

FINDING THE FUNNY IN JANE AUSTEN:
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES AS SCREWBALL COMEDY

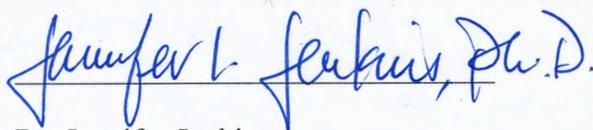
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Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted numerous times since it was first published in 1813. In 2009, Seth Grahame-Smith altered the novel to include the gaining popularity of zombies. This paper examines adaptations as a whole, more specifically how Grahame-Smith's novel exists as one. The genres of novel of manners and screwball comedy are examined in their similarities, and how altering the former into the latter allows humor to be present in the adapted work. Austen's love story of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy stays consistent in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, making the novel a successful adaptation while still being creative and new with zombies wandering around in the background.

The concept of adaptation suggests the process of change. In literary adaptation this includes the process of reimagining one story through different lenses that can achieve the same outcome as that of the original story. The appeal of an adaptation is discovering how one story can exist over and over again. Modern life is filled with these reimaginings of previously produced texts, whether it is Shakespeare performed in modern dress or a beloved novel lifted off the page to be presented on the screen. This is not to say that all stories presented today are not new and innovative to the world on their own. Stories that are chosen to adapt produce enough delight and appeal in their original form that adaptors attempt to create that same pleasure through slightly different parameters. Adaptations prosper partly because they are based on texts that were popular on their own. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are perhaps the most well-known literary couple penned by Jane Austen. The numerous adaptations born from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) are concerned with displaying the relationship of this couple, exploring how or even if they change through each retelling. Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) is an adaptation that highlights and enhances the moments of the original novel while allowing those moments to occur within a bizarre setting. In placing zombies alongside Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's love story, Grahame-Smith adds humor to their original tale while continuing to highlight their compatibility. In recreating the world of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy two centuries after their original existence, Grahame-Smith manipulated Austen's original novel of manners into something more closely related to a screwball comedy. While these two genres have much in common, there are elements that differ. The latter is considered more of a film convention, yet some characteristics of the adapted novel fit its parameters. In Grahame-Smith's work the question becomes: how do zombies influence or change the story, or more primarily change Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's encounters? As an

adaptation, the central focus on the love story of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy does not change. In using Austen's original language and plot, Grahame-Smith is able to heighten the love story and therefore places the story within the genre of screwball comedy with the addition of humor and the figures of the undead.

Linda Hutcheon defines an adaptation as: "An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative *and* an interpretive set of appropriation/salvaging, [and] an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work."¹ The adaptation exists because of another piece of work. It is not a new and original idea, but an examination of something that already exists. This does not mean that this reimagined work follows its predecessor exactly. Scenarios will be missing or altered, the setting and time period might be changed explicitly, but ultimately, two pieces of work tell either the same or a similar story.

An adapted work typically relies on the conventions of its predecessor. The conventions that can overlap between the two texts can include plot lines, characters, and overall themes. Adaptations typically seek to reimagine the original through a slightly different lens in an attempt to demonstrate that a story can have the same effect from a different angle. Hutcheon goes on to discuss that the point of view of an adaptation is "to describe, explain, summarize, expand" on what is occurring within the original story.² In terms of adaptations, something of the preexisting text has been altered in order to create a new imagining. The original story is ultimately being examined in some different way. Most often, adaptations will change the medium in which the story is told. For example, a novel can be made into a film, a film into a video game, or a video game into a play. When discussing adaptations that are created within the

1. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8.

2. Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, 13.

same medium, changes could include the point of view, as told from the perspective of a different character, or that the genre is transformed from a historical fiction to that of science fiction. The only rule that exists with adaptations is that the original work can be seen within the new. There are identifiable moments from the source text found within the new product.

Grahame-Smith's adaptation exists as a screwball comedy, but it would not be so if not for Austen's initial novel of manners. David Shumway defines the novel of manners as a story that "[deals] with the social reality of the historical present in which it is produced."³ The social realities pertain to society, and to the ways people exist and interact with each other within that society during a specific time period. Austen's novels all have female protagonists who live in the times in which Austen herself lived. In each novel, the author plays with the realism of her times: the issues of the people with landed property in England at the turn of the eighteenth century. The plot hinges on attaining knowledge, not only of the people surrounding the protagonists but also of those whom they do not know. Mary Ann O'Farrell, in her discussion of Austen's works as novels of manners, concludes that "manners are a way of coming to know something about a person or a circumstance or about the workings of the world," meaning that they are a way of interaction in society.⁴ The term "manners" in this way is not solely referring to the customs of society. It does not discuss how people *should* act towards one another, but rather examine the ways in which they actually *do* act in different settings throughout the novel.

