:
Reconfiguring Mood in the Box Hill Scene of Douglas McGrath's
Emma (1996)**

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Abstract:

This study examines how mood changes when a literary text is adapted into film focusing on the Box Hill scene in Jane Austen's *Emma* and its adaptation in Douglas McGrath's 1996 film. The study uses Seymour Chatman's theory of Story and Discourse to analyse how the same narrative event is mediated differently in the novel and film and how it produces different emotional effects in the novel and the film.

The analysis compares how Austen uses different narrative components and how the filmmaker, Douglas McGrath, uses cinematic discourse to mediate the narrative. In the novel, mood develops gradually through narrative voice, commentary, description, and characters' thoughts. This creates a reflective and layered emotional experience. In contrast, the film compresses the same episode into a tight dramatic sequence that focuses primarily on the central dramatic moment and creates an immediate and sensory emotional impact.

The study argues that mood does not come only from the narrative event but from the way it is presented. While the film intensifies emotional response, it also reduces the social detail and critical depth present in the novel. The paper concludes that adaptation with its different discourse capabilities mediates the narrative differently and reshapes emotional, moral, and ethical experience.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Emma*, Douglas McGrath, adaptation, narratology, cinematic discourse, narrative mood, Seymour Chatman.

1. Introduction

When a literary work is adapted for a different medium, the story may remain the same, but the discourse means through which that story is communicated changes inevitably. It depends upon the medium and the tools available to that medium.

Because of this, the emotional impact created by each medium is crafted by the distinct narrative resources of that particular medium. As a result, the mood may vary across the two media.

Along with the story events, a large part of the mood in the novels emerges through narrative mediation which consists of description, commentary, temporal manipulation, and characters' thoughts and perceptions. On the other hand, films do not have the same degree of control over narratorial mediation. So they depend upon visual and aural tools such as performance, framing, editing, sound, and mise-en-scène to create and convey emotions.

The readers actively participate in interpreting them and this leads to a reflective mood. In the films, the emotional responses are created more directly with less space for any interpretive mediation. As a result, the reflective mood created through active narrative mediation becomes a more immediate emotional experience. In the novel, the Box Hill episode develops gradually through a long day of social interactions actively mediated by the narrator, and Emma insulting Miss Bates and her eventual moral reflection. Emma eventually understands her mistake and this initiates her movement towards moral awareness and correction. Douglas McGrath's adaptation, however, condenses and reshapes this episode into a tight dramatic sequence. This becomes a more immediate emotional and sensory experience. In this article, with the help of Seymour Chatman's narrative theory of Story and Discourse, we explore these different emotional experiences and moods.

2. Literature Review

Most of the early scholars of adaptation studies were concerned primarily with fidelity of the adaptation and judged the adaptation based on how close it is to the source. This approach has been challenged by later scholars Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon and many other scholars. Stam in his *Literature Through Film* and Hutcheon in her *A Theory of Adaptation* argue that adaptation should be understood not as a mere reproduction of the source text but as a transformation of the text which should be judged as an independent text functioning on its own terms. According to this perspective, a film doesn't simply transfer or paste the story onto a different medium but reorganises it to its own medium's expressive capabilities and constraints. This helps in a clearer and more nuanced understanding of how narrative experience changes across media.

Scholars such as Claudia L. Johnson discuss Austen's fiction in relation to ideology, politics, and social structures. She also discusses the wider implications of Austen's narrative choices. In Austen adaptation studies many scholars and critics have examined how Austen's novels have been reshaped onto the screen and how that has affected the narrative experience and meaning. *Jane Austen in Hollywood* edited

by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, *Jane Austen on Screen* edited by Gina Macdonald and Andrew F. Macdonald, and Sue Parrill's *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations* are some of those works. They also looked at the cinematic conventions, cultural expectations and many other factors that could have influenced the filmmakers' decisions.

At the same time, another set of scholars and critics like Norman Page, Myra Stokes, Joe Bray, and Massimiliano Morini tried to examine and understand Austen's narrative techniques by analysing her language, irony, narrative voice, and methods of narration. Their work shows how Austen carefully constructs the narrative and creates a very layered narrative experience.

Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan in their work *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* argue that nineteenth-century literary texts, particularly Austen's novels, are frequently "generified" into easily marketable or accessible narrative structures. Deborah Kaplan, in her essay *Mass Marketing Jane Austen: Men, Women, and Courtship in Two Film Adaptations*, similarly argues that Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996) is "Harlequinized" into a narrative that primarily focuses on romance and is made for mass consumption. These studies argue that adaptations reduce the density, complexity and nuance of the novel for immediate and easily understandable emotional experience

A more focused work such as "*Filming Highbury: Reducing the Community in Emma to the Screen*," an essay by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, argues that Douglas McGrath's film adaptation cuts down the social world of Highbury to a large extent to focus more on Emma's individual journey. Marc DiPaolo, in *Emma Adapted: Jane Austen's Heroine from Book to Film*, similarly argues that McGrath's film focuses on Emma's journey and her emotional transformation reducing the novel's complex social structure. David Monaghan, in *Emma and the Art of Adaptation*, and Hilary Schor, in *Emma, Interrupted: Speaking Jane Austen in Fiction and Film*, both observe that the film streamlines Austen's narrative into a more mainstream narrative form.

There has been a vast amount of work on both Austen's novels and their adaptations discussing social, political, cultural, historical and linguistic aspects of them, and broader tendencies of both emotionalisation and simplification in the film adaptations. But relatively less attention has been given to how narrative mediation is transformed at individual scenes or sequences and how different components of the discourse, both in the novel and the film, become part of the mediation and shape the mood. This article addresses this gap by analysing the Box Hill episode in the novel and Douglas McGrath's adaptation.

3. Methodology

This study uses Seymour Chatman's model of Story and Discourse developed in his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* as a common theoretical ground for analysing both the novel and the film. The novel is examined through narrative voice, authorial structure, and free indirect discourse. Books on filmmaking crafts are used as an additional support to analyse elements in the film.

The analysis is done in three stages using a comparative analytical approach. It starts with a close reading of the novel's opening chapter and how each narrative element of the text in particular and all the elements together create mood followed by a close reading of the film's opening scene in which each cinematic tool in particular and all these tools together create mood and ends with a comparative analysis examining how both texts construct mood through two different narrative structures.

4. Narrative Mediation and Mood in the Novel

In the Box Hill episode, while the narrative voice communicates the story, the implied author shapes the narrative. According to Seymour Chatman narrative voice is the "speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience" (153). This communication is shaped by the implied author who, "instructs us silently, through the design of the whole" (Chatman 148).

This chapter opens with a brief description of the day, how the excursion is arranged and how they all reach there. The narrator describes it as "a very fine day for Box Hill" where "arrangement, accommodation, and punctuality" favour "a pleasant party" (Austen 344). This summary where "discourse is briefer than the events depicted" compresses time (Chatman 68). This harmony is subtly undercut immediately by the tonal shift. The narrator describes the mood of the characters and the day there was "a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union" and they are "separated too much into parties" (Austen 344).

This acts as an implicit narratorial commentary, the "speech acts by a narrator that go beyond narrating, describing, or identifying" and involves "judgment," (Chatman 228). The narrator does not directly judge the gathering. The phrasing itself evaluates its failure and establishes a mood of fragmentation before the conflict. Thus the implied author establishes perception by arranging the sequence in a way that the later insult emerges organically from an atmosphere of already existing fragmentation and dulness.

Then the narrative reveals the inner thoughts of Emma through free indirect discourse, one of the most characteristic features of Austen's narrative style. Chatman notes that narration exists along a spectrum "from narrators who are least audible to those who are most so" (146). Austen's narrator is relatively covert. It rarely announces itself directly, but it guides interpretation giving selective access to consciousness. Emma appears "so silent and stupid," "looking without seeing... listening without knowing what she said" while talking to Frank (Austen 344). This shows her changing feelings towards Frank. The judgement is filtered through Emma's consciousness. Here the narrator evaluates her feelings through irony.

