

Social Justice and Literary Adaptation: The Impact of Woke Ideology on American Classics in Contemporary Media

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Abstract

*This study investigates how contemporary social justice discourse, often referred to as “woke ideology,” has shaped the adaptation of American literary classics across film, television, animation, and video games. It examines how issues of race, gender, and intersectional identity are reconfigured in works such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *BioShock Infinite*. Drawing on cultural theory (Hall, 1997; hooks, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991) and adaptation studies (Hutcheon, 2006), the research highlights how these reinterpretations negotiate tensions between inclusivity and fidelity to the source material. Findings indicate that adaptations function as cultural sites of negotiation: they broaden representation and social relevance yet also spark debates over revisionism and authenticity. The study contributes to adaptation scholarship by situating American classics within broader debates on cultural identity, justice, and the ethics of reinterpretation.*

Keywords: Wokeism, Literary Adaptation, Social Justice, American Literature, Cultural Studies

1. Introduction

The cultural debates surrounding social justice discourse—frequently labeled “woke ideology”—have become central to understanding how literature and media are reinterpreted for contemporary audiences. Originally, the term “woke” described a heightened awareness of racial injustice within African American vernacular traditions. Over time, it has expanded to include recognition of systemic inequalities related to gender, sexuality, class, and other dimensions of identity (Hall, 1997; hooks, 1992). This expansion reflects broader societal transformations in how cultural products are created, consumed, and critiqued.

One of the most visible arenas where these tensions emerge is in the adaptation of canonical American literature into film, television, animation, and video games. These adaptations do not merely retell established narratives; they participate in ongoing negotiations about history, identity, and justice.

Scholars of cultural and literary theory have long emphasized that representation is neither neutral nor apolitical. Stuart Hall (1997) demonstrated that media texts actively shape the meanings of identity and difference, while bell hooks (1992, 2000) argued that cultural production can either reinforce or challenge racialized and gendered hierarchies. Intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), further underscores the ways overlapping systems of oppression affect lived experience.

Linda Hutcheon’s (2006) theory of adaptation similarly highlights that adaptations are not passive copies but interventions that reshape meaning across contexts. While these theoretical frameworks are well established, their application to the explicit influence of “woke” discourse in literary adaptations remains relatively underexplored.

This research seeks to address that gap. Although scholarship exists on representation in classic American texts, there is comparatively less attention to how contemporary ideological debates—specifically those surrounding inclusivity, equity, and identity politics—reshape the reception and reinterpretation of canonical works.

Adaptations such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and the video game *BioShock Infinite* demonstrate how racial discrimination, gender inequality, and broader intersectional identities are reconfigured when narratives are retold for twenty-first-century audiences. These cases allow us to trace how progressive values are inscribed into new cultural products and to evaluate the implications of those changes.

Foregrounding the research gap is particularly important given the polarized reception of woke discourse. Proponents view these adaptations as necessary interventions that expand access and cultural relevance. Critics, however, contend that such reinterpretations compromise artistic authenticity or impose present-day values onto historically situated texts (Sanders, 2015).

This tension between inclusivity and fidelity forms the crux of adaptation debates and highlights the stakes of this study. By investigating specific case studies across multiple media, this research demonstrates that woke-influenced adaptations function as cultural sites of negotiation: they broaden representation while also sparking controversy about revisionism, authenticity, and artistic freedom.

Another dimension of the gap involves media form. Adaptation studies have traditionally focused on literature-to-film transitions, but contemporary cultural production increasingly includes animation, video games, and transmedia storytelling. These forms introduce new modalities of engagement.

For example, while Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* relies on visual extravagance and musical anachronism to foreground questions of class and race, *BioShock Infinite* positions players within a racially stratified fictional society, allowing them to experience systemic oppression interactively. This comparison underscores how form shapes meaning: cinema, animation, and games each invite distinct modes of critique and identification (Bogost, 2007; McGonigal, 2011).

By bringing these theoretical and formal perspectives together, this study situates American classics within the broader field of cultural and adaptation studies. It argues that woke adaptations are not isolated phenomena but part of a global pattern of reinterpretation in which canonical works are revised to speak to contemporary debates on identity and justice.

Through this lens, adaptation becomes a critical practice that extends beyond textual fidelity to engage with pressing ethical questions about representation, power, and memory.

Ultimately, this introduction frames the central inquiry: how do contemporary adaptations of American classics negotiate the pressures of social justice discourse, and what do these negotiations reveal about cultural identity and historical memory in the present?

