



## **A Study on conflict modification in the novel *I am Number Four* and its film adaptation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study entitled A Study on Conflict Modification in the Novel “I Am Number Four” and its Film Adaptation aims to investigate how conflicts affect the characterization of John Smith in the novel and the film adaptation. The study used a qualitative approach with textual analysis since the focus of the study is the conflicts identified in a form of text in the novel and dialogues in the film adaptation. Framed by the theory of adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006), the study found that even though the identified conflicts in the novel are the same as the identified conflicts in the film adaptation, they were still developed differently because of the dramatization done to the conflicts in the film adaptation, resulting in resolutions that are more violent. By reducing peace, distilling violence and adding violence, the identified conflicts in the film adaptation were modified into conflicts which made the characterization of John Smith more violent-looking, aggressive, unstable, and reckless compared to John Smith in the novel.

**Keywords:** Adaptation; Characterization; Conflict

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Adaptation is a process of transforming one text to another in which mostly happens from a novel to a film. Adapting a novel that initially has hundreds of pages into a film that only has duration of around two hours requires many changes. The changes that happen will also be varied, depending on the purpose of the adaptation, the directors, or the writers of the adaptation. Characterization is the most frequent aspect that undergoes changes.

The changes in characterization are caused by many factors and may affect the flow of the adapted story. One of the examples is *Little Women* adaptation. There are six different versions of *Little Women* film adaptation. Each adaptation was interpreted with different perspectives and nuances so that the characterization in the film adaptation might seem different from the one in the novel. The characterization of the characters in the film adaptation might have been adapted to the needs of the market or even political interests of the producers or the directors. In her article, Acocella (2020) mentions that Alcott’s *Little Women* is different from *Little Women*’s film adaptation directed by Gerwig in 2019 because the novel inclined to be conventional

about the role of women while the film adaptation questions the role of women. She referred to the fact that Alcott, at the time of her writing *Little Women*, is assumed not to voice feminism although the book does imply the characters’ desire to be independent. Similar to Acocella’s opinion, Gerwig’s adaptation of *Little Women* emphasized Alcott’s inclination towards women’s independence in the characterization of the four sisters. Gerwig transformed the ending of the film adaptation by indicating that Jo pursued her dream as a writer and left the idea of marriage in her book that she wrote. Nicolaou (2020) states that Gerwig puts forward the idea that a woman’s life can still be worth celebrating even without a marriage. By reworking the ending of *Little Women*, Gerwig underlines that there is more than one way for a woman’s life to be satisfying; in this case, becoming independent seems to be more satisfying than a marriage.

Another example of changes in characterization is the adaptation of *The Hunger Games* series. Despite the great acting of the actress, the adaptation of *The Hunger Games* series is often considered to be lacking in portraying the depth of powerless feeling which is a significant characterization of Katniss, the

main character, in the novel. This means that there might have been fewer conflicts in Katniss' characterization in the film adaptation. Legel (2012) suggests that fewer conflicts had made Katniss a less complex character. In addition, Bricken (2015) believes that even romantic conflicts between the main character and two other characters have not been successfully portrayed in the film adaptation. The two examples indicate that the adaptation has made changes that have affected the characterization of the characters in the novel.

This means that changes in adaptation is inevitable and might result in different interpretations of the story. By looking at this, adaptation becomes interesting to study, especially since people's tendency to watch a film is higher than to read a novel. Studies on film adaptations will help explain the changes that have taken place and outline the possible new meanings from the film adaptations. Furthermore, from an educational perspective, analyzing and comparing a novel with its film adaptation will make people more aware of the different messages in the film adaptation. For these reasons, it is safe to say that learning about changes that occur in film adaptations might broaden knowledge and make viewers more understand that meanings are made and not given. Therefore, learning about changes in film adaptation is something that needs to be disseminated.