Then the extended flirtation forms a large part of the episode presented almost as a 'scene' (Chatman 68). By presenting it as a 'scene' the narrative delays the central ethical and dramatic moment. But at the same time it also builds tension towards it. During this flirtation characters such as Mrs Elton and Mr Knightley show irritation and jealousy. It's very implicit and suggestive. The narrator describes that, "Mrs. Elton swelled at the idea of Miss Woodhouse's presiding" and Mr Knightley says, "Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?" (Austen 346).

Then Frank's proposal that each person contribute "one thing very clever... or three things very dull indeed" (Austen 347) appears initially as playful but it immediately leads to Emma's insulting remark. As a response to Frank's proposal when Miss Bates playfully exclaims, "I need not be uneasy.... That will just do for me". Emma casually mocks: "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once." (Austen 347)

Miss Bates "did not immediately catch her meaning," and when it "burst on her," the effect is not anger. It's pain which she shows by "a slight blush" (Austen 347). She doesn't counter it or protest; instead, she tries to process the insult within her habitual politeness and self-reproach. She says that she will "try to hold" her tongue. She even attributes the fault to herself saying she must have been "very disagreeable," otherwise Emma "would not have said such a thing to an old friend" (Austen 347). Here her pain is internalised and expressed through self-blame which creates a restrained mood. The narrator lets her express her own feelings. This creates a restrained mood though it could have been a very melodramatic moment if the narrator decides to comment upon it or try to look into Miss Bates and reveal what she's going through.

However, the narrative doesn't immediately isolate the remark and casually moves on. Nobody in the group reacts. Mr Weston excitedly says "I like your plan," (Austen 348). He then continues to flatter Emma through his conundrum and Frank too continues his flirting with Emma. This diffuses the moment. It shows their

insensitivity, casual cruelty and class snobbery though it's not very explicit. This lack of strong collective response functions as an indirect critique.

Then Elton leaves for a walk after being jealous and irritated. Frank Churchill's remarks on them and on marriage more generally, and Jane Fairfax's looks like a casual exchange. These responses gain meaning later in the novel when we get to know that Frank and Jane have been engaged and Jane's hurt by the flirting between Emma and Frank.

Later the discourse which was restrained at the moment of insult shifts into more explicit ethical commentary through Mr Knightley's rebuke. Up to this point, the narrator has largely relied on implicit commentary. He asks how Emma could be "so unfeeling to Miss Bates" and "so insolent" in her wit (Austen 351). Even here, his tone remains controlled. But the rebuke is strong and raises ethical questions. He mentions how Miss Bates couldn't stop talking about it. This off-page conversation between Knightley and Miss Bates acts as an 'ellipsis' (Chatman 68).

Emma, initially, "blushed" and "tried to laugh it off" (Austen 351) which shows that she has not realised that she has hurt Miss Bates'. Knightley continues his criticism and disappointment for insulting a poor woman who has no prospects and might sink further instead of being compassionate. He ends it with a moral appeal to her consciousness:

"I will tell you while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will sometime or other do me greater justice than you can do now." (Austen 352).

This gives both ethical meaning and emotional depth to the scene. Emma starts realising her mistake and cruelty. Then the reflective passages after Emma enters the carriage show her guilt and remorse. She realises that she has been "so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates" (Austen 352). Her remorse and guilt reach a climax when tears roll from her eyes. Chatman describes this as a stretch, where discourse time is greater than story time (Chatman 68). The narrative slows and focuses on Emma's self-examination. This creates a reflective mood.

The episode uses narratorial commentary and free indirect discourse, mixed with irony, creating a comic and critical mood. It also uses summary, ellipsis, stretch, and scene to manipulate temporality. This helps the narrative focus on main moments and shape the narrative to control the mood. As a result, the mood develops gradually in a very layered manner.

