

Both 'the browning
version' and 'about a
boy' are too limited by
their time-conte...



'The Browning Version' and 'About a Boy' are set forty-five years apart, yet still deal with the same theme. Isolation is part of the human condition that almost everyone will have experienced at some point in their lives, hence readers or viewers of these works will be able to identify in some way with them.

However, is this limited to time-context? Do the issues of the human condition alone make the fiction popular, or is there more to it? Through the form of the two texts, the writers' intentions become apparent. By alternating the early chapters of 'About a Boy' between Marcus and Will, Fiona is established as a lurking figure. The reader gets to know her through Marcus' eyes; what he sees and feels. In doing this the reader, in my opinion, develops a negative view of Fiona. We feel that she is an unfit mother due to the 'crying before breakfast' and the suicide attempt on the 'Dead Duck Day'. In this way Hornby influences our views through use of form.

Similarly, in 'The Browning Version', I feel that the viewer is intended to dislike Millie. Ratigan manipulates our feelings for her in the way that she constantly talks to Andrew like a child, "Don't forget to take you medicine, dear, will you?" and uses sarcasm, "Thank you for precisely nothing. In the film version of 'The Browning Version', this can be seen very dramatically and, as a viewer, I found Millie to be unpleasant and arrogant. This is achieved by tone of voice and the scowls that the actress playing Millie used; similar as to how it would be in a play. With this genre specific effect, Ratigan very successfully influences our view of her, in a way that Hornby cannot achieve in a novel. There are many other differences in the texts that are due largely to the genres.

<https://assignbuster.com/both-the-browning-version-and-about-a-boy-are-too-limited-by-their-time-context-to-be-considered-serious-literature-essay/>

'The Browning Version' is a very tightly focused one-act play with no narrative voice. The novel, 'About a Boy', is written through the eyes of Marcus and Will with a third person omniscient authorial voice. By using novel form Hornby is able to give the reader extra information which would not be possible in a play, unless there was a narrator. Hornby can tell us the characters' thoughts. For example, Marcus comes to the conclusion that, between he and his mum, 'at least one of them was nuts'.

His need to 'say something optimistic' and hence fill the void in his mum is also shown in this way. This role reversal that takes place is heavily laden with the melancholy that runs through the novel. Read about The Schoolboy Without Marcus talking to himself and without the presence of a narrator, it would not be possible to access these thoughts.

In the film version of 'About a Boy' narrative voice is used again. The medium is changed from novel to film, but this effect is still very successful. The voice over on the film is the equivalent of the narrator in the book. It still gives extra insight to the viewer. 1 Ratigan, however, conveys unspoken ideas through subtext, set, costume and the performance skills of the actors.

A good example of this is in the first scene, where Taplow 'counts the number... of chocolates' in a box in Andrew's flat.

The stage directions tell us that he removes two, but only eats one. He puts the second chocolate back in the box 'after a second's struggle, either with his conscience or his judgement of what he might be able to get away with'.

The viewer, or reader, is instantly informed as to the character of Taplow: a typical boy with, essentially, a good heart. The ideas and situations in both <https://assignbuster.com/both-the-browning-version-and-about-a-boy-are-too-limited-by-their-time-context-to-be-considered-serious-literature-essay/>

texts deal with the common theme of isolation, however, they differ enormously.

The situation in 'The Browning Version' is alien to most people because it is very selective. On the other hand, 'About a Boy' is very contemporary to a modern day reader. The situation of Marcus, being in a new place and having not yet made any friends, is one that is very accessible and familiar to most of us in twentieth century Britain. These situations, for example, that of Marcus' feeling of disassociation, tend to show similarities in the language used.

The echoes of the running ideas that Marcus was 'who he was, and that, it seemed to him, was the basic problem' use the same under or over punctuated language that is typical to a child. The language is also often in incomplete sentences, which gives the impression of thoughts, rather than actual conversations, regarding anxiety and discomfort. Despite the similar language, the ever-changing plot and knitted-in humour keep the reader involvement and enjoyment high. Hornby's novel is very easy on the modern day reader. The jargon and language he uses is of our time. He writes how we speak.

The language in 'The Browning Version' tends to be more formal, which is fitting given the time-context. There is the same theme of feeling uncomfortable in you own skin. It is perhaps, then, relevant that Ratigan was a homosexual living in a very homophobic society, and having to deal with the isolation brought about by this. Ratigan is able to write so well on the subject as it is one he has strong feelings on. The play sees Andrew not

seeming 'to like people to like him', and with Ratigan's 'ambitious studies of human relationships', the underlying discomfiture is dramatically emphasised.