The example of changes in film adaptation above also shows that changes might determine the success of an adaptation. Some film adaptations are considered successful in adapting the story and some others are considered unsuccessful. Successful adaptation means acceptance from the public for the changes that happened while being unsuccessful might mean the opposite. Being unsuccessful in adapting the story might mean that the changes that happened were unacceptable by the viewers. The reasons for not accepting the changes in the adaptation can be diverse; from how it changes the flow of the story, the characters is not developed well, the message was too far different from the original, or because of many other unsaid reasons. The different reasons as to why an adaptation is seen as unsuccessful makes the researcher intrigued to learn more about changes in adaptation from the unsuccessful adaptation instead from the successful one.

One of the film adaptations that is considered as unsuccessful is titled *I Am Number Four*. *I Am Number Four* is chosen as the object of the research because the film adaptation received a lot of criticism for the changes in the characterization that happened to the main character, John Smith. These changes then led to the cancellation of the film adaptation's sequel. This case has made the researcher interested in learning how the changes affect the

characterization of John Smith which has not been studied before. Thus, the researcher conducted a research on *I Am Number Four* novel and its film adaptation. This research attempted to find out the changes in characterization of John Smith from the novel to its film adaptation through conflicts exist in both sets of data and how these conflicts affect John Smith in the film adaptation.

## **METHOD**

This research was a text analysis that used written words as the data. The research then used qualitative descriptive to collect the data. Qualitative descriptive research generates data that describe the 'who, what, and where of events or experiences (Kim et al., 2017, p. 23). This means that by using this method, the focus of the research is to understand the individual human experience in its unique context. Therefore, this method was the most suitable method to describe the data that answer the question concerning this research since the research attempted to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the subject described in words and languages.

The primary data that was used in this research are "*I Am Number Four*" novel written by Pittacus Lore (2010) and its film adaptation with the same title directed by Daniel John Caruso (2011). The data were collected based on the conflicts that involved John Smith, the main character. There were six conflicts found in both the novel and film adaptation. The chosen conflicts in the novel were analyzed to determine the relations between John Smith and the other participants involved in each conflict. The changes that were made in the film adaptation then were explained to show how they affect the characterization of John Smith in the film adaptation using a theory proposed by Linda Hutcheon (2006). How the changes affect the characterization of John Smith in the film adaptation answered the research question formulated by the researcher.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Conflicts in "I Am Number Four" Novel and its Film Adaptation***

There are three major conflicts found in both the novel and film adaptation. Each of the identified conflicts is paired with related narratives, dialogues, and descriptions. They would be used to analyze the characterization of John Smith in the novel and in its film adaptation. The three major conflicts are 1) Covering up John Smith's Identity, 2) Defending the Earth, and 3) Jealousy. These three major conflicts are triggered by various events involving different other characters and reasons. The resolutions that were made in the novel and the film adaptation are also different. These differences appeared by dramatizing conflicts in the film adaptation in which

is done by reducing peace, distilling violence, and adding violence.

**Covering up John Smith's Identity**

John Smith had to hide his identity while living on earth so his enemy, the Mogadorians who also came to invade the Earth, would not find and kill him. In an effort to hide his identity, John Smith is always guarded by his guardian, Henri. However, while trying to hide his identity, several minor conflicts occurred. The minor conflicts had helped to elevate the major conflict because there were possibilities that they might have revealed John Smith's identity.

One of the minor conflicts happened between John Smith and his friend, Sam. While John Smith was maintaining his hidden identity, Sam suddenly created a new conflict because he accidentally witnessed John Smith's power. John Smith was using his power against a group of bullies in a carnival on Halloween day in attempt to protect himself and to save Sarah who was kidnapped by them. Because of this incident, John Smith's identity was in danger of being discovered by Sam. John Smith then tried to resolve this conflict when he met Sam the next day.

**a. Novel Resolution**

**Table 1**

*Data Analysis of John Smith's Incident with Sam in the Novel*

Participant s	Relationshi p with John	Causes of Conflic t	Resolution
Sam	John's Friend	Sam saw John using his power in the woods when he was fighting with Mark and his friends.	John Smith covered up his identity by highlighting the illogical assumption of having superpower .