In answering this question, the paper contributes to both adaptation theory and cultural studies by showing how ideological conflicts manifest in creative decisions such as casting, dialogue, narrative restructuring, and the redistribution of narrative voice. In doing so, it positions adaptation as a vital arena where the past and present meet, where cultural values are contested, and where literature continues to shape collective understandings of justice and representation.

2. Related Work

Scholars such as Linda Hutcheon have shown how adaptations serve as cultural palimpsests that rewrite source texts for new contexts (Hutcheon, 2006). Stuart Hall's theory of representation emphasizes how narratives shape and reflect social realities (Hall, 1997). bell hooks' intersectional critique reveals how race, gender, and class intersect in cultural production (hooks, 1992; hooks, 2000). Recent studies on digital media (McGonigal, 2011; Bogost, 2007) also frame video games as ideological spaces that can critique systemic injustice. This paper builds

on this foundation by connecting these theories directly to specific American classics and their modern counterparts.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology that prioritizes textual and cultural analysis. Rather than seeking quantitative generalizability, the research is grounded in close reading, comparative interpretation, and critical contextualization. This approach aligns with the study's aim: to understand how contemporary social justice discourse—commonly associated with “woke ideology”—shapes the adaptation of American literary classics across diverse media forms.

The methodology draws from adaptation studies, cultural studies, and intersectional theory to examine how changes in character portrayal, narrative emphasis, and visual or interactive design reflect broader ideological commitments. By combining textual analysis with cultural critique, the study explores not only how stories are retold but also why these changes matter within the larger cultural landscape (Hall, 1997; Hutcheon, 2006; hooks, 1992).

a. Case Selection Criteria

Three primary case studies were chosen through purposive sampling: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *BioShock Infinite*. These works were selected for three main reasons. First, they represent canonical texts or adaptations that are deeply embedded in the American cultural imagination. Second, they provide variation across media—novel, film, and video game—allowing for comparative insights into how different forms mediate ideological critique. Third, each case directly engages with questions of race, class, gender, or identity, making them particularly useful for tracing the influence of social justice discourse.

The inclusion of *Huck Finn* highlights how adaptations grapple with the legacy of racialized language and representation. Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* was selected because of its deliberate stylistic and thematic reinterpretations of the Jazz Age, especially in terms of race and gender. *BioShock Infinite* broadens the analysis into interactive media, where players engage directly with themes of nationalism, racism, and class conflict. Together, these cases offer a triangulated lens through which to analyze the ideological stakes of adaptation.

b. Analytic Process

The analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, close textual and visual readings were conducted of both the original literary works and their adaptations. Attention was paid to thematic developments, changes in character agency, narrative restructuring, and the redistribution of voice. These readings were guided by theoretical frameworks such as Hall's representation theory, hooks' intersectional cultural criticism, and Hutcheon's adaptation theory.

Second, the study examined cultural and audience reception. Media criticism, academic essays, and reviews were analyzed to trace how adaptations have been debated in the public sphere. In addition, online forums, fan discussions, and interviews with creators were considered as sources of cultural discourse. While these sources are not treated as empirical data in the sociological sense, they provide insight into how audiences and cultural producers negotiate questions of authenticity, inclusivity, and fidelity in adaptations. To maintain rigor, the study prioritized peer-reviewed scholarship and established media criticism over non-academic commentary.

c. Link to Theoretical Framework

This methodology is intentionally interdisciplinary, combining adaptation theory with cultural and intersectional analysis. Hutcheon's (2006) conception of adaptation as a dialogic process informs the comparative readings of text and adaptation, showing how meaning is reshaped across contexts. Hall's (1997) and hooks' (1992) insights into representation guide the analysis of race and gender dynamics, while Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework is applied to examine overlapping structures of oppression in narrative design.

Through this combined lens, the methodology not only examines adaptations as cultural texts but also situates them within ideological debates about justice, identity, and power. By clarifying case selection, analytic process,

and theoretical grounding, the study ensures transparency and coherence in its approach, addressing the need for both cultural depth and methodological clarity.

4. Result Discussion

a. Racial Discrimination

Modern adaptations of American literary classics increasingly engage with themes of racial injustice, offering more self-critical readings that interrogate the historical contexts of the originals (Hall, 1997; hooks, 1992). These changes go beyond surface-level edits, often restructuring narrative emphasis to highlight systemic inequities.

