

Rewritten Masterpieces

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Introduction

Rewriting canonical texts is not simply an optional artistic exercise; it is a historically recurring and arguably inevitable form of reinterpretation. Adaptation is not merely reinterpretation but a mechanism through which cultural authority is renegotiated across time. Each generation revisits inherited narratives, reshaping them to reflect its own moral, social, and philosophical concerns. Retelling becomes a mechanism through which societies process the past, address historical omissions, and incorporate perspectives that were previously excluded. As Eliot (1919) suggests, artistic value lies less in radical originality than in the ability to engage tradition within a contemporary framework, absorbing and transforming what came before. This essay outlines several theoretical approaches that illuminate the logic of retelling and introduces two analytical lenses for examining how canonical works are reinterpreted.

Theoretical Foundation

A number of literary theorists have explored how and why stories are retold.

Genette (1997) develops the concept of "transtextuality," arguing that literature often emerges through the imitation or transformation of earlier works, producing what he calls "second-degree" texts. Mirenyat (2015) clarifies that Genette "uses the term 'intertextuality' for a rich mosaic of echoes of, quotations from, allusion to and parallelisms with other texts in a text....". According to Landwehr (2002) intertextuality is "generally understood to connote the structural relations between two or more texts." Landwehr also notes that this approach references influence and inspiration as key terms: influence recognizing earlier texts as the source for the new while inspiration regards later texts "as innovative improvement over the previous one."

Sanders (2005), in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, describes adaptation as a "transpositional practice" a form of reworking that maintains a recognizable relationship to its source. She emphasizes that fidelity to the original should not be the primary concern; instead, attention should be given to creative decisions and the new cultural context in which the work operates.

Hutcheon (2006), in *A Theory of Adaptation*, approaches adaptation as both creative and interpretive. She characterizes it as "second, without being secondary" and as a

"repetition, but repetition without replication". For Hutcheon, adaptations produce a "palimpsestic doubleness" in which audiences experience the new work alongside their memory of the original.

Both Sanders and Hutcheon note that audiences often take pleasure in recognition, what Hutcheon calls "insider knowledge", while also engaging with novelty. Adaptation and appropriation thus allow stories to remain relevant by repositioning them within new cultural frameworks.

Analytic Lenses

One useful framework for examining adaptation is New Historicism, which emerged in the 1980s through the work of scholars such as Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt.

Greene (2024) defines New Historicism as "... a literary theory that emphasizes the importance of both the historical context in which a text was created and the contemporary context in which it is read. It posits that understanding a literary work requires considering the socio-cultural, economic, and historical circumstances that shaped the author and the reader alike." This approach assumes that authors are shaped by their historical moment and that readers inevitably interpret texts through their own contexts.

Applying New Historicism to adaptation means examining both the original work's historical conditions and those of its reinterpretation. The framework also draws heavily on intertextuality, dissolving rigid boundaries between "literary" and "non-literary" texts. Alfaro (1996) traces the term to Julia Kristeva's essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), which reconceives texts as dynamic sites of relational meaning. As Alfaro explains, "there are always other words in a word, other texts in a text. The concept of intertextuality requires, therefore, that we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures."

A second lens derives from hermeneutics, particularly Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the "Fusion of Horizons."

George (2025) defines hermeneutics as the study of interpretation across fields concerned with meaning, intention, and human experience. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" describes understanding as an interaction between the historical context of a text and the present perspective of the reader. Because each generation brings a different "horizon" of assumptions and experiences, interpretation is always shifting. Gadamer (2006) explains: "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we

speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons.” Vessey (2009) further clarifies that horizons function metaphorically as the limits and conditions of understanding, shaped by both implicit and explicit beliefs. A “fusion of horizons” occurs when these perspectives interact, allowing new meanings to emerge. Importantly, this process implies that texts remain alive only through continued reinterpretation; when reinterpretation ceases, so does meaningful engagement. Canonical works endure not through preservation alone, but through ongoing dialogue.

Examples

Forbidden Planet

Forbidden Planet (1956) provides a strong example for Gadamerian analysis. As Morsberger (1961) observes, the film draws on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, reworking its themes within a science fiction framework. From a Gadamerian perspective, the film does more than adapt the play—it participates in its “effective history,” allowing meaning to evolve across time.