By looking at the table above, it can be seen that John Smith decided not to tell the truth about his identity to Sam. The novel provided resolution in which John Smith highlighted the illogical assumption of having superpower made by his friend, Sam. He managed to avoid Sam's suspicion about what he saw in the carnival by using sarcasm as shown in the conversation: "Yes, I'm an alien, Sam. I'm from a planet hundreds of millions of miles away. I have

superpowers. Is that what you want to hear...Do you realize how stupid that sounds? Quit being crazy," (Lore, 2010, p. 182).

John Smith managed to gain Sam's trust again after he said the above sentences to Sam. Because of the action he chose to solve the conflict with Sam, John Smith successfully eliminated the possibility of his hidden identity being exposed to Sam. This resolution then showed that John Smith in the novel was able to think carefully about his action so that he can protect his hidden identity without the need to use violence.

**b. Film Resolution**

**Table 2**

*Data analysis of John Smith's Incident with Sam in the Film*

Participant s	Relationshi p with John	Causes of Conflic t	Resolution
Sam	John's Friend	Sam saw John using his power in the woods when he was fighting with Mark and his friends.	John Smith admitted to having superpower , but threatened Sam to keep identity safe.

Different from the resolution in the novel, the resolution in the film adaptation made John Smith admit to having superpower to Sam. Even though he has been hiding his identity for years, when confronted by Sam, John Smith still chose to tell Sam the truth about his identity as shown in the figure and conversation after figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*John Smith Revealing His Identity*



Your dad was right. He was right. About ancient astronauts, life on other planets, all of it. Yes! I knew... I knew he wouldn't just leave us!

Sam, you can't tell anyone... You gotta promise me nobody knows this. There are others from where I'm from looking for me. I'm not safe, (Caruso, 2011, 00:57:30-00:58:22).

However, despite choosing this action himself, the admission that John Smith did was still accompanied by an addition of violence in a form of threat. This was where the dramatization of the conflict was done to the conflict in the film adaptation. Not only the resolution was made differently in the film adaptation, but also there was an addition of something that John Smith in the novel did not do, in this case an addition of violence. Below are the figures of when John Smith forced violence to Sam after admitting the truth about his hidden identity.

**Figure 2**

*John Smith Forcing Violence*



**Figure 3**

*John Smith Threatening Sam*



From the figures above, it can be seen that John Smith in the film adaptation was made into a character that had the tendency to choose violence more than John Smith in the novel had. Other than adding violence to the conflict, the dramatization was also done by reducing peace. John Smith in the novel highlighted the illogical thinking of his friend resulting in a peaceful resolution. Meanwhile, John Smith in the adaptation did not show a sign that he would resolve the conflict in a more peaceful way since he went straight to threatening Sam after telling him the truth. Thus, the resolution in the film adaptation made John Smith admitting his identity while making him into a more violent character.

**Defending the Earth**

Defending the Earth has only one major conflict existed in both the novel and the film adaptation, which is the battle with the Mogadorians. When The Mogadorians finally discovered John Smith's whereabouts, they planned to kill him and invade the Earth at the same time, but John Smith would not

allow them and decided to fight back. Using his newly found powers and with the help of his friends, John Smith tried to win the battle with the Mogadorians.

**a. Novel Resolution**

**Table 3**

*Data Analysis of the Battle with the Mogadorians in the Novel*

Participants	Relationship with John	Causes of Conflict	Resolution
The Mogadorians	John's Enemy	The Mogadorians wanted to kill all of the children, in this case, John Smith, and colonize the Earth at the same time.	John Smith's victory over the Mogadorians which emphasized John Smith's misery and sacrifices.
Henri	John's Guardian		
Six	John's Friend from <i>Lorien</i>		
Sarah	John's Crush		
Sam	John's Friend		
Mark James	John's Pet and Guard		
Bernie Kosar			

In the novel, John Smith had to make many sacrifices before he was able to win the battle with the Mogadorians. The sacrifices that he made happened because John Smith was portrayed as a character who was struggling to find his will to fight the enemy in which different from the portrayal of John Smith in the film adaptation. This characterization of John Smith was shown in one of the moments below.