A central example is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain's text, while radical for its time, remains problematic in its paternalistic depictions of Jim and frequent use of racial epithets. Contemporary adaptations wrestle with this legacy. The 1993 Disney film *The Adventures of Huck Finn* altered dialogue and character portrayals to balance fidelity to Twain with sensitivity to modern audiences (Whittington, 2017). In contrast, experimental retellings such as *Big Jim and the White Boy* (2015) shift narrative focus toward Jim, granting him narrative agency and moral depth. International versions, such as the Japanese animated series *Huckleberry no Bōken* (1976), avoided racial controversy by softening depictions and omitting slurs, though this also diluted the novel's engagement with slavery (Robinson, 2018). Together, these examples illustrate how adaptation reflects shifting cultural demands for equitable representation.

Interactive media also participates in this discourse. *BioShock Infinite* (2013) creates a dystopian America steeped in white supremacy and segregation, forcing players to confront systemic racism. As Bogost (2007) and Leonard (2006) argue, video games function as ideological texts, shaping understanding of social issues through interactivity. While not a direct adaptation of Twain, the game parallels Huck Finn's confrontation with American racial history by immersing players in moral dilemmas around complicity and resistance.

b. Gender Inequality

Adaptations also reimagine gender roles, reflecting broader feminist interventions into literature and media (Butler, 1990; Kaplan, 1997). Female characters who were once sidelined are now depicted with greater complexity, voice, and autonomy.

For example, Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013) reframes Daisy Buchanan not solely as an object of desire but as a woman constrained by patriarchal and economic systems. Mulligan's performance conveys both vulnerability and entrapment, underscoring Daisy's lack of freedom despite her privilege (Lehan, 2015). Cinematic techniques—close-ups, *mise-en-scène*, and musical cues—reinforce her inner conflict.

Animated adaptations likewise challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The 2018 adaptation of *Little Women* portrays Meg with increased assertiveness and intellectual independence, contrasting earlier portrayals that emphasized domesticity. Such shifts embody hooks' (2000) argument that reclaiming female voice in narrative reframes cultural memory, enabling audiences to engage with more inclusive gender perspectives.

c. Intersectional Identity

Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1991), illuminates how overlapping identities—race, class, gender, sexuality—shape lived experiences. Adaptations frequently use this framework to expand the moral and political dimensions of familiar texts.

In adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, Hester Prynne's struggles are reframed through a modern lens that emphasizes her roles as mother, outsider, and survivor. Animated versions foreground her resilience against both patriarchal and religious oppression, aligning with contemporary debates on reproductive justice and social marginalization (Brooks, 2017).

BioShock Infinite provides another case of intersectional storytelling. Its fictional city, Columbia, is at once a utopia and dystopia, structured by racial, class, and nationalist hierarchies. The *Vox Populi*, while morally

ambiguous, represent resistance to multiple forms of oppression. This aligns with Hall's (1997) theory of representation, illustrating how media can both reflect and destabilize dominant ideologies.

d. Historical Revisionism

Many modern adaptations engage in revisionist strategies, reframing history to critique dominant cultural myths. Hutcheon (2006) argues that adaptation functions dialogically, reshaping meaning across contexts rather than simply reproducing the past.

Luhrmann's *Gatsby* demonstrates this vividly. By integrating 21st-century hip-hop and electronic music into a 1920s setting, the film destabilizes historical authenticity, forcing viewers to reconsider the Jazz Age in relation to contemporary inequalities. Scholars note how this technique disrupts nostalgia, compelling audiences to question the exclusions embedded in the American Dream (Chibnall, 2014).

Similarly, adaptations of *Huck Finn* increasingly depict the Mississippi River not as a romanticized space of freedom but as a site of economic hardship and racialized violence. Gritty visual realism emphasizes survival and systemic injustice, echoing Hutcheon's (2006) claim that adaptation generates new meanings through formal transformation.

e. Representation and Voice

Another recurring trend is the redistribution of narrative voice, particularly toward historically marginalized characters. Hooks (1992) identifies voice as a key site of resistance in cultural production.

In *Big Jim and the White Boy*, Jim assumes narrative primacy, reversing the traditional "white savior" structure and foregrounding Black moral authority. Such shifts not only challenge literary hierarchies but also reshape cultural memory, validating voices long excluded from canonical narratives.

Interactive media amplifies this further. While *BioShock Infinite* centers on a white protagonist, it compels players to make decisions that affect marginalized groups, generating experiential empathy (McGonigal, 2011). This demonstrates how interactivity extends adaptation's potential to redistribute narrative agency and ethical decision-making.

f. Additional Themes

Beyond race and gender, adaptations also engage with civic duty, environmental justice, and mental health. These concerns reflect both contemporary ethical imperatives and the adaptability of literary texts to new cultural contexts.