A novel of manners examines the workings of day-to-day life in the times of its author. O'Farrell suggests that there is an "anxiety among its subjects and perhaps sometimes a kind of

3. David R. Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 32-3.

4. Mary Ann O'Farrell, "Meditating Much upon Forks: Manners and Manner in Austen's Novels," *Persuasions* 34 (2012): 101.

terror, even when the content of manners is not the materially terrible but the matter of ordinary dailiness,” that affects the characters.⁵ Austen’s characters are the ordinary people of her society, going about their daily lives. They interact with others of a higher or lower station than themselves, and the situations presented are not absurd or far-fetched. While there is always an element of romance in Austen’s creations, Shumway suggests that there does not necessarily have to be one to classify a text as a novel of manners.⁶ The most important factor within this type of novel is society. Societal norms of one time period might be extended to the same situations and problems in any time period, such as economics, cultural, and political aspects of society. The romantic subplots of Austen’s novels have obviously been a large draw for readers, but her novels of manners reflect how she examines the world around her.

Screwball comedies emerged in the films of the early twentieth century and played off the social elements that were found within a novel of manners. Manuela Ruiz Pardos claims that these types of comedies revolve around “ultimately defin[ing] contemporary romantic and marriage ideals,” focusing on a central female character finding not only her way through the world but a romantic partner, aided by her wit.⁷ The woman is often an American heiress, looking to find her own path out in the world. The films then outwardly suggest the class divide between the leading lady and the working class man who catches her eye. Ruiz Pardos goes on to suggest that the romance is a “playful negotiation, often approaching the status of warfare, in which desire and defeat, togetherness and separation, postponement and fulfillment are the

5. O’Farrell, “Meditating Much,” 102.

6. Shumway, *Modern Love*, 34.

7. Manuela Ruiz Pardos, “Addicted to Fun: Courtship, Play and Romance in the Screwball Comedy,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 13 (2000): 154.

ultimate rules.”⁸ The couple has to determine how exactly they work as a couple when they come from two completely different backgrounds. The social aspects of the novel of manners emerge within the screwball comedy as the story attempts to interpret how the characters fit within the existing world’s class divisions.

While the genre of screwball comedy is closely related to the genre of the novel of manners, the element of humor is what sets them apart. Shumway suggests that the defining factors of screwball comedies include the quick dialogue, crazy situations, and eventual romance.⁹ This final factor of a budding romance acknowledges that the ultimate goal of these stories is to bring a central couple together in the end. In attempting to join this couple, there are certain trials that do not make that transition easy but they are demonstrated in an upbeat and humorous way. Wes D. Gehring acknowledges that the word “screwball” can mean a number of things, all in reference to the crazy attributes of the genre. He identifies the term as referring to “an eccentric person,” as well as related to expressions of “having a ‘screw loose’ (being crazy) and becoming ‘screwy’ (drunk).”¹⁰ These different definitions help to explain the play of comedy and wit when pushing the leading couple together. Yes, the main couple has to deal with the community around them and the beliefs that accompany them, but rather than make the trials worrisome or dramatic to the audience, humor helps to bring hope that the couple will find their way together by the end of the movie. As with a novel of manners, in a screwball comedy the battle between marriage and class standings is continuously played with. The wit and humor of

8. Ruiz Pardos, “Addicted to Fun,” 156.

9. Shumway, *Modern Love*, 81.

10. Wes D. Gehring, “Screwball Comedy: An Overview,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13.3 (1986): 179.

the characters further demonstrate this battle of class more openly in the screwball comedy than it had been previously in the novel of manners.

Pride and Prejudice is a novel of manners, evidenced by Austen's depiction of a community that was similar to those that existed at the time the novel was written. The initial focus of the novel as a whole is the focus of the community in which the Bennet family lives. The community has the most influence, besides the Bennet family itself, on Elizabeth's thoughts and actions. Elizabeth as the protagonist is not even mentioned directly until the fourth chapter, highlighting the notion that she exists primarily as a part of the Longbourn community as well as her own immediate family. According to William Deresiewicz, Austen highlights how the "community thinks, talks, [and] exerts influence" all on its own providing the influence on the ways Elizabeth thinks about society.¹¹ This existence in the community does not mean that Elizabeth agrees with everything that occurs or the way specific people interact, but they still hold a kind of power over her. She will take into account the visiting strangers at the neighboring Netherfield as well as their incomes, even though she does it for different reasons than her mother does.

Elizabeth heeds the information about those around her because her community deems it important that she do so. Austen's language reflects the different views of each new character as information is presented to Elizabeth and the community. Charles J. McCann indicates that Austen places each newly introduced person in a setting that represents their "economic, social, or intellectual condition."¹² Mr. Bingley is equated to Netherfield as both man and home are

11. William Deresiewicz, "Community and Cognition in *Pride and Prejudice*," *ELH* 64.2 (1997): 504.

12. Charles J. McCann, "Setting and Character in *Pride and Prejudice*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19.1 (1964): 65.

likewise described with sparse detail. In opposition, Lady Catherine and her estate of Rosings are both described in elaborate and pretentious language. The descriptions of these homes acts to reinforce the natures of the characters that live within them. These descriptions also include Elizabeth's thoughts on the people that reside there. The different levels of society are not important here because Elizabeth makes her judgments on the character and manner of a person and not the amount of money he has, which is the primary notion that influences those around her.

