

# Disney's Adaptation of "James and the Giant Peach" by Roald Dahl

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU  
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE**

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BY ROALD DAHL**

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**Mentor rada:  
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## Sažetak

U radu se proučava adaptacija romana *James and the Giant Peach* (1961.) Roalda Dahla s ilustracijama Quentina Blakea u istoimeni animirani Disneyjev film iz 1996. godine, u režiji Henryja Selicka. Adaptaciju možemo definirati kao proces prilagodbe jednog medija u drugi tijekom kojeg dolazi do raznih promjena kako bi medij u koji se pretvara bio što uspješniji. U ovom slučaju radi se o prilagodbi dječjeg romana u animirani film. Rad proučava na koje načine se to ostvarilo, tj. što se izmijenilo, a što ostalo isto kako bi animirani film bio moguć. Razmatrat će se razlike i sličnosti likova, mjesta i događaja. Pozornost će se dati i ilustracijama Quentina Blakea i njihovu doprinosu pripovijedanju priče romana.

Ključne riječi: *James and the Giant Peach*, dječji roman, adaptacija, animirani film

## **Abstract**

This thesis analyzes the adaptation of Roald Dahl's novel *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), accompanied by Quentin Blake's illustrations, into the animated Disney film of the same name from 1996, directed by Henry Selick. Adaptation can be defined as the transfer of a story from one medium into another, during which certain changes can happen to make the medium which it is being transformed into as successful as possible. The goal of this thesis is to showcase how the story of the children's novel changed, what was removed or added, and what stayed intact. Moreover, differences and similarities in characters, scene, and events will be considered. The focus will also be on Quentin Blake's illustrations and how they contribute to Dahl's storytelling.

**Keywords:** *James and the Giant Peach*, children's novel, adaptation, animated movie

# 1. Introduction

This thesis analyses Disney's adaptation of Roald Dahl's beloved children's novel *James and the Giant Peach* by examining the changes and additions made to the original story. The adaptation, directed by Henry Selick and released by Disney in 1996, represents a significant reinterpretation of Dahl's work, highlighting the complexities inherent in the adaptation process. Linda Hutcheon says: "Adaptations of books, however, are often considered educationally important for children, for an entertaining film or stage version might give them a taste for reading the book on which it is based" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 118). This insight represents the dual role of adaptations in both preserving and reshaping the original narrative, making it accessible and appealing to new audiences. As films have become more popular than reading books amongst children and young adults, film adaptation is a way for them to connect to the book. Not only that, but film adaptations can also bring in a larger and more diverse public who might not otherwise engage with the original text. Even though this may be true, there are those who say that adaptation can never be the same or better than the book itself. Hutcheon in her book argues: "Not everyone approves of novelizations, of course: for many they are simply commercial grabs, unmitigated commodifications, or inflatory recycling" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 119). Even though adaptations are sometimes frowned upon, up until 1992, 85% of Oscar-winning Best Pictures were adaptations. They make up 95% of all the miniseries and 70% of all TV movies that win an Emmy Award (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 4).

This thesis focuses on the theoretical background and methodology of adaptation studies and tries to point out the complexities that happen during the process of adaptation of a literary work which is being adapted into a film. It also talks about the specific changes and decisions Henry Selick made to make this Disney film a visually pleasing cinematic piece. This thesis examines how these modifications not only diverge from or alter the original text but also contribute to enhancing the narrative. The focus is on the characters, events, the setting, humor, verse and music and illustrations. By comparing the novel and its film adaptation, this thesis highlights how the decisions to change or add something interfere with the original text and how they can make a complex story even more complex by bringing in depth and development.

## 2. Theoretical background and methodology

Wherever we turn and look, we can spot an adaptation of some sort. Unfortunately, adaptations can be frowned upon, says Hutcheon. Robert Stam says: "...we feel the loss of our own phantasmatic relation to the novel, with the result that the adaptation itself becomes a kind of "bad object"" (Stam, 2000, p. 55). Film adaptations can deviate from the original idea of the novel, lose the novel's depth, monetize someone's work and interpret it differently than consumers already have. So why do adaptations of novels into films still exist in such great numbers? Hutcheon argues: "Part of this pleasure, I want to argue, comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of the ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 4). It is important to mention that a printed text (a novel) does not give many (or perhaps any) instructions for the performers (actors) that must play out a scene: "...it is up to the director and actors to actualize the text and to interpret and then recreate it, thereby in a sense adapting it for the audience..." (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 39). Sanders also argues that adaptation can be looked at as a platform providing commentary on a source text by giving a modified perspective of the original and a voice that the text on paper cannot have. While watching an adaptation of an already existing work or text, we always have in mind the work it has originated from. Hutcheon says we feel "its presence shadowing" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6). However, Hutcheon also argues that adaptations should be observed as an individual work and should be studied separately: "an adaptation is derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 9). Brian McFarlane says that that approach "ignores the continuing interest that exists in the convergence among the arts" (McFarlane, 1996, p.196). He argues that adaptations are interpretive and creative acts, which often involve a degree of re-creation and transformation that can offer new insights and perspectives on the original work. This transformative process allows adaptations to resonate with new audiences and contexts, potentially achieving a cultural prominence that sometimes eclipses their source material. But novel to film adaptations are not the only adaptations that exist (p.24):

Adaptation is, however, frequently a highly specific process involving the transition from one genre to another: novels into film; drama into musical; the dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or the inverse movement of making drama into prose narrative. It can also involve



the making of computer games or graphic novels or be dispersed into modes such as music or dance.