For example, recent *Gatsby* adaptations foreground the psychological costs of consumerism and toxic masculinity, framing *Gatsby*'s obsession and Tom Buchanan's aggression as critiques of emotional repression (Lehan, 2015). Likewise, new *Huck Finn* adaptations recast the Mississippi River as an endangered ecosystem, aligning with environmental discourse (Robinson, 2018).

By embedding such themes, adaptations demonstrate the versatility of classic texts as vehicles for dialogue on justice, sustainability, and personal responsibility.

Finally, characters like Daisy or Huck are increasingly portrayed in adaptations as moral beings who can fight against social injustice. These portrayals not only align with the theme of civic duty but also reflect the broader narrative strategy discussed earlier—of shifting narrative agency to characters who challenge dominant ideologies. As illustrated in prior sections, these figures often become conduits for ethical decision-making, highlighting the role of personal morality in resisting systemic oppression (Butler, 1990).

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that contemporary adaptations of American literary classics are increasingly shaped by social justice discourse, often labeled as "woke ideology." These adaptations do more than update language or diversify casting; they restructure narratives in ways that foreground systemic inequalities and ethical dilemmas (Hall, 1997;

hooks, 1992). By reworking canonical texts through the lenses of race, gender, and identity, they operate not only as cultural artifacts but also as interventions in broader debates about justice, power, and representation.

The case of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates how adaptations negotiate the legacy of racialized language and stereotypes. Where earlier adaptations often minimized the controversy, recent versions place Jim's humanity and agency at the center of the narrative. This shift highlights evolving cultural demands for more equitable representations and illustrates Hutcheon's (2006) argument that adaptation is dialogic, reshaping meaning in light of new contexts. Likewise, Baz Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* disrupts nostalgic visions of the Jazz Age by inserting anachronistic music and hyper-stylized visuals. These creative choices invite audiences to reconsider questions of race, class, and gender, thereby dismantling the myth of the American Dream (Chibnall, 2014).

Interactive media further extends this cultural work. *BioShock Infinite* demonstrates how video games, as sites of ideological critique, immerse players in narratives of racism, nationalism, and moral ambiguity (Bogost, 2007; Leonard, 2006). Unlike film or literature, the medium compels players to make ethical decisions, thereby transforming adaptation into an experiential encounter with systems of oppression. Such examples signal the need for adaptation studies to expand beyond traditional forms and engage more deeply with interactive and transmedia storytelling.

These cultural shifts, however, are not without controversy. Critics argue that contemporary adaptations risk excessive revisionism, reducing complex texts to vehicles for present-day politics (Felski, 2015). Concerns over "political correctness" highlight ongoing tensions between fidelity to the original and the pursuit of inclusivity. While some of these critiques emerge from resistance to cultural change, they also raise important questions about the boundaries of adaptation: when does reinterpretation enrich a text, and when does it erase its historical specificity? Maintaining critical distance requires acknowledging both the gains and the losses inherent in justice-oriented adaptations.

Placing these debates within a global frame underscores their broader significance. Adaptations in Europe, Asia, and Africa similarly grapple with reconciling literary heritage and contemporary imperatives (Sanders, 2016). For example, the Japanese adaptation *Huckleberry no Bōken* recasts Twain's story by softening its racial content, reflecting how cultural context reshapes emphasis and meaning (Robinson, 2018). Such examples highlight that adaptation is always transnational, shaped not only by local histories but also by global conversations about identity, inclusion, and cultural memory.

In sum, the analysis demonstrates that adaptations of works such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *BioShock Infinite* exemplify the transformative yet contested role of social justice discourse in reshaping American classics. They broaden the cultural resonance of these texts by addressing race, gender, class, and intersectional identities, but they also provoke valid critiques about revisionism and loss of authorial intent. By applying the frameworks of Hall, hooks, Crenshaw, and Hutcheon, this study positions adaptation as a cultural battleground where questions of justice and representation are continuously renegotiated.

Ultimately, adaptations will remain central to how societies reinterpret their literary heritage. Their importance lies not in preserving texts as static artifacts but in reactivating them as living cultural dialogues. In engaging with both the promises and perils of social justice discourse, these adaptations affirm literature's enduring capacity to mediate between past and present, illuminating the ongoing struggles for equity, authenticity, and human dignity.

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