

From Narrative Voice to Cinematic Discourse: How the Opening Scene in Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) Reconfigures Austen's Narrative Mood

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Abstract

This study examines how narrative mood changes when a novel is adapted into a film, focusing on the opening narrative kernel event of *Sense and Sensibility* and the opening scene of Ang Lee's 1995 adaptation: Henry Dashwood's deathbed request. It uses Seymour Chatman's narratology to analyse the transformation. In the novel, this event is presented through ironic and reflective narration. In the film, it is shown as an immediate, dramatic, and emotional experience.

The analysis has three steps. First, it studies Austen's narrative voice, especially her use of covert heterodiegetic narration, her irony, and free indirect discourse. Second, it examines the film's cinematic discourse, including mise-en-scène, cinematography, lighting, editing, acting, and sound. Third, it compares how mood is created in both versions. In the novel, the mood is critical, ironic, and reflective. In the film, the mood is tense and urgent, created through visual and auditory elements and performance.

This study argues that mood does not come from the event itself. It is created by the way the event is presented. The paper concludes that adaptation is a change in discourse and impacts the emotional and ethical meaning of the narrative. While the film creates a strong emotional impact with its tight and focused narrative, it may reduce the social, ethical, and historical depth found in the novel. Overall, the study shows that changes in narrative voice and cinematic form shape how the audience feels and understands the story.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Ang Lee, *Sense and Sensibility*, narratology, cinematic discourse, narrative mood, adaptation studies, Seymour Chatman.

1. Introduction

The opening scene of Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* is presented through narrative mediation. The narrator presents the Dashwoods' history at Norland, the laws of inheritance, and Henry Dashwood's deathbed request to John Dashwood through this mediation. Ang Lee's film dramatises this narrative kernel through visual and aural resources. The narrative voice of the novel is replaced by elements such as composition, editing, acting, lighting, and sound. These elements create mood through what the audience sees and hears. This study moves between literature and cinema using Seymour Chatman's narratological model of Story and Discourse, which he discussed in his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, to examine how the narrative voice in the opening event is reconfigured on the screen in Ang Lee's adaptation and how different resources available to each medium create a different mood.

2. Literature Review

Most of the early scholars, film critics, and reviewers looked at films in terms of fidelity and judged them based on how close the film is to the source story, narrative events, progression of events, characters, themes, and language. Any deviation or creative interpretation was considered corruption or narrative loss. This can be observed in the works of George Bluestone, Geoffrey Wagner, and Lester Asheim. Bluestone, however, in his work *Novels into Films* (1957), argued that both are two different media, and most of the discussions that followed continued to compare films with novels. Wagner's *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975) classified adaptations based on their fidelity and creative approach. Asheim stressed the importance of preserving the original work's intention and spirit.

Over time, new scholars emerged who moved beyond the fidelity discussions and urged seeing adaptations as independent works that need to be judged on their own terms. Scholars such as Robert Stam, Kamilla Elliott, and Linda Hutcheon challenged what Stam calls the "fidelity reflex," which is to instinctively jump into discussions of how faithful the film is to the novel. Hutcheon, in her seminal work *A Theory of Adaptation*, views adaptations as creative works in their own right, while Elliott, in her works, questions the assumption that films merely illustrate novels. As a consequence, it has become possible to study how the narrative is reorganised, reinterpreted, or transformed.

Within Austen studies, works such as *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*, along with many other works, focus on a wide range of concerns, ranging from debates between literary purists and film enthusiasts to the transformation of Austen's stories,

characters, themes, and ideas. For instance, Claudia L. Johnson, in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, discusses Austen's novels in relation to politics, ideology, and reception, and also highlights how her novels engage with the social and cultural structures of their time. They also explore how the novels are streamlined into romance or Bildungsroman forms, and how issues like class, gender, and social relations are portrayed through different ideological perspectives.

They also discuss how the films respond to contemporary cultural and market demands and, as a result, what is retained in and what is transformed in the film. Scholars like Deborah Kaplan observe that many adaptations flatten Austen's irony and focus on courtship and emotional immediacy to reach wider audiences. Maree Sorbo similarly notes that screen adaptations often replace Austen's ironic distance with a more sentimental tone. A different set of scholars and critics, such as Norman Page, Myra Stokes, Massimiliano Morini, and Joe Bray, study how Austen's narrative techniques, language, syntax, irony, and narrative voice shape meaning, as well as the tonal and emotional texture of the novels.