5. Film Analysis:

The Box Hill sequence in *Emma* (*Emma* 01:27:56-01:33:58) is constructed through cinematic discourse as a concentrated and immediate dramatic unit. Mood is produced through visuals, performance, editing, and sound. The scene opens directly with a montage accompanied by music which functions similarly to what Chatman identifies as summary (Chatman 69). This montage presents a series of shots of character groupings picking strawberries. Frank Churchill is laughing with Miss Bates and Jane, Mr Knightley and Mr Weston are assisting Mrs Weston, the Eltons are interacting playfully, and Emma is with Harriet. It establishes the space and environment, and also warmth and divisions between them. As Seymour Chatman observes, film communicates through "two cotemporal information channels, visual and auditory" (Chatman 158).

The wide shots establish an open meadow, terrain, trees and properties such as baskets, strawberries, and picnic elements and imply a tone of leisure and recreation. Light pastel coloured costumes create visual coherence and harmony, particularly in the alignment of Emma and Harriet. The *mise-en-scène* thus shows social ease and narrows focus onto the emotional core of the scene.

A soft, high-key diffused daylight provided by sunlight produces a pastoral atmosphere with minimal contrast. This reinforces the apparent ease of the gathering. As Bruce Block observes, lower contrast reduces visual intensity and creates a sense of stability (Block 13). This is followed by a shift into scene.

The sequence then moves into a conversation between Emma and Harriet. Their conversation about Harriet's supposed attachment is visually aligned with Frank Churchill laughing with Jane and Miss Bates. Both Emma and Harriet turn toward this direction, followed by a point-of-view shot of Frank. This aligns the viewer's perception with Emma's misinterpretation that Harriet likes Frank. The construction deliberately misdirects the audience.

Then a cut to a wide shot of all the people seated together in the meadow. The montage music stops, and the scene moves into dialogue. Mrs Elton tries to push Jane to take a governess position. This introduces tension into the scene. A close-up on Frank Churchill before he intervenes foreshadows and hints at the possible relationship between Frank and Jane though it's not very clear. He interrupts first through polite diversion and then through the introduction of the game. This is a deliberate attempt to redirect the situation and relieve Jane from Mrs Elton's pressure. Mrs Elton is clearly insulted and offended. Mr Elton's remark that he is "an old married man" who can say nothing to please "Miss Woodhouse, or any other young lady". This carries an additional slight toward Harriet. Then they both leave. This irritates Emma. The insult happens in this atmosphere.

Miss Bates's self-deprecating remark about saying "three dull things" is followed by Emma's sharp response, "you will be limited... only three." The remark is shaped by Emma's irritation. Miss Bates initially laughs as she fails to understand it immediately. A brief pause follows and the ambient sound intensifies. Mr Knightley understands the insult and his body language and facial expression change. Miss Bates then eventually understands that she was being insulted. She immediately blames herself instead of confronting Emma. The camera remains on her in a close-up throughout her entire hesitant, stammering self-reproach.

The immediate reaction shots show the ethical meaning of the moment by acting both as mimesis for the audience's reactions and also guiding them to react that way. Mrs Weston's reaction who has been a confidante of Emma throughout the narrative acts as a disapproval and also functions as a moral response in the scene. It is immediately followed by a close-up of Emma which reveals her gradual awareness and guilt. As Walter Murch argues, editing prioritises emotions and the meaning they produce over everything (19). The cuts and close-ups heighten the emotions and act as implicit narratorial commentary. The camera which started in wide shots and moved towards mid shots during the social interactions now sticks to close-ups as the tensions rise and emotions reach their peak and each individual's reactions create ethical meaning. As Mascelli observes, a sequence may be built toward greater intensity through progressively tighter framing (195).

Then Mr Knightley gets up and invites Miss Bates to accompany him for a walk. This act comes as a disapproval and an ethical response. The camera again cuts to Emma. She lowers her gaze and her restrained expression shows her guilt. Then the scene cuts at the emotional peak rather than continuing and diffusing the emotions by continuing the interaction. By that the narrative chooses to focus more on Emma's emotions.

The next scene begins with Emma walking towards her carriage while Mr Knightley follows her angrily walking fast to talk about her behaviour towards Miss Bates. This staging and movement externalises moral confrontation. Emma's movement suggests avoidance, while Knightley's anger and walking towards her externalises his decision to confront her and show his anger and disappointment. The dialogue is delivered with controlled variation without losing intensity. This shows his moral authority and clarity all while maintaining restraint. Knightley's vocal stress on words such as "poor" and "compassion" referring to Miss Bates's poverty and vulnerability heightens the emotions and ethical core of the scene.