The dagger is still tucked into the waistband of my jeans, but what's the point in grabbing it? What faith is there in a four-inch blade against a forty-foot beast? It would be the equivalent of a splinter. It'll only make it angrier. My only hope is to bleed to death before I am killed and eaten, (Lore, 2010, p. 404).

It can be seen that John Smith in the novel was made into a character with a sense of insecurity about his own power. John Smith in the novel seemed not to have a will to try to fight back even though the possibility of him winning the battle was still existed. Other than made to be weaker, John Smith in the novel also had to made more sacrifices compared to John Smith in the film adaptation.

Bernie Kosar isn't moving... I move my head to the dog's rib cage. Ever so faintly I hear the th-tump of his beating heart... He is covered in deep cuts and gashes, and blood seems to seep from everywhere, (Lore, 2010, p. 415).

...when the last word leaves his mouth I know that he is gone. I squeeze him in my arms, shaking, crying, despair and hopelessness taking hold...I cup his head in my hand and hold it close to my chest, and I rock him back and forth and I cry like I've never cried before, (Lore, 2010, p. 424).

Both of the moments shown above were the examples of the sacrifices John Smith had to make in the novel. In order to protect John Smith, Bernie Kosar and Henri had to sacrifice their lives in which added more misery to John Smith himself because they were the most important ones in his life. Even though at the end Bernie Kosar survived, John Smith still lost the person he loved the most, Henri. Thus, the resolution in the novel made John Smith look weaker and it highlighted John Smith's misery and sacrifices in order to win the battle with the Mogadorians.

**b. Film Resolution**

**Table 4**

*Data Analysis of the Battle with the Mogadorians in the film*

Participants	Relation with John	Causes of Conflict	Resolution
The Mogadorians	John's Enemy	The Mogadorians wanted to kill all of the <i>Lorien's</i> children, in this case, John Smith, and colonize the Earth at the same time.	John Smith's victory over the Mogadorians which emphasized John Smith's power and strength.
Sarah	John's Crush		
Sam	John's Friend		
Bernie Kosar	John's Pet and Guard		

In the film adaptation, the resolution was made so it emphasized John Smith's power and strength rather than his misery and sacrifices like the resolution that is made in the novel. In the film adaptation, John Smith was made more vengeful because he already lost Henri in the previous

encounter with the Mogadorians when Henri was being kidnapped. In result, when he met the Mogadorians again at school, especially with the one that killed Henri, John Smith did not hesitate to fight and kill them. This characterization of John Smith was shown in the figure below.

**Figure 4**

*Vengeful John Smith*



"He killed Henri. I want him," (Caruso, 2011, 01:30:18-01:30:22).

Not only he was able to kill the Mogadorians that killed Henri, John Smith in the film adaptation was also made fearless that he bravely ran towards the other Mogadorians to kill them right away as shown in the Figure 13 and 14. This also showed that John Smith in the film adaptation was confident with his power unlike John Smith in the novel.

**Figure 5**

*John Smith Running Towards the Enemy*



The differences shown in the film adaptation resolution indicated that there was a distillation and an addition of violence to the conflict. The distillation of violence that simplified the conflict between John Smith and the Mogadorians made John Smith in the film adaptation look stronger and more powerful because he did not suffer as much as John Smith did in the novel.

**Figure 6**

*John Smith's Looking Stronger*



Furthermore, by pairing the distillation of violence with the addition of violence that came in a form of vengeance, the resolution in the film



adaptation made John Smith looked more powerful and aggressive compared to John Smith in the novel.

