

# The return of martin guerre



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What can the student more readily learn from the film as opposed to the book? Do the different mediums essentially tell the same story or are there sufficient grounds to argue there are enough significant differences to argue they do not? If you would be given the task of teaching the history which is the subject of the book and the movie, do you think it would be better taught to a first-year class preferring one medium over the other? Do not avoid presenting a preference by arguing that both should be used, but express a clear choice for one medium over the other giving your reasons.

The Return of Martin Guerre by Natalie Davis tells the story of a young man who has deserted his own village, and the subsequent accounts of the fictitious replacement that returns to take his place. Accordingly, it presents to the reader a set of events that portray life during 16th century France. The events, while not entirely accurate, guides the reader through a serious and powerful story about life, love, and more importantly religion. It is only after watching the film *Le retour De Martin Guerre* (1982) directed by Daniel Vigne, that the reader gains a sense of how different the story of Martin Guerre is portrayed in both print and film mediums.

This paper will compare the above mediums to one another with respects to the overall structure and aesthetic differences that shape the perceptions of the viewer or reader. These differences, while subtle, have a significant impact on those who favour fiction over fact, or vice versa. In addition, the paper will decide which medium would be better suited for teaching in a classroom environment, one that allows for a more stimulated involvement amongst first-year students, regardless of their preceding interests. Upon comparison, the paper will conclude that it is the film which ultimately is able

to best tell the story of Martin Guerre in a manner that properly resonates with audiences of a first year class.

The Return of Martin Guerre is presented in the third person point of view, while at times the narrator speaks of herself in the first person. However, the third person point of view is presented in a documentary style which explores the life of Martin Guerre, as well as the customs, traditions, and culture of those living in 16th century Artigat, France. The author Natalie Davis uses very descriptive language to help address any questions the reader may have of the culture. Reader's questions would relate to a historical society and a rare part of humanity that most would find difficult to comprehend with. Davis excellently scrutinizes each and every character explored, thus ensuring that the reader has clear understanding of the back-story that surrounds each issue. This had been essential to the overall storyline and overall message that Davis had tried so diligently to create.

By contrast, the film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, displays a message of love and betrayal in a rather simple peasant life. During this time there was little separation of church and state, with peasants and commoners directed by a higher authority, as opposed to the freedom that is enjoyed in France today. The film exposes the issue of freedom, primarily by focusing on the relationship between Bertrande de Rols (Martin Guerre's wife) and Arnaud de Tihl (Martin Guerre's imposter). This fabricated relationship becomes highly controversial and heavily discussed in the book. For example, Bertrande helps Arnaud learn as much about Martin as possible, in order to deceive the villagers of Artigat. This however was left out of the film, instead portraying Bertrande as an innocent housewife, unaware of the Arnaud's deception.

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After the trial, Bertrande admits to falling in love with Arnaud, even though he has been sentenced to death. This romance is absent in the novel, but used in the film in order to appeal to the cinematic nature of modern cinematography.

In essence, the mediums of both film and novel tell the same story of Martin Guerre, and the hardships which occurred in his everyday life. Each is able to accomplish this through different perspectives intended to appeal to different individuals. The novel inspires imagination, creativity, a sense of history and storytelling, while the film uses romance and infidelity to illustrate a story of love within a fallacious marriage. Interestingly enough both depictions of history highlight different aspects of the story in a very complementary way.

The film accomplishes several very important tasks in terms of character development and understanding. While in the novel, many assumptions are made of the reader towards their knowledge and understanding of French society. For example, the novel fails to enlighten the reader to the significance of the sanctified wedding bed or the 'circuit court' judicial system of the French court. The reader is unable to visualise the impact that historical customs and tradition have on the proceeding story line. Moreover, there are very few details on the personal exchanges between the villagers of Artigat. These interactions help to define human nature and culture, as well, personify the movie to the audience. The film in this regard is better able to portray historical scenery more accurately. It does an exceptional job of using realistic cinematography to grasp the audiences' attention, and demonstrate what the town of Artigat was really like in the 16th century.

While discussing which of the two mediums would therefore be better suited for a classroom environment, many factors must be considered. Factors such as age group and present day culture play an important role in making such decisions. Today, many are unfamiliar with the specifics of the historical society, or more importantly, show a considerable amount of apathy towards the study of it. Novels, such as *The Return of Martin Guerre*, can often be deemed dull and uninteresting to many first-year students. Therefore the film would serve as an appropriate medium because it provides an easier aesthetic design and atmosphere for students to learn from.

Certainly trying to make a historical film appeal to present-day audience is difficult. However, this is an area where *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* excels. It has brilliant acting, cinematography and meticulous details that connect with the audience, allowing them to explore life as it were in the 16th century. In many ways, this was a crucial goal in the making of the film. To first-year students, watching a historical film like *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, would rival even the best historical films that they would have previously seen. Exceptional visualization and acting continuously captivates the audience, allowing them to subconsciously enter the world and form an opinion on many of the ideologies and cultures of the time (i. e.: family life, marriage, and politics).