According to Hutcheon, there are three different but connected perspectives when it comes to adaptation. An adaptation is seen as ‘a formal entity or product’, therefore an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works (Hutcheon, 2006, p.7). This includes changing the genre, the medium or changing the context such as changing the point of view. Hutcheon adds: “Transposition can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8). The second perspective sees adaptation as ‘a process of creation’ where the adaptation includes (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation. This is known as appropriation and salvaging. Adaptation as a form of intertextuality is the third perspective – ‘a process of reception’. People experience adaptation as an already known piece of information through repetition with variation.

Because we can say that adaptation of literary works into films is a multifaceted process that includes turning a textual work into visual storytelling, Maria Nikolajeva’s approach to multimodality contains three aspects: transmediation, illustration and translation. This thesis focuses on transmediation.

## **2.1 Transmediation**

In her book *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature*, Maria Nikolajeva distinguishes the difference between an adaptation and a transmediation (transmodalization). She states that adaptation also includes many different transformations made using a given text within the same medium, but when we talk about transmediation, the focus is on crossing from one medium to another (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 229). When a literary text is transmediated, we can see how the actual process can make the story different so it can better adapt to the new medium and its audience. Linda Hutcheon discusses the nature and appeal of adaptation, stating that adaptation is a practice for many different forms of media: video games, TV shows, stage, films, operas. Nikolajeva’s concept of transmediation provides an insightful framework for understanding the transformation of Dahl’s novel into the better-known Disney film. Her distinction between adaptation and transmediation helps understand the evolution across

different mediums. In this process of transmediation, several changes are made to adapt the story to its new medium. Henry Selick used stop-motion animation to bring the characters and settings to life in a way that is both faithful to Dahl's story and tailored to the cinematic form. The shift from text to film necessitates not only a change in medium but also in how the story is communicated - each character is voiced, music and facial expressions are used to convey emotions, new scenes are added and some were taken out. The peach, for example, becomes a massive, tangible object and its growth is presented with visual effects. Because adaptations can be so unique and well done, it is not uncommon for them to be better known than their original.

## 2.2 Fidelity

The concept of fidelity in adaptations is the degree to which an adaptation remains faithful to its source material. McFarlane highlights: "Fidelity to the text is not measured merely by what is retained and how that is presented but also by the extent and nature of inventions and departures from the original" (McFarlane, 1996, p.168). He also argues that fidelity is complex. The question of whether the adaptation or the re-make of a literary text is good enough has always been a pressing question. Griggs (2016) especially writes about this in her book (p.5):

The question 'Yes, but is it as good as the book?' continues to haunt matters relating to screen adaptations: even if it is merely a ghostly presence, shadowing but not dominating debate in academic circles, it remains a concrete manifestation for reviewers in the twenty-first century, especially when we are dealing with the screen adaptation of works revered as part of the canon. Can the adaptation of a text be as good or better than the canonical text that it is supposedly adapting? Who determines that? How and why is it an issue?

Although there are many different things to be considered when making an adaptation (text to film), the original text is among the most important factors in shaping the identity of the adaptation. However, Robert Stam argues that strict fidelity is very hard to achieve. A written text, as mentioned before, is just that: a text. Hutcheon argues: "An adaptation's double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the

criterion of judgement or the focus of analysis” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6). While making a film, there are a lot of things that make a film, such as sound effects, music and body movement.

The issue of fidelity does not consider the actual process of filmmaking, such as the required budget to make the whole film, the collaborations between the director and the screenwriter, the producer, the actors, the editor, production... Hutcheon also highlights: “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7). Furthermore, she states that there are many possibilities as to why someone chooses to adapt a literary text – one may feel the need to consume and erase the memory of an adapted text, question it, or pay tribute by copying. On the other hand, according to McFarlane, “A filmmaker who admires a novel may legitimately feel challenged to represent in audio-visual images as close a correspondence as he can to his own personal response to what that novel has created in purely verbal terms” (McFarlane, p.193). All of these factors can interfere with the fidelity of a novel, as McFarlane highlights (p.9):

It tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable--even inevitable-- process in a rich culture; it fails to take into serious account what may be transferred from novel to film as distinct from what will require more complex processes of adaptation; and it marginalizes those production determinants which have nothing to do with the novel but may be powerfully influential upon the film. Awareness of such issues would be more useful than those many accounts of how films 'reduce' great novels

While fidelity to the original text is important, it must be balanced with the practical and artistic demands of the film medium.

## **2.3 Disneyfication**

The Walt Disney Company is a worldwide known American media company. They are known for many things, one of them being taking literary works and turning them into films. They have a very well-known way of doing so, which has been called Disneyfication. They adapt literary works, historical events, or cultural narratives into films and other forms of entertainment that align with their brand’s distinctive style and values. The process of adaptation includes key strategies that are designed to make the stories more appealing,

accessible and marketable to a broad, often global, audience, particularly children and families. The stories Disney chooses to re-make into films undergo profound changes during transmediation. Nikolajeva mentions the following: the most “child-friendly” version of the story is chosen, conflict and action are amplified, a happy ending is provided, human characters are changed into animals, addition of extra characters, more specifically, a character is added or changed to be an authoritative narrative agency, supplying comments and judgments. Alan Bryman (2004) lists simplification and removing things that are not typically for children as the main strategies of Disneyfication. These changes sometimes make the actual film version more popular than the original, as the film is viewed separately from the literary text. Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* also underwent Disneyfication in 1996. In this case, Disneyfication can be seen through several elements. The film adaptation simplifies some of the darker aspects of the original story, such as the grotesque nature of James’ aunts. Selick camouflaged a part of them with humor and exaggerated their appearance. While making the story more suitable for a Disney audience, these changes also alter the original narrative’s tone and thematic complexity, showcasing both the appeal and the controversies surrounding Disneyfication.