**Jealousy**

Jealousy is another significant source of major conflicts in both the novel and the film adaptation of I Am Number Four. A female character named Sarah who had a previous relationship with Mark, John Smith’s bully, triggered the major conflict that is jealousy in both the novel and the film adaptation.

One of the conflicts was about Mark who bullied John Smith and Sam at school. Mark did not like to see John Smith got close with his ex-girlfriend, Sarah, so he decided to bully John Smith and Sam. The resolution in the novel and the film adaptation might look similar, but there was a difference in the way John Smith made his decision to solve the conflict in the film adaptation. In the novel, John Smith tended to withdraw from the problem by ignoring Mark and his matter with him. Meanwhile in the film adaptation, the jealousy conflict indicated until it trigged a possibility of the emergence of John Smith’s power in which would lead to a physical altercation with Mark. Thus, this event could endanger John Smith’s hidden identity.

**a. Novel Resolution**

**Table 5**

*Data Analysis of Mark Bullying John Smith at School in the Novel*

Participants	Relationship with John	Causes of Conflict	Resolution
Mark James	John’s Bully	Mark did not like to see John getting close to Sarah, his ex-girlfriend.	John Smith withdrew from the conflict.
Mark James’ Friends	John’s Bully		
Sam	John’s Friend		

Since John Smith in the novel tended to withdraw from his conflict with Mark at school, the possibility of this conflict revealing John Smith’s identity was small. Despite him could easily win against Mark, John Smith still chose to avoid fighting Mark especially since many students were watching them in the hall of their school. This is shown in the quote “There are probably thirty people around us now. I have no doubt that the entire school will know what has happened... I turn and leave. He yells behind me. I don’t acknowledge it,” (Lore, 2010, p. 58-59).

The above was what John Smith thought when he was facing Mark. By thinking about his hidden identity, John Smith ignored Mark and left him there.

This resolution then showed that John Smith in the novel had the ability to control his emotion. Because John Smith chose to withdraw from the problem, there was no physical altercation happened between John Smith and Mark. In result, John Smith’s identity stayed hidden.

**b. Film Resolution**

**Table 6**

*Data Analysis of Mark Bullying John Smith at School in the Film*

Participants	Relationship with John	Causes of Conflict	Resolution
Mark James	John’s Bully		John Smith withdrew from the conflict, but left an indication of the possibility of him using his power.
Mark James’ Friends	John’s Bully	Mark did not like to see John getting close to Sarah, his ex-girlfriend.	
Sam	John’s Friend		

Similar to the resolution in the novel, the resolution in the film adaptation also made John Smith avoided the conflict with Mark. However, there was a slight difference in the conflict where John Smith made the possibility of his identity being revealed bigger than when it was happened in the novel. The resolution in the film adaptation left an indication that there was a chance for John Smith to use his power against Mark that would cause a physical altercation between the two of them, resulting in a bigger potential for John Smith’s identity to be revealed.

**Figure 7**

*The Emergence of John Smith’s Power*



The above figure showed how John Smith in the film adaptation had an urge to fight back his bullies by showing a sign of the emergence of his power in his hands. However, after realizing that many students surrounded him, John Smith calmed himself down. Even though John Smith did not physically fight Mark in which saved his identity from being known, this scene still indicated that there was an addition of violence to the conflict. This addition then made the characterization of John Smith in the film

adaptation looked more unstable and aggressive than John Smith in the novel did.

### ***Leaning Towards Violence***

After comparing the conflicts from the novel and the film adaptation, it can be seen that the appearance of violence in the film adaptation tend to be more intensified and excessive. This comparison strengthen Hutcheon's theory that adaptation from novel to film is a process of dramatization (2006, p. 7). It means that violence is dramatized in the film adaptation by making it more intense and more excessive. The identified conflicts become the point of departure for the dramatization mainly because with conflict, the story will move to reach a resolution. Dramatization in this film comes through three things, namely reduction of peace, distillation of violence, and addition of violence. By reducing peace, distilling and adding violence to the story, John Smith's character became more violent in the film adaptation. Furthermore, the people involved in the adaptation process of I Am Number Four might also have some reasons why they were making John Smith in the film adaptation a more violent-looking character than the one in the novel. An increase of interest in violence shown in a film might be one of the reasons behind it.