In the first half of the novel, this widespread focus on the newcomers into the overall community shifts to the intimate existence of the Bennet family itself. The opening scene of the novel is a discussion between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, instantly presenting the concept that an unmarried man will soon be residing at a neighboring home which is implied to have been empty for some time. Here, the prospect of Mrs. Bennet aiming to marry off her five daughters is immediate, and this idea will persist throughout the novel because of her desire for them to be comfortably settled before the passing of Mr. Bennet.

Within the setting of *Pride and Prejudice*, there is no concrete situation other than marriage in which women can survive in society. This lack of security is especially true in the case of the Bennets as their home is entailed to a cousin with whom they have had no personal acquaintance with until the actions of the novel. Austen's narrator dictates that "Mrs. Bennet was beyond the reach of reason [in regards to Mr. Collins, the cousin,] and she continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters."¹³ The manners here are fully involved in the ways of society, unchangeable by the wants of the matriarch of a family with no sons. Regardless of her wanting the house to remain in the family,

13. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966): 42.

because they have five daughters and not five sons, society and law dictate that this is not possible. The only possible outlet, in Mrs. Bennet's eyes at least, is the notion of women trying to marry those of a greater station than themselves so that they may be provided for. Mrs. Bennet is extremely concerned with the welfare of her daughters, due to the way, as O'Farrell claims, society has outlined the way people of the time can survive, no matter what class standing they have.¹⁴ She ultimately acts to ensure that her daughters are not destitute even if Elizabeth sees these actions as embarrassing.

Manners within a novel of manners are not how the characters are polite to one another, but how they exist within their community, how they choose to survive in their world. These manners can include Elizabeth's wit and disapproval of her mother's schemes because that is how she reacts to the ways of her society. As Deresiewicz has argued, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, as well as the community as a whole, have a kind of collective judgment that has produced the ways Elizabeth acts.¹⁵ There is a sense of acknowledgement by Elizabeth that her mother is not going to change her ways, and that her family has firmly planted itself within their society. The elder Bennets at the time of the novel cannot change their circumstances, leaving any attempt at improvement in social standing to their offspring. Elizabeth chooses to respond to this in her own way. Her words are sometimes in opposition to those of Mrs. Bennet, yet she still exists within the same community and the same overall views of the world.

Once Austen has established the Bennet family dynamic, the view shifts slightly, focusing on Elizabeth as she interacts with those from outside her own immediate surroundings. As the protagonist of the novel, Elizabeth's thoughts and views are always at the forefront of the

14. O'Farrell, "Meditating Much," 104-5.

15. Deresiewicz, "Community," 504.

narrative. Deresiewicz claims that Elizabeth is somewhat of an anomaly to those around her because she deliberately questions the words of others.¹⁶ The first full description of her character comes after Elizabeth overhears Mr. Darcy describe her as “not handsome enough to tempt” him.¹⁷ The narrator indicates that Elizabeth has no true or any real nice feelings about Mr. Darcy following this statement but goes on to tell her friends what happened “with great spirit... for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous.”¹⁸ She, unlike the dispositions of her mother and younger siblings, does not take great offense at one small comment. While this comment will begin to brew in her mind as she discovers more about Mr. Darcy, in the moment she does not put much stock in what is said. She continues onward, sure of herself: the words of a stranger have no real influence on her character. Elizabeth has an understanding of her place in society. She has the ability to alter her views as she gains more insight and information as well as by interacting with those outside of her community. *Pride and Prejudice* works effectively as a novel of manners in that it fully encompasses the views of the community while still allowing for individual variation as love builds between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. The world in which Austen herself existed is obviously present in the language as well as the troubles that the characters find themselves in. The wit that emerges through the main couple’s interaction aids not only their relationship but allows for the novel as a whole to be a fit predecessor for the screwball comedy genre.

As film began to use the genre of screwball comedy in the first half of the twentieth century, some of the elements played upon were ones that already existed in the world of Austen.

16. Deresiewicz, “Community,” 507.

17. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 7.

18. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 7.