### 3. The Novel and the Movie

*James and the Giant Peach* is a popular children's novel written by the world-famous Welsh writer Roald Dahl. Ever since its American (1961) and British (1967) publications, it has become a children's classic. This was his first attempt to write for children and the book was inspired by a cherry tree in Roald Dahl's countryside home (Mental Floss). He imagined the cherry so big that it crushed everything. After considering several other fruits he decided on a peach for his novel. As mentioned before, the first original edition was released in 1961, featuring Nancy Ekholm Burkert's illustrations (Penguin). Dahl refused many film offers for this novel because he thought it could not be translated well. After his passing, his wife decided to make the novel into a film and explicitly wanted the director Henry Selick to adapt the book. *James and the Giant Peach* was adapted into a Disney film in 1996, and it was Selick's attempt at joining live action and stop-motion animation (Slant, 2010). It was produced by Tim Burton and Denise Di Novi, and Paul Terry was cast in the role of James. The film is 1 hour and 19 minutes long. The two aunts, Spiker and Sponge, are played by Joanna Lumley and Miriam Margolyes. This film is the second collaboration between producer Tim Burton and director Henry Selick (Ebert, 1996).

#### 3.1 Book Summary

At the very beginning, we are shown James enjoying his time with his parents. Soon after, James' parents get eaten alive by a rhinoceros. and James moves into his aunts' home on a hill, where he is mistreated. His aunts Spiker and Sponge are always cruel to him, do not give him food, call him names like "filthy nuisance" or "disgusting little beast". They never take him out to play with other children, so he is miserable and very lonely: "The nasty little beast will only get into mischief if he goes out of the garden,' Aunt Spiker had said. And terrible punishments were promised him, such as being locked up in the cellar with the rats for a week, if he even so much as dared to climb over the fence" (Dahl, 2007, p. 10). This all changes when James meets an old man who gives him a bag of crocodile tongues: "There's more power and magic in those things in there than in all the rest of the world put together" (Dahl, 2007, p. 19). When James trips and drops them, they scatter all over the ground. Soon after, James and his

aunts notice a giant peach growing from a peach tree. The peach keeps growing. James' aunts decide to capitalize on it. Many people come and pay just to see the peach. Later that evening, James notices a hole in the peach and begins to crawl into it. He does not stop until he reaches a door. When he enters it, he realizes he is in the center of the peach. There he meets many creatures: the Centipede, the Earthworm, Miss Spider, the Ladybird, the Old Green Grasshopper, the Glowworm and the Silkworm. They all become friends as the story progresses. The Centipede manages to cut the stem of the peach and they all begin to roll away inside of the peach. On their way, they crush James' aunts and soon after they reach the sea where they encounter sharks who keep attacking the peach. They are scared for their lives so James, the brain of the group, thinks of an idea – he uses Miss Spider and the Silkworm to make long threads that they wrap around seagulls' necks. It takes 501 seagulls to lift the peach from the sea. The peach is not harmed, to everyone's surprise. As they travel, high above clouds, they encounter the Cloud-Men, who are responsible for the weather. The Centipede becomes very playful and mocks the Cloud-Men, which is why the peach gets attacked. It is quite a rough journey for them, but they manage to escape. As the time goes by, James notices that they are close to New York City: "Come on, Centipede, bite through the first string,' James ordered" (Dahl, 2007, p. 117). The Centipede starts cutting the threads so they can go down slowly and safely, but that soon changes as a plane cuts through all of the threads and they begin to fall rapidly. As everyone is bracing themselves for impact, they land on the highest part of the Empire State Building. Policemen rush to the top of the building and are skeptical at first, but after James and his friends explain everything, they are safely brought down to the streets. They are welcomed by the whole city and the people throw a parade for them. The children are ravenous and eat the whole peach. James and his friends live happily in New York and the pit of the peach is set up as a monument in Central Park, where James also lives. Children keep knocking on his door to hear his story, so he decides to write a book about it, which is the book we are reading.

### **3.2 Film Summary**

The film adaptation begins with a live-action sequence. James Henry Trotter is a young boy who lives a wonderful life by the sea in England. He lives with his parents, who get eaten by a storm cloud rhinoceros. James is sent to live with his two cruel and evil aunts, Spiker and

Sponge, far away on a hill, isolated from the rest of the world. As in the novel, his aunts treat him harshly and unfairly. Like any other day, James has chores that need to be finished. As he is walking and going about his miserable day, a mysterious old man appears in front of him. He gives James a bag of magical, fluorescent green crystals. He tells James that he knows how unhappy he is and that these crystals will change his life. While going up the hill, James accidentally spills the magic crystals, and they scatter everywhere. They begin disappearing into the ground. The green crystals cause a peach to start growing on a tree. The peach keeps growing until it reaches an enormous size. Aunt Sponge tries to eat it but is stopped by aunt Spiker. They decide to exploit the giant peach by charging people to view it and it becomes very popular. Later that night, aunts Spiker and Sponge order James to pick up the trash left behind by their customers. While they are enjoying their time at the house, James notices a hole on the side of the peach. James begins to crawl inside it, and the live action film turns into a stop-motion one. Upon entering the peach's pit, he encounters the Old Green Grasshopper, the Centipede, Miss Spider, the Earthworm, the Ladybird and the Glowworm. They decide to get away from James' aunts, so they break free. The peach starts rolling down the hill, destroying Spiker and Sponge's car. Soon they reach the ocean and the peach rolls into it, serving as a boat. There they are, on the top of the peach, and they cannot believe their eyes. Unfortunately, they encounter their first problem. A giant mechanical shark with razor teeth attacks them. They manage to defeat the shark through teamwork and bravery. The group continues travelling on a giant peach until they reach the Arctic, and the peach gets stuck in ice. This is the time the Centipede decides to admit he was lying about him travelling the world and knowing the way to New York City. To ease the tension, James explains that the compass in the sunken ship can help them reach New York City. James and Miss Spider go in first. Underwater, they see sea creatures which adds excitement to the scene. On their way back to the peach, they find themselves surrounded by predatory fish. Once they are out of danger and continue travelling, they encounter another challenge: they are attacked by skeletal pirates, whose captain looks like Jack Skellington from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The whole pirate crew lands on the peach, which makes James and his friends very frightened. They all fight each other; James and his friends try very hard to defend themselves and the peach. This is the scene where James executes bravery and leadership. He confronts the captain which results in James winning. As they approach New York City, James and his friends encounter the storm cloud rhinoceros. It begins circling the peach and threatening the safety of them all. James comes up with a plan, seagulls are used as a diversion, and James confronts the rhinoceros and wins. They continue