Despite such vast and rich scholarship, how narrative voice constructs mood in the novel and how it is translated onto the screen at the level of individual scenes or sequences through different cinematic components have not been fully explored. This article addresses this gap by analysing the opening episode of the novel in comparison with the opening scene of *Sense and Sensibility*.

3. Methodology

This study uses Seymour Chatman's narratological framework of *Story and Discourse* as a common theoretical ground for both the novel and the film, with additional support from books about filmmaking crafts for examining each craft.

It is a three-stage comparative analytical study. It starts with examining narrative voice in the novel's opening event and how it shapes the mood, followed by a close examination of the opening scene in the film, focusing on performance and audio-visual elements and how they shape mood, and ends with a comparative study of both media, examining how the same narrative event is treated and how mood is generated differently across the two media.

4. Narrative Voice and Mood in the Novel

Seymour Chatman defines narrative voice as “the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience” (Chatman 153). This narrative voice works within a broader structure of communication that includes the real author, the implied author, the narrator, and the reader. This novel has a covert heterodiegetic narrator who does not participate in the story-world (heterodiegetic) but maintains a

relatively low degree of explicit self-presence (covert). As Chatman notes, narration exists along a spectrum “from narrators who are least audible to those who are most so” (147). Austen's narrator occupies this intermediate position and rarely draws attention to itself. It tells about the events through controlled summary of some events, selective commentary on some other events, and tonal modulation from scene to scene according to the requirement to critique or make readers understand characters or events.

Austen begins the novel with a long history of the Dashwood family at Norland and how well-respected they are. The narrator notes that their estate was “large” and that they had lived “in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance” (Austen 1). This apparent neutral tone gives background and establishes that Norland is a stable and comfortable place with social order. This makes the coming social and economic loss and vulnerability of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters very tragic without making it overtly sentimental and creates a mood of restrained apprehension.

This is followed by the inheritance structure, which is narrated entirely through summary rather than dramatised action, though there is scope for a very dramatic and sentimental scene or sequence. The narrator explains how the Norland estate is legally given to the male heir, while the women are left with a very limited amount of money, and notes that the will produced “as much disappointment as pleasure” (Austen 2). This clearly shows the injustice of the existing legal system. Austen further shows this injustice by emphasising that John Dashwood is already financially comfortable by “half of a large fortune” he inherited from his mother and has further increased his wealth through marriage (Austen 2). This reveals that John does not actually need the Norland estate for his economic safety, but it is very much needed for the survival of the Dashwood sisters, since they receive only a small amount of money from their father and nothing from their mother. This contrast shows not only John's selfishness but also the absurdity of the inheritance system and how it favours male heirs and robs women of financial security, making them vulnerable.

The narrator intensifies this critique through ironic commentary on the old gentleman's decision to favour the child heir. The child's appeal is described as “by no means unusual in children of two or three years old: an imperfect articulation... and a great deal of noise,” which outweighs years of care and affection from the Dashwood women (Austen 2). This ironic commentary shows the irrationality and absurdity of the decision and reveals how misplaced the old gentleman's sentiment is. Here, the narrative voice embeds her criticism in the narrative description of the events and guides the reader's judgment instead of pausing the narration to condemn the character's action and giving long didactic moral speeches. This

keeps the narrative flow, and yet, beneath it, there is a critical evaluation of the character's actions. This creates a critical mood in a restrained manner.

The narrator further continues to maintain a tone of restraint by choosing to compress the most important kernel, the kernel that sets the story in motion, into a summary instead of dramatising it:

“His son was sent for as soon as his danger was known, and to him Mr. Dashwood recommended, with all the strength and urgency which illness could command, the interest of his mother-in-law and sisters” (Austen 3).

Such an important kernel is presented without dialogue, gesture, or descriptive elaboration. It is not staged as a scene; it is reduced to a summary. The narrator avoids sentimentality and maintains a controlled tone by choosing to summarise it in an apparently neutral tone instead of presenting it as a dramatic, sentimental scene charged with high emotions involving multiple characters. This could have acted as a strong emotional hook to the story, but it could have become extremely sentimental and dramatic too. But looking at Austen's complete works, we can say that she always chooses to maintain restraint and avoids sentimentality without making the narrative emotionally hollow. The narrator distributes the event's ethical and moral weight across the discourse that follows. It emerges gradually through commentary and psychological analysis. Here, the mood is produced by what is withheld and how it is later interpreted.