One of these elements, and a major factor that influences Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's ultimate relationship, is the distinction of class. As Shumway argues, the use of class differences helps both the novel of manners and screwball comedies "to create, on the one hand, comedy in the form of jokes, at inappropriate behavior and, on the other, romance by enhancing the appeal of the hero and heroine."¹⁹ What is considered to be inappropriate behavior in terms of Austen's world is determined by society, and the few interactions between the couple do not seem all that wrong. While Mr. Darcy is a gentleman and Elizabeth is a gentleman's daughter, making them somewhat compatible in the eyes of society, the Bennet family does not have a substantial amount of money. Mr. Darcy is on a different end of the spectrum in terms of his wealth, making Elizabeth unworthy not only in his eyes for a brief moment, but to members of his family and the rest of society as well. Mr. Darcy obviously struggles with his desire for Elizabeth because he functions strictly by the ways of his upper class society. Only in the belief that he cannot overcome his infatuation of her does he propose marriage to Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth is not worded with flowery language, and he notes that someone of her standing could not be worthy of him. Elizabeth is only acceptable because he wants to get over the struggle of pining for her. At this moment, Elizabeth openly expresses her dislike for Mr. Darcy, whereas prior she had been more guarded in their banter. Shumway notes that within a screwball comedy, the verbal exchanges between a couple are indeed meant to generate attraction.²⁰ This is obviously true in the case of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, evident from the first proposal. This is a result of the banter the couple engages in which is consistent

19. Shumway, *Modern Love*, 96

20. David R. Shumway, "Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage," in *Film Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003): 403-4.

with the screwball genre. While their verbal exchanges start well before this first proposal, the air of Mr. Darcy's belief that he will not be turned down because of who he is and what has been afforded to him his entire life, adds that spark of humor. He is in his own world, taking Elizabeth's silence as "sufficient encouragement," to continue to put his foot in his mouth with words that offend his desired bride.²¹ The audience has been somewhat privy to Elizabeth's feelings through the action of the novel thus far, with Mr. Darcy being more of a mystery because he is so to her. His declaration of love fails miserably, but his next letter reveals more information to Elizabeth, which hints at their ultimate suitability, illuminating her misjudgment of Mr. Darcy's character. Austen places the couple in opposition before they can come together harmoniously, "adding considerably to both the tension and charm of the drama," as Walter E. Anderson explains.²² They can only appreciate and love each other in the end because of the journey they go through.

Another aspect of screwball comedy within Austen's original work is the nature of the main male suitor. In screwball comedy, as Gehring remarks, the main male character is sometimes a rigid fellow who is tightly coiled in his personality, and the genre plays at bringing him out of his shell into the humor and joy that other characters find easily.²³ Mr. Darcy is not an outspoken man and is willing to hide behind his friends and his family, wary of mingling with those whom he does not know. Mr. Darcy tells Elizabeth "I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers," which demonstrates the firm stance of his character.²⁴ His apprehension

21. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 130.

22. Walter E. Anderson, "Plot, Character, Speech, and Place in *Pride and Prejudice*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.3 (1975): 373.

23. Gehring, "Screwball Comedy," 182.

stems from society's opinions of his station, and his need to find a compatible mate based on that station. That is one reason he fights his attraction to Elizabeth, succumbing only to completely fail in his initial proposal.

Elizabeth further thwarts Mr. Darcy because she does not believe in the need to find a husband. Likewise, in screwball comedy, the women rely on their wit to get them through, and "balked at traditional gender roles and were insistent on self-rule," as noted by Maria DiBattista.²⁵ Elizabeth was well before her time in not relying on finding a husband to take care of her. Her overall intention is never on getting married, even if she ends up with Mr. Darcy in the end. Both the genre of screwball comedy and Austen's novel of manners end with the happiness of marriage, but the lead woman begins with wanting to continue her independent role as long as possible, even if that means that she never gets married. Only the leading men that come into these women's lives have the ability to verbally spar sufficiently enough to lead them to consider the prospect of marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Grahame-Smith adapts the 19th century story with the concept of the undead. Zombies are slow moving bodies that no longer hold the mind capacity of the previously alive human. Through the years, the zombie has been relatively unchanged in its physical status, while the cause for its existence being a "malleable symbol," and the only real fluctuating variable in film and fictional representations.²⁶ The figure of the zombie is presented by Jane Pulliam as a "figure of a decaying corpse shuffling in a

24. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 121.

25. Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 11.

26. Jane Pulliam, "The Zombie," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares, Volumes 1 & 2*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 724.

somnambulistic state, eyes glazed and arms held stiffly forward, in the mindless pursuit of human flesh.”²⁷ As Pulliam explains, the original concept of the zombie comes from Haitian lore, where those of reanimated flesh were utilized for the purpose of free labor. They were not seen as figures of terror, as they are today, as they were incapable of harming anyone, and had no will of their own. Pulliam goes on to suggest that the zombie ultimately became a “fearful symbol of human bondage in [their] former colony where, in the late eighteenth century, the enslaved successfully threw off their oppressors,” and were then seen as having their own thoughts.²⁸ This shift brought the fear of the slave overcoming the master, which was evident in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in America before the abolishment of slavery.