their journey, but the peach lands on the tip of the Empire State Building. People are frightened and cannot believe their eyes. Soon, policemen come to investigate and eventually they explain what happened and who are they. At that moment, James' aunts, Spiker and Sponge arrive, wanting the peach and James back. Miss Spider saves the situation by tying them in her silk. The film finishes in Central Park and the peach pit becomes James' home. He and the insects live happily ever after, just like the family James always wanted. In the end, stop-motion animation turns into live action again, showing James playing with other children in Central Park.



## 4. Comparison

The focus of this chapter is the adaptation of the book into the Disney film. Both versions tell the same story but have their own differences and strengths. Nikolajeva says that filmmakers always try to incorporate as much as possible while adapting a literary work into a film but sometimes changes have to be made to make the new medium as successful as possible (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 231). This comparison covers various aspects including characters, events, the setting, humor, verse and music, illustrations and James' development through illustrations. By comparing and analyzing all the mentioned aspects, the differences in characters' portrayal and development are highlighted. The setting transforms from the detailed descriptions in the novel to the imaginative visuals, providing richer sensory experience. This analysis also explores the ways humor and verse are adapted to suit the new medium and the role of music in the film. Furthermore, this chapter delves into the importance of Quentin Blake's illustrations in telling the story and how they showcase James and his development as a character and as a child suffering abuse.

### 4.1 Characters

In the Disney adaptation of Dahl's book *James and the Giant Peach*, several characters undergo changes while still maintaining their roles from the book. According to Nikolajeva, there are two types of characters in children's literature: the underdog and the trickster. An underdog is a character who is often underprivileged, an abandoned orphan, a child with emotionally absent parents, or dead parents (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 148). In this case, James is an underdog – a character who is underprivileged and whose parents die at the very beginning of the story. He is a young boy who suffers immense loss and isolation, with his parents dying at the very beginning of the story, leaving him in the care of his cruel aunts. This sets the stage for his journey from vulnerability and despair to empowerment and self-discovery. James and the supporting characters stay the same in the film, but their personalities are more distinct and complex with added storylines, voiceovers, voice acting, and body movements. Their characters have more dimensions with added events and situations where their traits can be heard and seen.

Table 1. The list of characters in the original narrative and in its adaptation

<b>Character</b>	<b>Novel (1961)</b>	<b>Disney Film (1996)</b>
<b>James Henry Trotter</b>	imaginative, kind-hearted, often daydreams about escaping and playing with children, brave and enduring despite what his aunts constantly put him through	James has the same role as in the novel. However, he is more expressive, his curiosity for the world is amplified
<b>Aunt Spiker</b>	tall and extremely slim, wicked personality, evil	portrayed the same as in the novel but exaggerated at times, looks like a witch to emphasize her personality
<b>Aunt Sponge</b>	the opposite of Aunt Spiker regarding looks: short and very fat, thinks only about herself, mean, rude	portrayed the same, her looks are also exaggerated to be more dramatic
<b>Miss Spider</b>	kind, gentle, helps the group with her webs to save the situations they are often in, James' maternal figure	caring, kind but portrayed as more mysterious than in the book, very maternal
<b>The Ladybird</b>	gentle, kind	maternal qualities, gentle, kind
<b>The Old Green Grasshopper</b>	a gentleman, James sees him as a fatherly figure, plays	his singing abilities are enhanced because the addition of sound

	an instrument – the violin	allows viewers to hear his voice which adds an auditory dimension to the experience that the book cannot provide, sophisticated demeanor
<b>The Centipede</b>	an egotistical and arrogant creature, makes a lot of jokes, puts the rest of the group in danger	his comedic spirit is stronger in the film, adventurous, has a New York accent
<b>The Earthworm</b>	often afraid, not at ease, very pessimistic	his personality is the same, he is portrayed as a blind earthworm wearing black glasses, a white vest and a red bow tie
<b>The Glowworm</b>	does not get involved as much, provides light when needed	in the film, the glowworm is enhanced – wears a big multicolored gown with a big brooch

James Henry Trotter suffers the biggest changes and transformations between the book and the Disney film. Table 1 provides the most marked differences between the same characters in the novel and the film. In the novel, James is portrayed as an imaginative little boy who constantly daydreams about a better and happier life. He is brave and resilient, he suffers a lot of pain from the loss of his parents and the treatment he gets from his two aunts, Spiker and Sponge. The insects inside of the peach become his home and family, whom he experiences many adventures with. In the film, James' loss is emphasized through various elements. The additions of sound and visuals make this possible. His sadness is portrayed through his facial

expressions and body posture. Often, close-ups are used to show his slumped shoulders, a bowed head, furrowed eyebrows that communicate his inner world and despair. Before his journey with the peach, all he thinks about is his parents, playing with other children and escaping his current reality. His thoughts are heard through voiceovers which give the audience more context and depth to the story. Moreover, dim lighting and melancholic music is also used during his sad moments to emphasize his feelings.