The film reframes Prospero’s authority, Miranda’s innocence, and the enchanted island within a modern context shaped by psychoanalysis and technological anxiety. This shift illustrates Gadamer’s view that tradition is not fixed but continually reinterpreted. His concept of “play” is also relevant here: the film invites viewers into an interpretive process where meaning arises beyond authorial intent, through the interaction of past and present. Rather than replacing *The Tempest*, *Forbidden Planet* extends it, demonstrating how canonical texts persist through reinterpretation (Gadamer, 2004; Shakespeare, 1623/1998).

Cats: The Jellicle Ball

Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” holds that understanding emerges not from neutrally recovering a text’s original meaning but from the productive collision between the text’s historical horizon and the interpreter’s present” A contemporary example of this can be seen in *Cats: The Jellicle Ball* (New York Times, 4/7/26). This production brings Lloyd Webber’s 1981 musical into dialogue with New York’s queer ballroom culture. The result is neither a straightforward revival nor a simple cultural overlay, but a new form that emerges from their interaction. The incorporation of voguing and chosen family dynamics does not distort the original; rather, it reveals new interpretive possibilities. Eliot’s lyrics gain renewed significance in this context, illustrating Gadamer’s “insight that tradition is not a fixed monument but a living inheritance ...which continues only through active reinterpretation....”

Turandot

From a New Historicist perspective, Puccini's *Turandot* exemplifies the instability of canonical works. Because the opera was left unfinished, it has generated multiple completions, each shaped by its historical moment. Franco Alfano's 1926 version reflects early twentieth-century operatic conventions, reinforcing contemporary assumptions about gender and authority (Fairtile, 2004). Luciano Berio's 2002 completion, by contrast, foregrounds fragmentation and questions the coherence of the work, aligning with late twentieth-century critical concerns about authorship and textual authority (Uvietta, 2004). More recent interpretations, such as the 2024 Tin–Stanton completion, engage directly with issues of Orientalism and representation, allowing previously marginalized perspectives to reshape the work's meaning (Ng, 2026). The Atlanta Opera's decision to perform only Puccini's original material offers yet another intervention: by refusing to complete the opera, it reframes the work as historically open rather than incomplete (Loria, 2026). In each case, *Turandot* demonstrates Greenblatt's argument that texts are continually reshaped by the cultural forces surrounding them.

Mary Reilly

Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990) can be read through Greenblatt's New Historicism as a reworking of a canonical Victorian text from a perspective the original ignores. In Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), domestic servants are present but narratively invisible. According to Pennington (1994) Martin makes that absence central by shifting the narrative to Mary, whose diary becomes a parallel or "double" to the original text. As Pennington notes Martin's novel functions as an intertextual revision that mirrors and reshapes Stevenson's narrative. Zygan (2023) notes that rather than just an intertextual text, *Mary Reilly* is a spin-off written to create a dialogue with Stevenson's classic; its aim is to rediscover the well-known story by including previously omitted aspects. Through Greenblatt's concept of social energy, the tension in Stevenson's work can be seen not simply as psychological duality but as bound up with the class structures of the Victorian age. Martin exposes those structures through Mary's labor, vulnerability, and constrained hierarchical position. In Stevenson the crisis centers on Jekyll's identity as a gentleman while Martin emphasizes Mary's social and psychological conflicts. According to Zygan (2023) *Mary Reilly* operates as a form of cultural negotiation, not simply retelling Stevenson but reinterpreting to include elements not in view. Pennington also notes the novel's parodic and revisionary structure is what Hutcheon calls "repetition with difference" creating a distance that allows the original text to be read against itself .

Conclusion

Hutcheon (2004) observes that “every age can justly claim to be an age of adaptation.”

Adaptation reveals that masterpieces are not stable objects but ongoing opportunities for interpretation. New Historicism shows how each version reflects the cultural conditions of its moment; Gadamer provides understanding of how meaning emerges through the interaction of past and present perspectives. Together, these approaches demonstrate that reinterpretation is not a threat to literature but central to its survival.

The continued reworking of texts such as *Turandot* shows that what endures is not a fixed original, but a capacity for transformation. Each retelling reshapes the narrative’s significance, redistributing emphasis and revising its cultural implications. In this sense, adaptation does not reproduce masterpieces, it produces them.

Canonical status, then, is not a mark of completion but of ongoing relevance. Texts remain meaningful precisely because they can be told again, differently, and differently over time.

April 29, 2026

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