

"la confidential" – the novel and film essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Adapting a novel into a screenplay is an extremely difficult prospect as the film has to convert the image that was captured over several hundred pages into a few hours of video. Challenging as this endeavour may be, few novels present as daunting a challenge as *La Confidential*, written by James Ellroy. Ellroy's epic masterpiece features almost 500 pages of several intriguing and complex plot threads, nonpareil disturbing graphic violence, hundreds of detailed three-dimensional characters and deception and betrayal in every page. Curtis Hanson, however, took the challenge and directed the film adaptation of Ellroy's novel. The movie is an excellent adaptation to the novel as it still maintains the same conflict and plot line and grasps the action and suspense which the novel invokes in the reader. However, the film does not capture everything which the reader experiences through the novel. Ellroy's original work possesses many elements that create an atmosphere of darkness, absent from Hanson's adaptation. This contrast in atmosphere is seen through the difference in the development and presentation of Jack Vincennes, the contrast in character of Ed Exley and the difference in the theme of the two mediums.

In Ellroy's novel, the development and presentation of Jack Vincennes is much darker and well-developed when comparing to the film adaptation. In the novel, Jack is a celebrity cop who had a severe alcohol and drug addiction in the past. One night, Jack, after overdosing on drugs, attempts to arrest a drug dealer. His state eludes him into believing that the outlines of two people in the distance are friends with the drug dealer and consequently, he kills them. He finds out later on that "the shapes weren't the nigger's [drug dealer] backup—they were Mr. and Mrs. Harold J.

Scoggins, tourists from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the proud parents of Donald, seventeen, and Marsha, sixteen," (Ellroy 38). No one discovers that Jack is the real killer and he is given a promotion for his display of bravery in the line of duty. As a result of this event, Jack experiences an epiphany and decides to quit drinking and ingesting narcotics. Already, the author provides insight on Jack's shady past which created a negative atmosphere in the novel. The film however, omits Jack's past entirely and only mentions that he does not remember why he became a cop (La Confidential). Later on in the novel, Jack realizes that there may be files on the incident where he killed the innocent couple and he slips into a depression. His addiction to drugs is revived as he fears that his wife, Karen, will find out the truth about him:

" To my wife: you thought you married a hero, but you grew up and learned you were wrong...When you read the paper and see that your husband drilled two evil robbers, you'll think they're the first notches on his gun. Wrong—in '47 dope crusader Jack blasted two innocent people, the big secret he almost wants to spill just to get some life kicking back into his marriage," (Ellroy 298) Jack reaches on the brink of insanity as a result of his paranoia, which shows how negative the atmosphere is presented in the novel. The movie simply portrays Jack as a typical corrupt cop who makes shady deals with Sid Hudgens to arrest movie stars for money (La Confidential). The film does not present Jack in the negative way that he is portrayed in the novel, proving that the novel possesses an atmosphere of darkness and desperation which is omitted in the film.

Another example of the negative atmosphere presented in the novel is the contrast in character development of Ed Exley between the two mediums. In the novel, Ed is an ambitious man who will do anything to advance in his career and eclipse his father's success. When provoked and branded a coward in the novel, he shows his cruelty and ruthless behaviour when he kills several unarmed suspects: " No weapons in sight. Nobody moved...Ed jerked the trigger: once, twice—buckshot took off Coates' legs" (Ellroy 249). He kills the unarmed men in cold blood, which shows how far he will go to get what he wants and to disprove his coward label. In the film however, Ed did not fire at the suspects until they pull out their own weapons and kill a fellow officer (La Confidential). The film gives the viewer the impression that Ed has good character, whereas in the novel, the reader does not experience the same compassion for Ed due to his cruelty and ruthlessness.

This leads to the negative atmosphere portrayed in the novel because the novel does not provide any character willing to always do the right thing. Another factor which contributes to the lack of negativity in the film is the omission of Ed's father, Preston Exley. In the novel, his father serves as a motive behind the actions he takes as his sole purpose is to succeed and surpass Preston in his career. Another character, Lynn Bracken, comments on this fact when she says, " That you were a weak, angry man competing with your father," (Ellroy 360). The film portrays this relationship differently as prior to the events of the film, Preston was killed by a purse-snatcher who was never found and this serves as the motivation behind Ed's actions (La Confidential). Removing Ed's father in the film completely changed his character and the result is a rule-abiding cop whose ambition lacks any true

motivation. Due to the difference in his character development, the novel portrays a much darker atmosphere when comparing with the film.

Finally, the main underlying theme is different between the two mediums; the theme of the novel conveying a darker atmosphere to the reader, while the film portrays a hopeful tone to the story. The most prevalent theme in the novel is the theme of justice vs. personal glory. The characters in the story often face situations where they are forced to choose and this is shown through the advice given to Ed by his father: "The Nite Owl case got you to where you are today and a quick resolution will keep you there. Collateral homicide investigations, however compelling, might seriously distract you from your main objective and thus destroy your career. Please remember that," (Ellroy 364). In contrast, the characters in the film choose justice and this is seen through how quickly Ed changed in the film from being simply ambitious to becoming a moral person. The only explanation for this dramatic change of character is a confession that he remembers the reason why he became a police officer (La Confidential).

However, the fact that the characters of the novel constantly choose their own personal success leads to the development of a negative atmosphere as the reader cannot distinguish between good and bad characters. This is also seen through the difference in the ending of the two stories. In the novel, Dudley Smith, the main antagonist, walks away freely despite the crimes he commits: "Bad news on Dudley. You don't want to hear this...No Dudley witness, no Dudley evidence," (Ellroy 484). Despite the good intentions of the characters in the end when they choose justice over themselves, they

still fail to catch the true perpetrator behind the main conflict of the story. In the film however, Ed is given the choice of a promotion by Dudley as long as Ed does not kill him. Ed kills him anyway and his death symbolized justice being served (La Confidential). This gave the film, an overall positive tone as opposed to the novel where despite all that occurred, justice still could not be served.

In conclusion, Ellroy's La Confidential contains many elements, which convey an atmosphere of darkness absent from Hanson's adaptation. The simplicity of the film through the presentation of Jack Vincennes, the character development of Ed Exley and the difference in the theme of the two mediums, sets an overall positive atmosphere completely contrasting the tone that is set by the novel. Due to the darker atmosphere of the novel, the reader is provided the authenticity of the story as the characters can be empathized as a result of their development. However, by omitting this factor, the film allows the viewer to focus solely on the suspense and thrill of the conflict as there is no moral dilemma present for the viewer to be concerned with. The story of La Confidential, the book, and La Confidential, the film, possess a deeply intricate mystery that has captured the hearts of literary scholars and movie-lovers the world over and will always remain one of the greatest stories ever told.

Works Cited

Ellroy, James. L. A. Confidential. New York: Warner Books Inc. 1990. Print.