Following this, the narration turns to John Dashwood. It is here that narrative voice, irony, and psychological access blend most clearly. Austen's narrator moves fluidly and seamlessly between external narration and interior access, revealing the thoughts, motives, and rationalisations of John Dashwood and shaping ethical perception. John is introduced through a biting irony: “He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold-hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed” (Austen 3). The narrator does not explicitly condemn John. Instead, judgment is embedded in the sentence's structure.

The narration then moves into John's inner reasoning and gives access to his thoughts while maintaining critical distance. His initial generosity appears as an internal projection: “Yes, he would give them three thousand pounds: it would be liberal and handsome!” (Austen 3).

We can see Austen's most characteristic *free indirect speech* here. The narrator's commentary and critique are blended with the character's consciousness. The narrator's evaluation of John's rationalisation is blended within the language of the character's own thoughts. This creates a layered discourse, and the moral meaning emerges indirectly. As Chatman suggests, commentary may be implicit or explicit (228).

The reader gets to know John's reasoning and is also made critically aware of his selfishness. The narrator mocks John by exaggerating his generosity as “liberal and handsome.” This does not produce sympathy; it exposes the self-serving nature of his moral reasoning.

Throughout the opening event, the narrative voice shapes the reader's sympathies without directly appealing to them and aligns them with the Dashwood women. The narrator first reveals the long history of the Dashwoods at Norland and their social status and economic standing in an apparently neutral voice. It then looks at the selfishness and inability of male characters who fail to protect the Dashwood women from falling into a vulnerable state, and the absurdity of the inheritance system that robs the Dashwood women of everything, with a critical eye and an almost mocking tone, in a restrained manner. The narrative critiques individuals and the broader social structure and holds both responsible for the injustice done to the Dashwood women.

Thus, the opening chapter constructs a tone and mood that is restrained, ironic, and ethically charged, avoiding overt sentimentality, in which meaning emerges gradually through interpretation by the readers.

5. Cinematic Construction of Narrative Voice and Mood

Chatman's distinction between story and discourse can be extended to cinema, which operates through “two, cotemporal information channels, visual and auditory,” and each channel can convey the information and emotions of the narrative on its own or in coordination with the other (158). Cinema often lacks an explicit narrating voice, unlike the novel. So, the narration in film is generally very covert and expressed through the images and sounds, structuring them in the intended shape and order carefully through editing.

Thus, the narration in cinema is similar to the covert heterodiegetic mode of the novel. Chatman notes that a film presents events as if they simply happen “out there,” and the camera records them, and that appears to be “pure visual objectivity” (159). But this neutrality itself is carefully constructed by the director of the film, who heads and often guides different technicians of different crafts of filmmaking. These constructed visuals guide the audience in perception and interpretation and shape the mood of the narrative. Anyway, individual interpretation and perception vary from person to person based on their subjective interpretation, which is influenced by their tastes, knowledge, visual literacy, and several other factors.

The scene (*Sense and Sensibility* 00:01:00–00:02:20) begins with a wide shot of the Norland Park building. It's not lit from outside, and light inside the building is visible through a few windows. The image of the building acts as a covert narrative voice and establishes a

dark and melancholic tone of loss and grief even before it enters into the story. It also implies that the story is about people in the building and something bad or tragic is about to happen. The tonal contrast of lighting creates a visual and dramatic intensity that prepares the audience for the emotional weight of the scene. As Bruce Block explains, “the greater the contrast in a visual component, the more the visual intensity of the picture increases” (13).

A sharp cut transitions the audience into the interior of the building, accompanied by the line, “Your son has arrived from London, sir,” delivered over the exterior image. This cut, known as a *J-cut* in editing terminology, in which audio comes before the image, creates a sense of immediacy, making the edit sharp and seamless (Bowen 209). The long/master shot that follows tracks John's entrance into the room and establishes the space. As Joseph V. Mascelli notes, “the long shot should be employed to establish all elements in the scene, so that viewers will know who is involved, where they are located” (26). This shot places the viewer within the room and prepares for the emotional escalation that follows:

“Mr Dashwood summons his last ounces of energy and starts to whisper with desperate intensity.