Aunts Spiker and Sponge are the biggest antagonists of this story, both in the novel and in the film. Their ridiculous and emphasized looks reflect their personality. Both the novel and the film showcase their abusive behavior towards James. They do not take care of him in the slightest, they torture him with food deprivation and very bad living conditions, take advantage of him whenever they can, and make him work while they enjoy themselves. The film does not change their personalities, but rather adds to their appearance. The audience can clearly see just based on their looks what kind of people they are. To make the situations a little lighter and less threatening to younger audiences, the film added comedic elements. For example, when they spot the peach on the tree, their exaggerated bickering and greed help to make the scene lighter and humorous. Their reactions are often bold and cartoon-like, such as them falling over each other and fighting over the peach. This addition turns dark and scary characters into funny ones.

The novel and the book have the same anthropomorphic insects. Miss Spider and the Ladybird are kind and gentle and often help the group to get out of tricky situations: “A few-minutes later, Miss Spider had made the first bed. It was hanging from the ceiling, suspended by a rope of threads at either end so that actually it looked more like a hammock than a bed. But it was a magnificent affair, and the stuff that it was made of shimmered like silk in the pale light” (Dahl, 1961, p.45). In the film, Miss Spider is a bit more mysterious, and the film highlights her protectiveness. She offers support and comfort to James in his vulnerable moments such as when they go to sleep their first night in the peach. She sings him a lullaby and helps him relax. She is skillful as she manages to help the group several times by using her webs. The Ladybird is James’ maternal figure, she is lovely and caring, and often helps James through difficult times and encourages him to speak up in situations others do not believe in him. When James shares his idea about saving the group from the sharks using seagulls and bait, the Earthworm and the Centipede think that will never work and cut him off. The Ladybird intervenes and supports James’ idea: “Let him finish,” said the Ladybird. ‘Go on, James. How would you do it’” (Dahl, 2007, p. 72). The film retains the Ladybird’s qualities and adds to her elegance, which emphasizes her supportive role. The Old-Green-Grasshopper is portrayed as

someone who guides James in certain situations. When James feels uncertain, The-Old-Green-Grasshopper's words encourage James and he expresses his belief in James' abilities. He showcases wisdom and musical talent by playing the violin and his music soothes the group and gives them hope and peace between their adventures. He is portrayed as a cultured character and provides insightful commentary. He is a calmer character than the rest of the group which makes him reliable and safe. In the film, The Old-Green-Grasshopper retains his qualities, but his musical talent is more emphasized and enjoyable because of the added sound the film has, so the viewers can hear the sound of the violin and his singing making it easier for the viewers to connect with him. They share impactful experiences together, such as discussing their past and playing music. The Centipede is shown as a boastful character, both in the book and in the film. In the book he often brags about the number of legs he has and claims to be the smartest in the group. On the other hand, the film makes the Centipede more vulnerable by making him admit to his mistakes. For instance, when they get lost on their way to New York, he admits that he lied about knowing the way which adds an emotional depth to the character. The Earthworm is the only character that is very pessimistic and always frightened by situations they find themselves in. Both versions portray him the same, but the film adds a layer of comedic relief. An example of this are his panicked expressions and frantic movements in dangerous situations which make the whole event humorous rather than distressing. Although the Glowworm has a smaller role compared to others in the story, she is very useful for the group in the book and in the film. She provides light for them inside of the peach, allowing James and his friends to see their new home. In the film, the Glowworm is used as a living lantern and her sleepiness and being woken up so suddenly, adds to the comedic relief. In the film, her character is expanded with added personality through voice acting and animation.

The characters in the film adaptation have the same core values and identities. They stay true to Roald Dahl's vision while also undergoing certain changes. The characters in the film are more suitable for the targeted audience. The differences in characterization made in the film are crucial for the characters' development and the success of this adaptation.

## 4.2 Events

One of the biggest differences between the novel *James and the Giant Peach* and its Disney adaptation is in the events that occur. Nikolajeva highlights: "Depending on the length of the

original, the film version can either follow the plot faithfully or adapt the length...” (Nikolajeva, 2006, p. 231). The changes in the film are made to emphasize the characters and their personalities and to make the film more interesting by adding new events, changing one part of an event or removing an event completely. The novel is more focused on James’ relationships and interactions with his insect friends and their journey and determination to reach New York City. Even though the film adaptation of the novel is focused on the same journey, it brings dimension through new elements and interesting details that add to the whole experience of watching a movie.

*Table 2. The list of events in the original narrative and the film adaptation*

<b>Events in the Novel</b>	<b>Events in the Film</b>
James’s parents are not shown through illustrations, the readers do not meet them directly.	In the first few minutes of the film, James’ parents are introduced, they are interacting with James.
James’ parents get eaten by a rhinoceros – it escaped from the zoo.	James’ parents get eaten by giant storm cloud rhinoceroses.
James’ aunts Spiker and Sponge are killed off by the peach when it starts to roll down the hill.	James’ aunts are not killed off, they decide to drive to America, follow the peach but at the end get arrested after James confesses about the abuse. They get tied up in silk by Miss Spider.
The group is faced with real sharks that, because of how their nose is shaped, cannot harm the peach.	The peach gets attacked by a mechanical shark and it causes problems with its razor teeth.
James and the group see the Cloud-Men who get angry when the Centipede provokes	-

them. They cause a windstorm.	
-	The group gets lost in the Arctic and stuck in ice and the Centipede admits to lying about travelling all around the world. They must go underwater to find a compass.
-	Pirate skeletons-Jack Skellington reference.
The plane cuts the threads connected to the seagulls, so the peach falls on the point of the Empire State Building.	Before the peach falls, James had to fight off the storm cloud rhinoceros and then the peach falls on the point of the Empire State Building.