The focus of the zombie quickly transferred to the physical presence of the zombie. Pulliam notes that what was truly terrifying was the notion of a reanimated dead body with an obsessive drive to consume living flesh.²⁹ The zombie existed in a realm between life and death, a constant physical reminder that all will succumb to death eventually. In addition to zombies existing as a representation of this fear of death, they cannot think for themselves and have a physical drive to consume the bodies of the living. In the 20th century, the figure of the zombie has been coupled with the idea of an apocalyptic setting, in which the zombies seem to have taken over, leaving all those who are still alive to fight for their existence, and to attempt to return the world to its former order. In different imaginings, the reasoning for the presence of the zombie differs, but the outcome of their existence is the uniting factor. Kyle Bishop notes that, as a common trope in zombie films, the presence of the zombie “always represented a stylized

27. Pulliam, “The Zombie,” 723.

28. Pulliam, “The Zombie,” 725.

29. Pulliam, “The Zombie,” 724.

reaction to cultural consciousness and particularly to social and political injustices.”³⁰ The different scientific reasonings for why the zombie exists stem from the current cultural problems, their existence acting as a coming to life of those problems, a physical problem that cannot be ignored.

The plot points of Seth-Grahame’s adaptation are relatively the same as those of Austen’s original story. The adaptation uses the same characters that are present in the original novel, and the situations they find themselves in are similar. The occasional zombie might appear within some of these scenes, as do the talk of training and weaponry, but Mrs. Bennet is still pushing for her daughters to find husbands. However, in the adaptation, there is no dire need for the Bennet daughters to get married. The original novel demonstrates, as Susan C. Greenfield states, that women “possess neither worldly goods nor full rights to their own bodies,” giving reason for Mrs. Bennet to push for marriage to ensure her daughters’ safety.³¹ The status of what women can achieve is somewhat different in the adaptation, however. Elizabeth takes initiative in being secure in herself, because she has been trained to fulfill a purpose in this modified society. Caroline Bingley even refers to Elizabeth as the “Defender of Longbourn..., [the] Heroine of Hertfordshire,” suggesting that it is obvious to even those who barely know her that she is somewhat set in her independent ways and proud of it.³² It is no longer a culture in which women cannot achieve the same as men. The extensive training in the art of kung fu that the Bennet

30. Kyle Bishop, “Dead Man Still Walking,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37.1 (2009): 18.

31. Susan C. Greenfield, “The Absent-Minded Heroine or, Elizabeth Bennet has a Thought,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39.3 (2006): 339.

32. Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009), 23.

daughters have received has allowed them to have a means of living on their own terms. Whether or not they choose this option is not necessarily relevant as they have the choice in the first place.

In Grahame-Smith's setting, anyone who has the means is trained in combat to protect themselves and their community from the threat of the zombies. The training allows the sisters to act physically in their actions and reactions in this adaptation. Elizabeth is especially proud of the fact that society deems her a formidable warrior. Her mannerisms are therefore opposite of the calm and polite Elizabeth of Austen's creation, and the society found in the original text. Elizabeth is now seemingly rash and utilizes her body in whole and not just her words, both in fighting zombies as well as presenting herself to those around her. Elizabeth's reactions to Mr. Darcy's comments about her family and herself are obviously more severe than the amusement or resignation she expresses in the original novel. During Mr. Darcy's first claim that Elizabeth is not attractive enough she responds with immediate action, the "warrior code [demanding] she avenge her honour."³³ The adaptation is visibly more action-based than Austen's novel. This action is not only due to the need to kill zombies on sight, but also is a response to the new rules of society. The thought of Elizabeth taking up weaponry against Mr. Darcy also elevates the comedy of the novel. As Hutcheon explains, an adaptation "is not a copy in any mode of reproduction[;] it is repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty."³⁴ Grahame-Smith has not drastically altered the plot. Essentially the same story is being presented, but the zombies and Elizabeth physically defending herself produce that delight and surprise that Hutcheon states come with the territory of the adaptation process.

33. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 13.

34. Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, 173.

In the original novel, the screwball comedy was evident in the wit expressed between the main couple. Elizabeth is obviously opposed to Mr. Darcy for the majority of the tale, and acts this way in the adaptation as well. The circumstances of the couple make their relationship difficult, but Anderson suggests that “the plot complicating their romance and leading to their union defines our principle interest in the novel.”³⁵ The way their relationship functions is somewhat enhanced in the adaptation by the physicality of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. No longer does Elizabeth easily brush off his insults, now feeling the need to defend her honor immediately. While in Austen’s novel Elizabeth brushes off Mr. Darcy’s first dismissive comment, Grahame-Smith shows that “she meant to follow this proud Mr. Darcy outside and open his throat,” only faltering to follow through because of the threat of zombies to the rest of the party.³⁶ Her standing as a fine warrior makes her feel she has no choice but to stand up for herself, whereas in the original novel the dictates of society stop her from doing so outwardly. The title couple appears more evenly matched in the adaptation as well because of this focus on their actions and physicality. The class divide between them still exists, but their abilities to combat the zombies are equally matched. In discussing the screwball comedy genre in general, Christopher Beach claims that these comedies “are most strongly defined by their use of language,” and that “their awkwardly manic physical actions... can be related to a larger social distress, a ‘dis-ease’ located in the ideological contradictions caused by various forms of socioeconomic and class upheaval.”³⁷ While Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are both trained fighters making their physical actions far removed from awkwardness, there is still an air of restlessness between them, as if

35. Anderson, “Plot, Character,” 374.

36. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 14.