MR DASHWOOD

John—you will find out soon enough from my will that the estate of Norland was left to me in such a way as prevents me from dividing it between my families. John blinks. He cannot take it in” (Thompson 30).

Here, the father immediately jumps into the topic without any formal greetings. This creates immediacy and tension and prepares for what is at stake for the Dashwood women. The father also does not clearly reveal why and who prevents him from dividing the property, and this creates a bit of curiosity and also helps us in giving the backstory, though it is very unclear. The father's laboured breathing in a room that is dark, with tonal contrast created by candlelight, creates urgency. This creates a dramatic mood of emergency through acting and visual tone.

Mr. Dashwood continues to explain the legal restriction on dividing the estate in an escalating dialogue. The explanation is partial and generates curiosity for the drama that follows. Here, exposition is embedded within emotional urgency. John's response, “Calm yourself, Father. This cannot be good for you,” introduces tonal contrast between restraint and desperation. The father continues speaking with even more desperation. This intensifies dramatic tension.

From this point, the scene shifts into a series of over-the-shoulder and reverse shots. This aligns the viewer with both characters without becoming fully subjective, maintaining

objective distance. As Mascelli explains, “the objective camera films from a sideline viewpoint... the audience views the event through the eyes of an unseen observer” (13–14). An important cut occurs when Mr. Dashwood says that Norland is John's “by law.” The camera cuts to John's face. It's a close-up. His expression shifts subtly from concern to restrained happiness. This moment is not verbalised but performed. Thompson, in her screenplay, writes: John looks torn between genuine distress and unexpected delight (Thompson 30). This cut and John Dashwood's facial expression externalise what the implied author in Austen's narrative reveals through interior narration and free indirect discourse. The cut itself follows the principles outlined by Walter Murch, who states: “Emotion, at the top of the list, is the thing that you should try to preserve at all costs” (19).

The cut acts as a narrative voice and stresses the revelation of his interiority, his selfishness, and his mixed feelings. The conversation that follows clearly shows the ethical tension. When Mr. Dashwood speaks of his wife and daughters and how they are left with “only five hundred pounds a year... nothing for the girls' dowries,” the editing directs attention to the moral burden placed upon John. His hesitant reply, “Of course,” shows his uncertainty and further emphasises his divided state of mind and nature.

The scene reaches its emotional and dramatic peak when the father, breathing heavily, insists, “You must promise to do this.” The cut to John isolates his response, “I promise, Father, I promise.” There's a certain sincerity in his promise, but the absence of a reverse reaction shot makes the promise ambiguous. This aligns again with Murch's hierarchy of editing priorities, where emotional continuity outweighs literal completeness (19).

Throughout the scene, the editing rhythm is carefully constructed by beginning with longer shots and gradually moving into shorter, closer framings as tension increases. As Mascelli observes, “a sequence may be built to move toward climactic close-ups” (195). These editing choices align with the rising emotional intensity. Yet the pacing is very controlled and not rushed. This maintains the emotional weight of the moment.

Throughout the scene, the visual and aural choices made by the filmmaker act as a narrative voice implicitly. The low-key lighting contrast in the scene heightens dramatic intensity and reinforces the ethical tension in the scene. The restricted tonal range, dominated by dark interiors with selective highlights created by lighting, creates a sombre, melancholic atmosphere. The candles placed beside the father act as a primary source of light, casting a direct, warm light onto his face. This keeps his face visibly open, and his expressions are clearly visible. The father's brightly lit face shows his sincerity and vulnerability. The same source creates shadows on John's face and shows his ambivalent nature. This produces a

clear contrast between the two characters. It is not just an aesthetic choice but a visually expressive choice and acts as implicit narratorial commentary.

The *mise-en-scène* of the scene, with a bed, a candle, and minimal furnishings, creates a sense of isolation and makes the audience grasp the weight of the moment. The father is dressed in white, lying on a white bed, and appears physically weak, while John is wearing darker tones that symbolise his moral uncertainty. This contrast is further reinforced through bodily positioning. The father is lying on the bed. His weakened posture suggests his vulnerability. The low-angle camera looking upon him shows his weakness. As Joseph V. Mascelli notes, high-angle camera treatment and staging can render a character “beaten down by circumstances” through positioning and visual framing (39). John is seated in an upright position. This, in contrast with his father, shows his emerging authority. The low-angle camera shows his power and implies an imbalance of power. The dying father, physically lowered and dependent, gives a responsibility to a son who is literally and symbolically positioned above him.