One illustrative instance of this can be seen when Frobisher is 'forced to turn down [Andrew's] application' for a pension. The pauses in speech displayed by both Andrew and Frobisher both show the awkward nature of their conversation 'I thought - my wife thought, that an exception was made'. The discussion of money matters is obviously very embarrassing for Andrew, which is not helped by Millie's 'remarks' leading to Frobisher thinking the Crocker-Harris' to be more wealthy than they are. Millie's deceit has once again led to the humiliation of Andrew, to whom, in this instance, I feel the audience react sympathetically.

The post-war references are presented implicitly in the play. The accurate image of a 1940's grammar school shows science to be a minority subject, however, in the 1994 film version of 'The Browning Version', with the archaic and clumsy cold war references, the relevance of this issue is diminished. Taplow's aim in the plot, to gain his 'remove', is thus destroyed. I feel the director has done this to make the story more accessible to a modern audience. However, I feel this to be wrong and unsuccessful, as this plot is important in the isolation of Andrew, who is the only master who 'pays any attention to' the 'rule' about telling the boys the results of their removes.

Andrew abides by the rules, and in this scene his isolation is highlighted by Frank's laid-back attitude to the rules and popularity with the boys. The

<https://assignbuster.com/both-the-browning-version-and-about-a-boy-are-too-limited-by-their-time-context-to-be-considered-serious-literature-essay/>

structural aspects of 'The Browning Version' are also important. The play is only one act long; hence Ratigan is presented the problem of presenting different scenes. How can he move the play around? It appears a lot more problematic than the novel.

The action of the play takes place in the sitting room of the Crocker-Harris's flat in a highly episodic way. It is not Andrew's home, so he is even isolated to some extent in his only comfy refuge. However, Andrew is leaving it to somewhere unfamiliar and new where he won't gain as much appreciation or be as fulfilled. This is an uncomfortable situation as we feel that Andrew is moving from one isolation to another.

The plot moves along with the entering and exiting of different characters, which emphasises the lonely nature of Andrew's life, as people come and go and never get very close to who he actually is. Also, with the tight set, which is somewhat disjointed, nothing and no one quite seem to fit, again emphasising isolation. Hornby appears to have to work a lot less at the novel with the problems of setting and scenes. There are not the same constricts on how he writes it. He can choose to have the short snappy chapters that break us into the story at the beginning, leaving the reader intrigued.

Alternately, he can choose to have a long chapter, for example the 'Christmas Day' chapter, which drags on and mirrors the actual agonising, seemingly-forever day that Will endures with 'the pair of losers' and their extended family.

By moving in and out of different chapters and locations, Hornby can also give the reader different perspectives, for example, that of either Will or

Marcus' views of life. He can also give us a deeper understanding of each character, for instance, Marcus, who is 'never deliberately funny... merely curious' and naive to the world. In the film of 'About a Boy', the director chooses to have the same opening, with the viewer being shown snippets of Will and Marcus alternately.

I felt this was just as successful as in the novel. Despite this, I thought the focus on the novel was very changeable and limited. There would be a big section, which bore little similarity to the text, and then sections that were almost word for word. Perhaps the director is not as clear as Hornby as to where he wishes to guide the reader. A good example of this is the way in which the film sees all 1990's references removed, in order to bring the film up to date.

Kurt Cobain' is replaced with the song line 'Shake your ass... tell me where it's at' and thus Ellie and Marcus are united by an incident at school involving this. This bears hardly any similarity to the text, yet the 'Dead Duck Day' is almost word for word. I believe this to be because that chapter of the text is so good that it can be visualised easily, so it works well on film also.

3 The texts both deal with different ends of isolation. 'The Browning Version' takes place at the end of something, and 'About a Boy' at the beginning of something. Ratigan's play begins at the retirement of the main character, which seems to be bizarre. This, however, allows Ratigan to focus highly on the aspect of isolation he wants to and only give the viewer the pieces of information, on what comes before, that he feels necessary. Ratigan's writing is, therefore, highly selective and very focused on how it all comes to

this. On the other hand, Hornby begins with an obvious new start, one that is a lot more familiar to most, so familiar that it could be said to be clichéd.

The new city, lifestyle and people immediately isolate Marcus. The modern structure of this affects the reader's understanding. In this time, it is quite commonplace for parents to get divorced and move away from each other, even though this makes it no less distressing for all who are involved. This is an aspect of the human condition that Hornby explores in relation to context.

In Ratigan's work, however, Millie and Andrew do not have a happy marriage yet there is no talk of divorce due to the time of the play. Divorce was still very much frowned upon and extremely uncommon at the time. Therefore, a deeper understanding of context in each text is successfully gained through use of structure. 4 Hornby uses flashbacks to add to the plot detail, and in a way, give insider information to the reader. Two good examples of this are; Fiona's reference to the 'two different sorts of life' Marcus has had, and the way in which the 'Dead Duck Day' subject is returned to again and again, and the way he 'could recall being nervous'. By giving us these snippets, through character and not narrator, Hornby is able to make significant leaps in time without any damage to the continuity of the story.