As mentioned before, this film adaptation made a lot of changes. In Table 2 are shown the events that differ from the ones in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, James' parents are not shown through illustrations, which leaves the readers to use their imagination on their looks. In contrast, in the opening scenes of the movie, James' parents are introduced enjoying their time with James while they talk about the world, specifically New York City. These scenes allow the readers to further connect with James. The cause of their death is similar – in the novel they are eaten by a rhinoceros after it escaped the zoo. In the film they get eaten by a giant storm cloud rhinoceros, which adds a fantastical element to the story.

James' aunts Spiker and Sponge have a different ending in the film. In the novel, they get crushed by the peach rolling down the hill, which marks the end of their lives. On the other hand, the film adaptation took a different turn. When the peach rolls down the hill, it does not crush them, but they decide to drive to America to follow James and the peach. Once James and his friends reach New York City, aunt Spiker and aunt Sponge arrive to take James and the peach back with them. Fortunately, they fail as the insects stop them and Miss Spider ties them up in her silk.

The challenges they face during their journey to New York City differ, too. The first noticeable change is the encounter with sharks. In the novel, the peach and the group are faced

with dozens of real sharks trying to destroy and eat the peach, but they are not able to do a lot of damage to the peach because of how their nose is shaped. Whereas in the film, James and his friends are attacked by a mechanical shark with razor teeth, gears, and blades. This is where the group has to think of a plan to survive. All the characters get involved in the mission and they successfully manage to outsmart the shark by making a distraction out of Miss Spider's silk and the peach. Their next encounter are the Cloud-Men. This part is only a part of the novel whereas in the film, they are replaced by the group getting lost in the Arctic and getting stuck in ice. Finding the compass is the only way they can continue their journey. Here, Selick added the part where the Centipede admits to lying about his knowledge about travelling, which is not originally in the novel. Another event that is added in the film is the situation with pirate skeletons. They only appear in the film and here is where Selick added a part connected to his and Tim Burton's earlier collaboration – a pirate that looks like Jack Skellington.

The ending of the film is also different than the novel's. In the novel the threads that connect the peach and the seagulls are abruptly cut off by a plane passing by, making the peach fall on the spear of the Empire State Building. Moreover, the film added the reappearance of the storm cloud rhinoceros before they landed on the spear. James defeats it and avenges his parents which helps him overcome the trauma of losing his parents. These changes in the film adaptation add to the visual storytelling. Selick expanded some characters and added sequences for better cinematic experiences.

### **4.3 The Setting**

“Dynamic visual details, especially accompanied by music or song, make such descriptions enjoyable, which is a good example of adaptation to the specific medium” (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 232). In this chapter, Nikolajeva discusses how children cannot enjoy a long verbal description in a film, that is why special effects, music, songs make the viewing bearable for them. Selick, for his adaptation of the novel *James and the Giant Peach*, used stop-motion animation to make it visually appealing and capture children's attention and inspire their imagination. He uses bright and vivid colors throughout the whole film, and the only exception where he uses darker colors is when a threat occurs, such as in scenes with his aunts or when he fights the storm cloud rhinoceros. The strategic use of color helps to visually recognize the safe and threatening spaces in James' world, making the emotional states more



apparent to the audience. The songs he uses are fun and catchy, which further makes the film enjoyable for children.

James has two homes. In the novel, his home with his parents is not described, the readers know it only as an English house. His home with his aunts is not vividly described but the readers get an opportunity to imagine the look of it through the way the aunts treat James. On the other hand, in the film adaptation, his parents' home is described as a bright seaside home in England. His aunts' home is a real contrast to his old house. It is dark, old, looks witch-like and looks like it is going to collapse at any moment. His bedroom is the attic where he has nothing of his own. It is old and cold, and he is very lonely there. The peach tree in the novel is described as an old tree in his aunts' yard and it grows overnight. In the film the peach tree is seen as a bare and lifeless tree and the growth of the peach was visually enhanced by special effects to make it eye catching. The inside of the peach is described as cozy, and welcoming. James is thrilled with the design in the novel. In the film, the inside of the peach is shown through animation filled with colors and imaginative details. The walls are soft and glowing, the texture and the color orange resemble the real-life fruit's flesh. Their journey through the ocean is different in the film. The novel includes real sharks, the Cloud-Men, but in the film the sharks are replaced by a mechanical shark, the Cloud-Men are replaced by them getting lost in the Arctic. The Cloud-Men are little creatures that cause hailstorms and create rainbows in the novel. Their arrival to New York City differs, too. In the novel, after the threads were cut off by a plane the peach fell on the spear of the Empire State Building, while in the film before the peach fell, the group had to fight the storm cloud rhinoceros. Central Park is where the pit of the peach is and where James lives in the novel, but in the film after the pit is shown and James living there, there is a scene of James playing with other children.