This scene has no music. There are only minimal auditory elements, such as faint footsteps on wood, subtle creaks, distant barking of dogs, and the soft crackle of an unseen fireplace. This lack of non-diegetic music intensifies the immediacy of the moment by drawing attention to breath, pause, and hesitation as expressive elements. As Kathryn Kalinak notes, the minimalist score makes the audience respond emotionally on their own (52). This lack of music allows silence to function as a narrative device. Instead of guiding, it makes the viewers respond to the emotions and ethical tension of the scene through their own interpretation.

6. Comparative Analysis

The novel first presents the long history of the Dashwood family in a restrained, neutral voice, then critiques the selfishness and absurdity of male characters through free indirect discourse and implies systemic injustice done to women through the flawed inheritance system, which favours men. Then, it summarises the deathbed request again through an apparently neutral tone. It doesn't dramatise the event or critique or comment upon it; instead, it chooses to discuss its emotional weight and ethical implications through the discourse that follows. Throughout the event, the readers are guided internally. This creates a very restrained narrative mood that is critical, ironic, and reflective.

The film, by contrast, chooses to dramatise the event in real time through visual, audio, and performance choices. It includes details about the law, the economic situation of women, and the request within this dramatic scene. The film removes many details present in the novel, such as the history of Norland, details about the old gentleman, John

Dashwood's mother and wife, and his wealth. This streamlining creates narrative economy and tight dramatic scenes. The establishing wide shot, low-key lighting, contrast in lighting on character faces, and costume choices act as a narrative voice that creates mood. Whereas editing choices, close-up framing, and performances at the key moments of the narrative act as a narrative voice that subtly critiques. However, the audiences have to interpret them externally.

The film also lacks a narrator and free indirect discourse that constantly embeds criticism within the narrative. As a result, the film loses some of the novel's criticism. The film's critical cues about John through editing and framing don't compensate for the novel's irony or criticism completely. As a result, the narrative voice, and therefore mood, which is interpretive and reflective in the novel, becomes dramatic, emotional, and sentimental in the film.

7. Implications and Scope for Future Research

By analysing how a single kernel is presented differently in two different media, this study shows how mood is not inherent in events alone but also emerges through discourse. This shifts attention away from fidelity, thematic structures, or narrative structure analysis. This study also brings together literary narratology and film and bridges narratology and film form. As a result, this study offers a more integrated way of analysing literature and cinema within a shared theoretical framework.

The approach can also be applied to other events and scenes or sequences in the film. This can also be applied to other novels by Jane Austen and to their film adaptations, as well as to adaptations of novels by other writers. This approach can also be applied to TV or digital adaptations of works by Austen or other writers. Further research can be done focusing on individual elements like kernels, satellites, characters, settings, or elements of discourse like authorial structure, point of view, non-narrated representation, etc. Further research can also be done to study how individual cinematic elements, such as sound, music, editing, or cinematography, contribute to mood construction in adaptation. In addition, audience reception studies could help in analysing readers' and audiences' experiences and the changes in discourse across media. This framework can be extended to film studies more broadly to analyse how mood is constructed through audiovisual discourse, even in films not based on novels.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to show that mood is not intrinsic to narrative events and cannot be translated across media. It is constructed by the discourse of each medium, which structures, represents, and evaluates events. We have an interpretive moment in the novel

and a desperate, physical moment in the film for the same narrative: Henry Dashwood's dying wish and John's pledge, because of the different discourses.

In the novel, a mood is created by a complex, covert, omniscient, ironic discourse. The scene is unrepresented, excluded, and meaning is included as a discourse of indirect discourse and commentary. This invites a reflexive moral meaning, with inferential meaning. This narration is translated visually and auditorily. Voice is translated into editing, lighting, performance, and silence, impacting perception and judgement non-interpretively. What is written ironically in the novel is translated into cinematic expression. But any reorganisation is costly. The film's visual beauty and more immediate emotional experience come at the expense of ethical complexity.

This example demonstrates that adaptation is not translation but transformation. Not only are the narratives not equivalent when reorganised within the different media, but the different modes of representation not only present the meaning differently but also impact the experience. Thus, for adaptation, we need to consider not only narrative but also discourse and the role of the media in creating the moods that communicate meanings.

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