It also highlights the isolation of Marcus in this single moment by focusing entirely on his reactions at the time and his later reflections. I find Hornby's structure to be more effective. The methods he uses are timeless, hence not confined in popularity to people of the same era. Language is equally important to both writers in showing isolation of each character. Both texts use language specific to their own time.

Hornby's use of language, slang and reference points are so specific that a reader could easily date the piece. It has been said that Hornby moves 'with ease and humour along Joe Public's favourite pastimes'. He is on intimate terms with the sprawling middle class into which Britain has evolved.

Because of this he can use contextual references, such as 'Snoop Doggy Dog', 'Kurt Cobain', who were considered 'cool' by all the children at Marcus's new school, the reader is shown what a 'normal' boy should be listening to. This, however, isolates Marcus. He doesn't approve of 'Snoop Doggy Dog' because 'he has a bad attitude to women'.

This comment is far too old to have been Marcus's own idea. The reader is shown that Fiona almost definitely put these words in his head; he is different and knows his mum has 'made [him] that way'. The way that he is 'quite happy at home, listening to Joni Mitchell' firmly isolates Marcus. Not only is he not 'right for schools', he is not right for his context. This, however, does not isolate Marcus alone.

It also isolates Fiona, as she has brainwashed him to not be a 'sheep' to the extent that he is completely aligned with her in his thinking. Due to this, the reader feels negatively about Fiona as she is hindering Marcus being a child, hence Fiona is isolated. It is possible that if this book were read by someone fifty years from now the references may mean little or nothing to them. None the less, the actual references, I feel, are not vital. It would still make sense and the ideas would still be conveyed. Like some of his contemporaries, such as McEwan, Hornby is very aware of himself as a 'cool' writer.

It could be argued that the contextual references he uses are simply there to prove this. As Hornby has to write quite a significant part of the novel through the eyes of Marcus, a child, his use of childhood language is very important. In chapter three, Marcus is wishing he were a 'Macaulay Culkin' kind of child. The contextual and age appropriate reference, the repetition of Macaulay's name, the long length of his sentences and the lack of punctuation used in this section successfully remind the reader that we are inside the thoughts of a twelve year old. This is similar to the way that Hornby writes through a female voice in 'How to Be Good', his latest novel. Hornby is very perceptive and accurate in his language imitation.

He is convincing enough in both texts for the reader to believe and hear the voice. 'The Browning Version' is a much more formal setting, thus the language is, fittingly, also much more formal. Millie is isolated by Mrs. Gilbert, who is, in effect, taking her position and her home.

Millie is cooking and Mrs. Gilbert says that she is 'scared stiff' of cooking. This reserved statement is both contextual and isolating. It is probable that Mrs. Gilbert hasn't cooked as she has always had a maid, whereas Millie hasn't 'had a maid for five years'.

Millie is made to experience feelings of inferiority through this technique. Both writers satirise social conditions. Ratigan's portrayal of Andrew fits in with what is going on with society at the time. Teachers had massive status and respecting elders was vital. The false importance of sport is satirised by Andrew's isolation when he is asked to speak before the 'junior' sports master on his leaving assembly.

This is a theme that is still relevant to a modern audience. Sport is still very much elevated and today's sportsmen are given hero status. For this reason, I feel that Ratigan's play is still relevant to readers of later times. In a similar way, Hornby also satirises social conditions; that of the self-help group in particular. 'SPAT', the single parents help group is very clichéd.

In the film this is done very successfully, with will holding hands and chanting with a mixture of lesbians and bitter, single mothers, abandoned by their men. The scene is very uncomfortable for the viewer and the isolation and misery of these people is portrayed in a very heart-rending, yet entertaining way. It is plausible because it is so vivid. Both texts deal with similar subjects and both deal with people coming to self-awareness.

Why, then, did Hornby choose to write a novel and Ratigan to write a play? Hornby's novel is very poignant and deals heavily with aspects of current thinking, such as politics and zeitgeist, and displays excellent timing for the millennium, where the vital question everyone is asking is 'who are we and where are we going? By choosing novel form, Hornby has a wide range of methods available to him to feed the reader the information he wants them to have. Hornby's language is so strong that any reader who has ever felt isolated will surely feel for one of the characters, no matter what time they were brought up in. This dealing with the human condition is one of the aspects that make this novel so popular. However, there are many others, which I explored above. In conclusion, I feel that Hornby's novel is deals with time-context issues very well, yet still has relevance to readers of different periods, so it can be considered serious literature. Ratigan's 'drawing-room

comedy' retains its sense of ' existential bleakness and irresoluble carnal solitude'.

As a reader, I enjoyed the play for many different reasons. I was not merely fascinated with Andrew's downfall, but found the other aspects of the play that I have already discussed highly successful. This is a piece of serious literature that has proved to be of value to people of different time-contexts. The film of this work shows this without a doubt in my mind.

The time-context is not limiting, but beneficial to the play.