37. Christopher Beach, *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 49.

they do not know what to make of each other. The class divide still exists here, causing discomfort between the pair. This unease is still there in Grahame-Smith's version, making their coming together an unhurried process. When they finally view each other as equals and fight the zombies together, they are on a more level playing ground than in Austen's imagination.

This physical fighting in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* enhances the convention of wit in screwball comedy. The physicality builds upon the wit, causing extreme emotions in those resorting to it while bringing them in close proximity to friend and foe. Within screwball comedies, Ruiz Pardos states, "...the experience of playing together and having fun together emerged as [a] powerful underlying energy," which is expressed in these scenes of fighting off zombies.³⁸ Instead of "playing" together, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are fighting together in a way that is considered an art form, a much more violent method of play. Grahame-Smith makes this choice to highlight the absurdity of their relationship. The desire for them to come together is obvious. Only their temperaments and thoughts about each other keep them apart. By adding this physical and violent form of play, the adaptation presents an amusing visual of them literally wounding each other, rather than just bruising each other's egos: "He swept her feet from beneath her and sprang to his own. Elizabeth was too quick to allow him the advantage, for she was soon upright and swinging the poker at him with renewed vigour."³⁹

There are four scenes in which Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth have to work together to combat attacks by the zombies. These scenes allow for Mr. Darcy to consider Elizabeth as more than her class dictates. She is a potential partner for Mr. Darcy not only because of his attraction to her figure, but because of the way she carries herself in both ordinary life and in protecting those

38. Ruiz Pardos, "Addicted to Fun," 159.

39. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 152.

around her. In the first case, Mr. Darcy is called on by Mr. Bingley to help remove two zombies from the Netherfield premises so that none of the other guests are disturbed. Elizabeth in her appreciation of a good battle follows him immediately to aid in the ridding of the undead. Mr. Darcy completes the act alone, telling Elizabeth “I should never forgive myself if your gown were soiled,” but they are both there to witness the presence of the unmentionables, the first step in coming together in harmony.⁴⁰ In the second instance of their fighting together, they are actually fighting each other. Elizabeth feels the need to defend her honor following Mr. Darcy’s first proposal in which he judges her character. Elizabeth contests his claims with words and hand-to-hand fighting, at one point kicking him “into the mantelpiece with such force as to shatter its edge.”⁴¹ Shumway notes that within screwball comedy “the resistance by the woman to the man’s claim upon her produces dialogue that is the verbal equivalent of foreplay.”⁴² Grahame-Smith changes this verbal argument into literal fighting when Elizabeth resists Mr. Darcy’s claim of affection, and this physical parallel of foreplay alerts the couple to each other’s strengths. In the third instance, Elizabeth witnesses Mr. Darcy in action against the zombies. Visiting his estate of Pemberley in the belief that he is not around, Elizabeth begins to battle a group of zombies when Mr. Darcy seemingly comes from nowhere to handle the situation. Here the novel makes Mr. Darcy a sight out of a romantic comedy, with the following image: “The smoke from Darcy’s musket hung in the air around him, wafting Heavenward through his thick mane of chestnut hair.”⁴³ Elizabeth is able to observe Mr. Darcy as a kind of equal. Coupled with her discovery of why he acted as he did in previous interactions, she openly appreciates his

40. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 80.

41. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 151.

42. Shumway, *Modern Love*, 94.

43. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 199.

fighting form. Lastly, when the main couple comes together at the end of the novel, aware of their feelings, they work together to fight off a pair of zombies that stumbles upon them. There is no detailed description of the fight itself, merely the acknowledgement that “they had stumbled onto their first opportunity to fight side by side,” and that they did.⁴⁴ By the end of the novel, the couple comes to the realization that they would be better off working together than separately. Deresiewicz claims that the courtship in Austen’s novel is “more conscious and more emotionally profound... [when that courtship] becomes instead a form of friendship.”⁴⁵ In the adaptation, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s ability to be aware of each other’s physical skills is fundamental in creating the bond they share. The progression of these scenes aids the couple’s eventual relationship, presenting them as equals physically.