The structure of the sequence also uses ellipsis. Transitions between the scenes omit Mr Knightley and Miss Bates's interaction. Mr Knightley mentions how Miss Bates couldn't stop talking about the insult and this reveals how hurt she is

without showing the scene and her emotions completely. This narrative technique acts as retrospective ellipsis. This helps in maintaining narrative economy and also focuses on Emma.

The emotional peak occurs within the rebuke when Emma begins to cry during the confrontation. The camera places her in the foreground to focus on her guilt whereas Mr Knightley standing in the background doesn't observe her emotions completely. Mr Knightley's delivers his final lines with restrained intensity appealing to her consciousness and exits the frame leaving her to reflect upon her actions. Music which has been absent throughout the insult until now re-enters. It gradually increases in intensity and reinforces the emotional climax. As Kathryn Kalinak notes, it guides emotional response by shaping the viewer's engagement with the scene (1). She also notes that a minimalist score can "gravitate towards the structure" and make the audience "respond in their own" (52). The restrained use of sound ensures that emotional impact emerges through performance and timing rather than continuous scoring.

6. Comparative Analysis: From Narrative Mediation to Cinematic Immediacy

One of the major differences between the novel and the film lies in how the narrative events are arranged and how that affects narrative duration. The novel uses summary, scene, and stretch to regulate mood and produce a layered mood. The initial day's arrangements, journey, and grouping are summarised immediately moving into the more dramatic long scene-based interaction and reflective passages that expand psychological time. The insult emerges gradually within this long structure. Yet its emotional consequences are delayed and reflected upon through confrontation by Mr Knightley later. The film condenses this progression into a tightly structured sequence.

The opening montage functions as a summary followed by a continuous present-time interaction. Elliptical transitions remove the interaction between Mr Knightley and Miss Bates, and the narrative moves fast towards confrontation. While the novel uses both temporal expansion and compression and develops gradually, the film particularly uses temporal compression through montages, reaction shots, and elliptical editing. As a result, the reflective, critical and layered mood in the novel becomes a more immediate concentrated emotional mood.

This transformation is very clearly evident in two different forms of narrative mediation. In the novel, mood is constructed through a mediating narrative voice functioning within the framework of the implied author. It filters events, distributes commentary, and controls perception. Through this voice, the narrator shapes mood and meaning gradually through implicit commentary. In the film, visuals and performative expression perform the same function, more covertly though. The

reaction shots, staging, and performance act as commentary implicitly. Mrs Weston's disapproving look, Mr Knightley's expression, and Emma's visible guilt can be interpreted as immediate ethical indicators. In the novel, only Knightley is critical of Emma. In the film, both Knightley and Mrs Weston are critical though Mrs. Weston who is fond of Emma doesn't express it openly. But as Chatman notes, modern films are generally "chary of overt comment" and instead prefer meaning through visual and auditory channels (247). This makes the film less verbose and more artistic. As a result, the evaluative mood in the novel becomes more immediate and perceptual.

The restructuring and omission of events also further contribute to this transformation. The lengthy flirtation between Emma and Frank, interactions involving the Eltons and Jane, Frank's game which contributes to the gradual build-up of the insult in the novel are trimmed or just suggested or entirely removed. Frank and Jane's reflective passages on marriage after the Eltons leave are completely omitted. Frank's game is used as a device to divert Mrs Elton from Jane, not as part of flirtation. The sequence simply builds towards the conflict. As a result, the layered mood developed by gradual accumulation in the novel becomes a more concentrated and immediate dramatic and emotional sequence.

The insult is also treated differently in both the novel and the film. In the novel, Emma's insulting comment appears almost incidental within ongoing conversation. Emma is riding a wave of reckless, playful banter and intense flirting with Frank Churchill. Her wit gets ahead of her manners, and she insults Miss Bates without thinking. Nobody reacts at all. Miss Bates reproaches herself and Mr Weston continues talking casually as if nothing just happened. Mr Knightley's criticism and Emma's reflection that comes later in the chapter act as ethical judgement.