#### **4.4 Humor**

Humor in *James and the Giant Peach* is an important element that is different in Dahl's novel in comparison to its Disney film adaptation by Henry Slick. The differences that can be found between these two mediums help set the undertone for targeted audience and the complexity of the mediums. Dahl's novel is filled with so called British humor that can be described with dark undertones, absurdity, and dry wit. The humor can be pointed out in the

way the antagonists are described and the situations James and his friends find themselves in. One of the first example of humor is the way James' aunts are described – very comically (p.13):

Aunt Sponge was enormously fat and very short. She had small piggy eyes, a sunken mouth, and one of those white abby faces that looked exactly as though it had been boiled. She was like a great white soggy overboiled cabbage. Aunt Spiker, on the other hand, was lean and tall and bony, and she wore steel-rimmed spectacles that fixed on to the end of her nose with a clip. She had a screeching voice and long wet narrow lips, and whenever she got angry or excited, little fecks of spit would come shooting out of her mouth as she talked.

But humor about them does not stop here, their fate can be described as dark and funny as the peach crushes them while rolling down the hill. The whole novel includes absurd situations to which all the insects exaggerate their reaction to: “‘What happened?’ ‘Where are we?’ ‘But this is impossible!’ ‘Unbelievable!’ ‘Terrible!’ ‘I told you we were bobbing up and down” (Dahl, 2007, p. 61). They keep on doing this every time something happens until James calms them down or finds a solution.

On the other hand, the film adaptation has a simpler humor, adapted to suit younger audiences. Here, humor can be seen through characters and situations. Aunt Spiker and aunt Sponge are cartoonishly evil, and their appearance is exaggerated. Their reaction to the growing peach and their way of using it for the money is ridiculous. Their ending, when Miss Spider ties them up in her silk, also has a humorous tone to it. Interactions between James and his insect friends have elements of humor in them. They way Centipede talks about his legs and how they all joke with him that he does not, in fact, have 100 legs, but only 42. All the characters' interactions often have humor tied to them, especially if they are not in some kind of danger. The Centipede has another situation where he stands out with his humor – when the mechanical shark attacked them, his reactions and ways to defeat the shark have a humorous tone to them.

#### **4.5 Verse and Music**

Roald Dahl's writing talent can be seen not only through his narrative style and imaginative storytelling but also through his use of verse, which plays a significant role in his novel. In his novel, the readers can find verses that add rhythm, emotion, depth and whimsy to the story, offering a unique blend of playful language and lyrical storytelling that enhances

the reader's engagement with the narrative. The verses' timelines are picked carefully to heighten the characters' feelings, desires, and thoughts and to make the situation easier than it is. The verses in the novel are a form of storytelling. They also create a lighter mood and tone of the story. They are playful, funny, and fun to sing. Dahl uses a few rhyme patterns in his verses: AABB, ABAB, ABCB. The use of rhyme not only enhances the lyrical quality of the text but also makes the verses easier to sing, remember and are musically engaging. The verse below has an ABAB rhyme pattern and is sung by the Centipede when they decide to cut the stem of the peach and start to roll down the hill. It is an important moment and a big decision had to be made. This rhyme pattern is more complex and has a flowing rhythm:

"We may see the venomous Pink-Spotted Scrunch  
Who can chew up a man with one bite.  
It likes to eat five of them roasted for lunch  
And eighteen for its supper at night!" (Dahl, 1961, p. 50)

This verse showcases the tension and urgency of the situation while maintaining a sense of fun and playfulness, characteristic of Dahl's style.

The film adaptation of the novel replaced the verses with music and songs to enhance the visual and auditory experience of the film. The transition from verse to song in the film adaptation is handled with care, ensuring that the original intent and emotional depth of the verses are preserved while also adapting them to suit the cinematic medium. The music for this film is by Randy Newman and the songs he made mirror the theme of the story: playful, whimsical, they evoke emotions and make the overall film more enjoyable. There are three songs in the movie. "My Name is James" – a song which James sings at his low point and which is about the life he misses and wants back. "Eating the Peach" is sung out of despair when James and his group are very hungry and they realize that the peach they are travelling with, is edible. "Family" – a song that occurs towards the end of the film. It is about longing and friendship, as well as the new family James and the insects form. It serves as a climax in the story, emphasizing community and the sense of home.

## 4.6 Illustrations

This thesis studies Roald Dahl's novel *James and the Giant Peach* illustrated by Quentin Blake, although it should be pointed out that the original edition of the book was illustrated by Nancy Ekholm Burkert. The illustrations for this novel are essential for storytelling and providing visual context. Blake's style of illustrations has become popular over the years and very recognizable. He had many collaborations with writers such as Joan Aiken, Russell Hoban, John Yeoman, Michael Rosen, and of course, Roald Dahl (Quentin Blake). Blake's illustrations are not just decorative but are essential to the narrative, providing context and helping the reader understand the characters and events better. He draws with loose, dynamic lines which add playfulness to the illustrations. His style adds movement, and it sometimes seems scrambled all over the page, which aligns perfectly with the adventurous and fantastical nature of Dahl's story. Despite the apparent spontaneity of his line work, his illustrations are meticulously crafted to capture the essence of each scene and character. For his illustrations, he uses ink and watercolor, but in the novel *James and the Giant Peach*, everything is illustrated just using ink, which further reinforces the novel's whimsical and surreal qualities. The monochromatic palette, devoid of the softness or warmth that watercolor might have provided, especially for a children's novel, gives the illustrations a deeper meaning, showcasing the story's underlying themes of struggle, loneliness and eventual victory. Using just ink and lines, Blake managed to capture a wide range of emotions and actions. Moreover, his characters are drawn mid-motion which gives a more dynamic effect. He pays attention to their gestures and expressions which gives the characters a personality. His most famous works are collaborations with Roald Dahl. That is why his style suits so well with Dahl's work. For example, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge are illustrated in the way that the readers can see on them their cruelty and how evil they are which also has a humorous effect on the reader (*Figure 1.*). Blake did an amazing job at portraying James and his emotions in every scene. His innocence, determination, sadness (*Figure 2.*) and curiosity can easily be spotted in the illustrations.