Through the abundance of physicality, the ultimate goal of both the original novel and the adaptation is to depict Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy fall in love. Shumway’s notion of the main couple playing together as a kind of foreplay or courtship is at the forefront, not hidden behind the presence of the zombies. Elizabeth Abele identifies that the screwball heroine “rarely remains motionless or stops talking long enough to conform to the fully objectified position.”⁴⁶ The zombies simply add to the humor while simultaneously acknowledging that if Elizabeth is a potential object of sorts to Mr. Darcy, she is still able to exist independently. Mr. Darcy does not expect to find someone who is able to fight off the zombies at that level, let alone a woman. Elizabeth is the complete opposite of what her gender is typically displayed as and defies the initial thought Mr. Darcy has of her. Shumway defines romance as “more than simple illusion

44. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 302.

45. Deresiewicz, “Community,” 519.

46. Elizabeth Abele, “The Screwball Heroine Saves the Day” *Schuylkill* 3.1 (2000): 51.

and more than a genre: it is a complex and tenacious ideology,” which highlights the struggle of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s relationship.⁴⁷ Where some in both the world of Austen and Grahame-Smith marry for stability, the rare few try for all-encompassing love. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy represent what it takes to find that love.

The zombies help Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy become the kind of people who fight for what they want. Mr. Darcy still has to come to terms with the reasons and justifications for his desires, but does not back down from Elizabeth’s initial antagonism. In the second half of the plot of both the original and the adaptation, Elizabeth has to face the absence of Mr. Darcy. Greenfield states that this “detachment from Darcy is advantageous in alerting her to her lack of knowledge, which ironically elevates her mind by forcing it to work.”⁴⁸ When Elizabeth cannot see him or interact with him, she is alerted to what she could not have known in her first estimations of the man, which is essentially part of what eventually endears him to her. Once Elizabeth has time to discover her feelings for Mr. Darcy, her ability to fight against zombies then enhances her ability to fight for love. In facing the zombies, the couple begins to view each other as equals, making it easier for them to overcome the preconceptions they have about each other in the original novel. Hutcheon notes that “the context in which we experience the adaptation—cultural, social, historical—is another important factor in the meaning and significance we grant to this ubiquitous palimpsestic form.”⁴⁹ With this contextual reference always in the background of the adaptation itself, the new cultural norm of these characters highly influences this equality that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy find. As they both learn to defend themselves and those around them, the world they live in has been structured so that they meet on a more level footing than that in

47. Shumway, “Screwball Comedies,” 399.

48. Greenfield, “The Absent-Minded Heroine,” 344.

49. Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, 139.

which they meet in Austen's depiction. As they are confined to the same plot, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy do not come together any faster in this reimagining, but when they meet in the end they are completely satisfied in their ability to act as their true selves completely.

While most interpretations of the zombie do fit within the apocalyptic setting, it does not appear that way for Grahame-Smith's adaptation. The positioning of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy as zombie killers, and the wit that seems to be enhanced through their physical sparring, present the story as humorous. The zombies enhance this humor in mindlessly existing with the urge for human flesh. As Elizabeth and others trained in combat take down zombies quickly and efficiently, the zombies are not presented as an unbeatable threat. In an instance when Elizabeth finds herself alone with three zombies, she is alerted to their existence by "a terrible shriek, not unlike that hogs make while being butchered."⁵⁰ This description compares them as little more than farm animals, easily subdued by an actual person with far more power and skill. Yes, they kill many along the way, but the zombie hunters are quickly able to subdue them. While there are instances of the zombies having killed many people in one setting, as evidenced by them eliminating the entire kitchen staff at Netherfield, it does not take long for one or two sufficiently skilled persons to take them out. The reader is unable to take the threat of the zombie seriously because each one present in the novel is killed.

Not all critics acknowledge the humor within Grahame-Smith's adaptation. Andrea Ruthven's interpretation of the zombie presence in the novel is that the humans are no different than the zombies, having no option but to "slay or be slain."⁵¹ She suggests that the zombies'

50. Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Zombies*, 27.

51. Andrea Ruthven, "Pride and Prejudice and Post-Feminist Zombies," in *Weaving New Perspectives together: Some Reflections on Literary Studies*, ed. Maria Alonso Alonso (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 158

drive in looking for sustenance in human flesh is equal to that of the human drive to fight and kill the zombie. She goes further in saying that “both are automatic responses that can neither be controlled nor rationalized.”⁵² Ruthven does not acknowledge the text as a screwball comedy, and only attempts to fit the story within the stereotypical zombie apocalyptic genre. She missed the overall point that the ultimate goal of the novel is to bring the main couple together in the end, just as it was in Austen’s original work. That is one reason why it is successful as an adaptation.