As mentioned before, the dramatization in the film adaptation comes through three things. First is reduction of peace. In theory of adaptation, a pragmatic necessity of cutting a sprawling novel to make it fit the screen in terms of time and space is called reduction (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 37). It usually takes longer to perform an action than to read a written report of it, so the time gained by reducing peace in John Smith's action in the film adaptation could be used for the main conflict of the story. The second process is distillation of violence. Distillation is a process of simplifying the complexity of the story without changing the effects of it. By being distilled, the characterization of John Smith in the film adaptation is defined succinctly in which made him looked to be less complex than the one in the novel. Last one is called addition of violence. Addition is a process of adding necessary details. Film adaptations usually add bodies, voices, sound, music, props, costumes, architecture and so on; in this case, addition of violence to increase suspense.

After seeing where the dramatization are placed in the film adaptation, the reasons behind it is being questioned next. As mentioned earlier, an increase of interest in violence might be one of the reasons why the producer of the film adaptation used more violence in the story. Violence itself is used in films for many reasons and one of them is to attract the attention of the audience. Violence is incorporated into film to make a reaction out of the viewers (Bartsch & Mares, 2014). Since it creates suspense and tension, some targeted audience might find

violence appealing and entertaining. It is also found that violence in films has more than doubled since 1950, and gun violence in PG-13-rated films has more than tripled since 1985 (Bushman et al., 2013). It is proven then that violence in films does attract people who enjoy watching films. This reason alone might be the reason behind the appearance of stronger violence in the film adaptation of I am Number Four.

If the film adaptation looks more appealing to the audience and gains the attention it is needed by making violence more apparent, the successful rate of the film would be high and it could gain a lot of profit. However, how the audience liking the violence that they consume in the film is still subjective. Dramatizing a film by making it more violent does not always make the said film successful. This assumption is proven by the film adaptation of I Am Number Four itself. Instead of being a successful adaptation, I Am Number Four became a film adaptation that gained a lot of bad critics from its viewers and film critics. Despite it gaining a triple its \$60 million production budget, I Am Number Four is still perceived as a film with a poor critical performance, resulting in the cancellation of its sequel. This might mean that claiming violence as a way to attract more audience is problematic for many reasons. These reasons then might be more understood if a different study regarding this topic is being conducted using a film study theory.

### **CONCLUSION**

Adapting an original work into a film requires many changes. The changes that happen in adaptation might include changes in setting, plot and characterization. In this case, the changes happened to the characterization of the main character of "I Am Number Four" in which adapted from the novel with the same title. The changes in the characterization occurred through the identified conflicts found in both the novel and the film adaptation in a form of text and dialogues in which are grouped into three different major conflicts. Framed by the theory of adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006), the resolution of the conflicts made in both the novel and the film adaptation are analyzed. It is found that even though the identified conflicts in the novel are the same with the identified conflicts in the film adaptation, they were still developed differently because of the modifications done to the conflicts in the film adaptation. The identified conflicts were modified in the film adaptation into conflicts that changes the characterization of the main character that is John Smith. The modification of the conflicts was done by dramatizing the conflicts through a process of reduction of peace, distillation of violence, and addition of violence. The dramatization of conflicts then made John Smith in the film adaptation looked

more aggressive, more violent, unstable and reckless compared to John Smith in the novel.

Furthermore, one of the reasons why the producers of “I am Number Four” film adaptation made John Smith a more violent-looking character in the film adaptation might be because of an increase of interest in violence shown in film. However, these reasons might be more understood if a different research regarding this topic is being conducted using a film study theory.

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