### 4.6.1 James' Development Through Illustrations

In her book *The Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature*, Nikolajeva discusses many choices artists can choose when illustrating. They can give the literary text a "visual counterpart, not changing or adding anything new. On the other hand, they can use their

illustrations for adding a new interpretation (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 225). In her article *Transpositions of James and the Giant Peach: Analyzing the Signification of the Orphan in Visual Imagery*, Laura Cesa provides thematic significance of Quentin Blake's illustrations. She says his illustrations are crucial to understanding James and the depth of the whole story. She focuses on orphanhood, loss and transformation shown through Blake's work. She also compares Blake's illustrations to Burkert's, but this chapter will focus only on Quentin Blake and his significance.

As mentioned in the comparisons earlier, in the novel, Dahl does not physically describe James' parents. However, in its film adaptation his parents are presented in the opening scene and James' loving bond and connection with them. They talk about their family dream and when James does not see the cloud resembling the Empire State Building, his mother tells him to try another way at looking at it. Cesa describes: "This scene foreshadows not only what is to come but also provides James with a sentimental memory and emotional connection to New York. The mother's advice becomes the catalyst for James to face his fears and overcome his trauma" (LFQ). The death of his parents is much more prominent in the film than in the novel. His loss awakens more of an emphatic experience from the viewers. Blake, however, leaves the death of his parents to the readers' imagination which forces them to interpret the text in their own way. Cesa mentions that this way of illustrating, or rather, omitting them, makes it easier for children to have a safe distance from the actual trauma, whereas adults can interpret this tragic part much deeper and connect them to their own experiences. Blake's illustrations are used to show James' isolation and emotional displacement. Before he meets the old man that gives him the crocodile tongues, James is portrayed in bleak settings that showcase his loneliness and sadness. For example, the illustration of James behind the fence conveys the feeling of him being trapped and wishing for freedom and a better life: "James wonders towards the white space of the image, an empty but unwritten future, a clean slate in which his development will begin anew" (LFQ). Blake did an amazing job at showing contrast from his life before he entered the peach and after. This signifies the shift in James' life which gives him hope for a better and brighter future where he is not abused and treated so horribly and has a family and friends to play with. Blake did not illustrate James entering the peach but found more significance in James entering the pit of the peach. In *Figure 3*, he drew James on the left side moving towards the right side of the illustration, which highlights the beginning of his new life: "Using light, he creates and directs all focus on what is behind the door which can also symbolize James's brighter future" (LFQ). In the film adaptation, Selick did the opposite thing

(*Figure 4*). He made James move backwards but it symbolizes a healthy regression in child development, says Cesa.

Selick also expanded and put emphasis on James' bond with Miss Spider. She was portrayed as being more maternal than in the novel. The best example is when they all went to bed (beds made from Miss Spider's silk), James opened up to her, saying he was scared of going back to his old life. Miss Spider's response gave James reassurance and comfort. She kissed him goodnight, just like a real, kind mother would.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis provides an analysis of Disney's adaptation of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, highlighting the film's additions and changes to the original narrative. It provides a comprehensive look at how the adaptation differs from the original novel and what these differences mean for the overall story. Dahl's novel was first published in 1961 and it quickly became a classic amongst children. Over the years, it has been illustrated by many artists, one of them being Quentin Blake with his dynamic drawings that have become closely associated with Dahl's works. In 1996, director Henry Selick decided to turn the famous book into a film. It was produced by Tim Burton, and it combines live-action and stop-motion animation to create a visually distinctive cinematic experience. The film starts with live-action and later turns into stop-motion. The film follows the book's plot faithfully but incorporates additional elements and creative changes to enhance the whole experience.

Adaptations of books into films are common, especially nowadays, but they often face criticism for potentially leading to a sense of loss regarding the readers' connection to the original novel. Film adaptations can deviate from the original ideas and interpret the story differently than the readers expect. Despite this, adaptations of novels into films are prevalent because their appeal lies in offering familiarity with new twists. Directors and actors interpret and recreate scenes, adapting the text for different audiences. Even though some viewers compare the film to the novel, it should be appreciated and seen as an individual work. The process of changing the medium involves re-creation and transformation. It offers new insights and resonates to new audiences, sometimes surpassing their source material. This thesis covered various aspects and compared the film adaptation to its original narrative. The analysis revealed notable differences in character portrayal and development between the book and the film. The film provided deeper backstories and more complex personalities. The setting transformed from the novel's detailed descriptions into vibrant and imaginative visuals. Events in the film were modified – it includes new scenes and elements, such as the mechanical shark and skeletal pirates, which added further excitement for the viewers. Humor and verse were adapted to suit the new medium, with the film relying more on visual and auditory comedy. The music by Randy Newman played a significant role in shaping the film's emotional and narrative role. In conclusion, the film adaptation of *James and the Giant Peach* successfully balances fidelity to the source material with the demands of the new medium. It introduces new elements and enhances existing ones to create an engaging story. This thesis demonstrates that adaptations

can offer fresh perspectives and deeper insights into the original work while still following the original narrative.



## 6. Appendix

**Figure 1.**

*Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge*



**Figure 2.**

*James Being Sad*



**Figure 3.**

*James Entering the Pit in the Novel*



**Figure 4.**

*James Travelling Inside of the Peach*



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## **Izjava o izvornosti diplomskog rada**

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mog rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

Zagreb, rujan, 2024.