In the film, Emma is irritated by Elton's remarks while leaving the gathering. Her insult comes out of this irritation which makes it a little understandable. The film softens her character and makes the audience empathise with her. The reaction shots of Mrs Weston and Mr Knightley in close-ups, heightened silence act as immediate moral response and ethical judgement. The sequence moves directly toward closure and intensifies its emotional impact. Also, the immediate reactions of other characters especially Mrs Weston, make the film more empathetic and produce a relatively warmer mood unlike the novel which is more critical and class snobbery is implied.

This difference is also very evident in the aftermath of the insult. In the novel, Emma initially tries to dismiss the incident, and the complete moral weight emerges only through rebuke and long reflection that follows. In the film, Emma's reaction shows her guilt immediately. Her crying during Mr Knightley's confrontation replaces the long introspection of the novel. The scene ends in an emotional peak dramatically while the novel has reflective passages which create an introspective mood. The

rebuke is also reconfigured. The restrained ethical criticism becomes a more intense and direct confrontation though it is also very restrained.

The commentary which is dispersed across the episode through dialogue, narration, and later reflection produces a critical mood. In the film, the commentary is very suggestive and implicit in the form of visual and performative cues. The film becomes less critical and more emotional.

Taken together, these changes show a shift in narrative emphasis. In a novel that is more than 450 pages long, the episode is covered in 9 pages. It is socially expansive and textured. Whereas the film is 2 hours and the sequence is covered in around 6 minutes time duration. It tries to focus on its central character primarily. Hence the novel chapter constructs mood through the lengthy and gradual interactions between characters and reflective commentary and the film sequence focuses only on Emma's immediate emotional experience. As Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield observe, the McGrath adaptation reduces the wider social world and focuses on Emma, where "the important relationships all stem from and to her" (243).

7. Implications and Scope for Future Research

This study shows that the mood is not dependent on events of a narrative alone but also on the discourse that is shaped by different tools distinct to each medium. Thus, it stresses the importance of narrative discourse as a framework to understand adaptation. It shifts attention away from fidelity criticism and contributes to the stance that the adaptations should be seen as independent works that function on their own terms. It also highlights the need for an integrated approach to literary narratology and film form and narratology.

This framework can be applied to other sequences in the novel and the film or other adaptations of Emma. This can also be extended to other film or digital or TV adaptations of Austen or any other novel. This can be extended to a wider range of narrative forms like short story or epic poems or stage plays and their adaptations. This framework may also be used to examine individual components of story or discourse in the novel or techniques such as editing, sound, performance etc in the film. This approach may be applied to novel and film narrative and mood analysis individually.

8. Conclusion:

This study shows that the construction of mood in a narrative doesn't depend only on narrative events but also on the discourse system and its various components. This study of the Box Hill episode shows that while the narrative is similar its emotions, morals and ethics vary due to the differences in narrative voice and mediation shaped by it, temporal structuring, and perceptual alignment.

In the novel, mood emerges gradually accumulating social detail, narrative and ethical tension and eventual moral awakening facilitated by narrative voice and implied author throughout the narrative that's shaped by summary, long scene, and reflective stretch. This produces a layered mood. The film reorganises the same sequence but compresses it through cinematic tools.

The narrative that's internally processed and interpreted in the novel becomes externalised through performance, editing, cinematography, music and sound. This concentrates the emotions and produces mood directly and immediately.

This film also reorients narrative emphasis. It streamlines the narrative to focus on Emma's growth and removes or reduces the broader social texture. The commentary that creates a critical distance in the novel is reduced or omitted. As a result, the adaptation intensifies emotions and reduces nuance and texture of the source text.

The analysis thus shows that mood is not an inherent property of narrative events but also a discourse that's shaped by each medium's expressive tools, their capacities and limitations. Adaptation does not just transfer the story and its mood but actively shapes a distinctive mood and experience from the same narrative material.

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