If the fighting against the zombies was truly an automatic response, as Ruthven suggested, all humans would pursue the act of killing zombies just as all zombies are driven to find food. The people fight the zombies in the adaptation as a result of excessive training not only in some form of hand-to-hand combat, but in the use of firearms and other weapons as well. Obviously, not all those in the society of the novel have the means to acquire this knowledge, and thus they rely on those around them to keep them safe. It is evident that the “...zombies are unrelentingly, unquenchably and indiscriminately hungry,” eating any human they can get their hands on, as noted by Jen Webb and Sam Byrmand.⁵³ They, unlike the humans, are truly without a conscious mind, seemingly programmed to act as they do. The only sense that the reaction by humans to fight the zombies is automatic is that they have to fight in the first place. The two cannot coexist in the same world, thus leaving those that are still human to stay alive. If that means stopping the occasional zombie when they come across one, so be it. There is not one instance within the novel when the zombie hunters actively go out in search of what are referred to as

52. Ruthven, “Post-Feminist Zombies,” 158.

53. Jen Webb and Sam Byrmand, “Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope,” *Body & Society* 14.2 (2008): 84.

“unmentionables.” Only when zombies come upon them do the humans react by killing. It is a conscious, not an automatic, action, always reacting with a defensive response.

Further, what makes this adaptation interesting is the idea of the adaptation genre as being a kind of cannibalism or zombification. Hutcheon asserts that “if we know that prior text [on which an adaptation is based], we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly.”⁵⁴ When a text exists as an adaptation it is directly connecting itself to a previous work, the original always shadowing the new stylized story. It is a further and different rendering of something that had existed previously, just as a zombie exists within a body that no longer holds its original mind. A zombie is the reanimation of a deceased human and an adaptation is a reimagining of a finished text. Webb and Byrnannd note that the process of becoming a zombie is “an act of violence.”⁵⁵ While the creation of the zombie appears as a violent act and the act of producing an adaptation does not, the process is similar: removing the original identity and replacing it with something different. Fans of the original text might object to violence found within an adaptation but there is still a sense of recognition between the original text and the new text. The original and that adaptation exist as two distinct entities. In Pulliam’s encyclopedic entry on the zombie, she states that “when the zombie makes its appearance in British and American culture, its most fearsome aspect is its lack of that Protestant human virtue, free will.”⁵⁶ In Austen’s text, the status of women is also one without free will; they are unable to provide an independent living for themselves in society. Despite this, Elizabeth still pushes the boundaries of what a woman can do, which becomes more obvious in

54. Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, 6.

55. Webb and Byrnannd, “Some Kind of Virus,” 91.

56. Pulliam, “The Zombie,” 725.

the adaptation. This part of her character is then the opposite of becoming a zombie, as she fully engages in all the possibilities that her society can give her.

Grahame-Smith transformed the work of Austen, utilizing a trope of popular culture two centuries past her time. Adaptations are typically based on literary texts that were admired in their own right. This is definitely the case in terms of *Pride and Prejudice*, not only evidenced by the popularity of the novel itself, but by the numerous film adaptations and novel spin-offs depicting what happens after Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy finally wed. Grahame-Smith thus immersed himself in an already successful genre. With the insertion of zombies into Austen's plot, he simply added played on the popularity of the zombie, suggesting that the movement of the undead is not yet over. Bishop suggests that the popularity of the zombie exists because of the realities of society post-9/11. He suggests that "because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios of zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded by more traditional horror films."⁵⁷ The origins of the zombie change in each depiction of the creature, stemming from the cultural fears of reality. Bishop goes on to state that perhaps the zombie "is not merely a reflection of modern society, but a type of preemptive panacea, and that potential gives the genre both cultural significance and value."⁵⁸ This hints at the reasons for popularity of the zombie genre. Through the zombie, it has become apparent that those who enjoy horror want to believe in the monster in order to embrace the fear.

What makes Grahame-Smith's adaptation funny is that while the conventions of the zombie are in place, he uses them for humor rather than for horror. The focus of the story is still

57. Bishop, "Dead Man," 18.

58. Bishop, "Dead Man," 24.

very much on Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. The zombies exist primarily in the background, killed and decapitated only once they come too close to the true action of the story. They allow the couple to have something in common other than their admiration for each other. This, like the zombies, is another ideal of culture in the 20th and 21st centuries. Marriage is no longer an arrangement that suits the social wellbeing of the two interested parties. There is more emphasis placed on sharing a life, which implies that the couple actually likes each other and enjoy similar activities. Elizabeth is a warrior in her own right, and would not be willing to give that up simply for the security of a husband. She was not interested in Mr. Darcy at the beginning because of his attitude. Yet Elizabeth could not deny that he had skill in hunting zombies. Grahame-Smith altered the original story so that Elizabeth could not completely discount Mr. Darcy. While she never outwardly praised Mr. Darcy in the first half of the novel, she never criticized that element of his character. The humor enhanced by the presence of the zombie is what makes Grahame-Smith's novel a successful adaptation. The love story of the original Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy is still there, with a few outlandish obstacles blocking their path.

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