

## ADAPTING THE VILLAIN: A CASE STUDY OF GEORGE WICKHAM

### *ADAPTANDO O VILÃO: UM ESTUDO DE CASO DE GEORGE WICKHAM*

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#### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the portrayal of the antagonist George Wickham, from the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, to its adaptation to the webseries *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. The analysis delineates the main characteristics that make him an antagonistic character and investigates how they are adapted to the webseries. First, we present a brief summary of the context of production of the adaptation; after, we look to what makes Wickham such a charming antagonist in the novel and how these character traits were treated in the adaptation; finally, we compare both works in order to identify how the antagonist was adapted.

**Keywords:** adaptation, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, George Wickham.

#### RESUMO

Este artigo foca na representação do antagonista George Wickham, do romance *Orgulho e preconceito*, para sua adaptação na websérie *The Lizzie Bennet diaries*. A análise delinea as principais características que o fazem ser um personagem antagonista e investiga como elas são adaptadas para a websérie. Primeiro, apresenta-se um breve resumo do contexto de produção da adaptação; após, analisa-se o que faz com que Wickham seja um antagonista tão charmoso no romance e como essas características foram retratadas na adaptação; finalmente, compara-se os dois trabalhos para identificar como os antagonistas foram apresentados nas obras.

**Palavras-chave:** adaptação, *Orgulho e preconceito*, *The Lizzie Bennet diaries*, George Wickham.

#### ***Pride and prejudice in two worlds: regency era and the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

*Pride and Prejudice* is one of those novels that has been countlessly adapted, be it to the screen, stage, music or other arts. Its adaptations have been numerous: shifting

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the focus of the characters, bringing them to different realities – with zombies or the current days -, keeping them in the nineteenth century England, changing its genre – from a satire to adventure, romance or investigation, among many others. It is clear that this is a story that people want to see again and again, as Hutcheon (2006) argues, “recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation” (p. 4). And, although they are frequently seen as a lower form of art, their importance in society is unquestionable. The characters and story have become a part of pop culture, and many people only know this love story through the adaptations.

As Hutcheon (2006) suggests, because of constantly changing media, adaptations do not seem to be going anywhere soon. There are always new ways of telling a known story and the audience is eager to follow the characters and stories they know and love in different formats. One of these cases is through the adaptation *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (LBD), which is a transmedia storytelling format, whose original source is Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. It is transmedia because, as Jenkins (2006) states, the “story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (p. 95).

In the world of LBD, Lizzie’s main platform of communication is through *YouTube*, which is where her videoblogs are posted, however, that is not the only way we can access the story. All the relevant characters have a Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook accounts, where they post things that are important to the story. Furthermore, different *spin offs* were created, and we can discover more about characters through their videos, which are not always vlogs – Lydia’s channel is, but Gigi’s videos are meant to be seen as demos of apps. There are also books that were published – one which is set during the story and one afterwards –, and Q and A videos in which Lizzie answers the questions posted on videos she uploaded. Each medium adds something to the whole of the story, however, one could easily only watch the videos, or just read the books, or even just read the tweets – although one might ask why you would do that – and still get a story in itself.

These media add to the world building of LBD and help creating an atmosphere that makes fans feel the characters are almost real. It is not uncommon for people who do not know *Pride and Prejudice* to think that the webseries is, in fact, a vlog, especially when you realize that all those characters do not stop existing after the 3

minutes videos. We can follow them talking, gossiping and traveling through their social media posts.

The LBD adaptation is considered to be innovative because it was the first time that a story was told through such contemporary media. It gained recognition, with millions of views and, eventually, winning an Emmy Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media in 2013.

It is not only the shift in the media used for this adaptation that make it so original, but also the setting that is extremely different from the *Pride and Prejudice* book it adapts. While the second is set in the Regency period in England, encompassing all the manners and problems one might expect to find during that time, the first is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century California, USA, where few problems the main character faces stay the same. Because the book is so intrinsically connected to the period it was written in – it is a novel of manners –, the adaptation had to discover ways to portray some of the concepts that were pertinent at the time and are irrelevant nowadays.

If one of the main themes of the novel was to find an eligible husband for the five Miss Bennets, a genuine concern for Regency women, this seems outdated for a 21<sup>st</sup> century woman. Now, they are career focused and finding a job that pays well and they find meaningful is much harder. If an elopement could once end with the life of a woman, and of her whole family, now, a quick divorce fixes things. Having your intimacy published online however, has become a source of concern for women who frequently have their privacy violated by the partners they trust the most, and see their future jeopardized because of leaked pictures or videos posted as a form of revenge.

Not only did the themes have to be adapted, but also the characters, so that they better represent the values the audience wishes to see. The antagonist, who is meant to contrast with the hero(ine), should depict a personality that the audience does not root for. In both works, he is, at first, seen as someone who embodies all the admirable qualities one might wish in a partner, to later reveal that is not the truth. If in the Regency era that meant having good morals, a charming character, and proper connections, the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires an outgoing personality, a person who fights for what they believe while managing to look amazing in the process.

In the next section, we focus on the antagonist of the story: George Wickham. He is the character that, at first, seems to be a potential love interest for the protagonist,

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but later, reveals himself to be despicable, ruining the life of Elizabeth's sister. First, we look at the novel and try to pinpoint the main traits this villain has that makes him such a threat to the Regency society. Later, we see how these traits were transposed to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: what characteristics were accentuated and what were changed. Thus, we can have a better understanding of what it means to be a villain in today's world, if we compare it to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **What makes a great antagonist: the charismatic Wickham**

Although he would later become the villain of the story, George Wickham is first introduced as an agreeable young man. In his first appearance, he is thus presented: "His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address. The introduction was followed up on his side by a happy readiness of conversation--a readiness at the same time perfectly correct and unassuming" (1993, p. 63). It is clear for the reader that Wickham is meant to be seen favorably: he had all the attributes that were requested in a bachelor. Two of his characteristics are greatly emphasized: his good looks and "a happy readiness of conversation" (p. 63) which seem to set him apart from the other men in the area, who, in comparison, became "stupid, disagreeable fellows" (p. 64). Despite not possessing the fortune heavily emphasized by the narrator as advantageous in the beginning of the novel – who has not heard the famous opening line "it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (p. 3)? – that is not seen as something too problematic, since Elizabeth was also not rich, and Wickham had a respectable job in the militia.

In his introduction to the story, he is shown having a curious encounter with Mr. Darcy: while the first is portrayed as being courteous, taking the lead on saluting him, the second disregards that gesture and leaves the group without retributing the greeting. His pleasing character is contrasted with Darcy's and the narrator, as well as the protagonist, seem to favor Wickham's attitude. Although it is the first time Elizabeth meets Wickham, she has already met Darcy before and considered him extremely rude. Her favoring the first is not that surprising, since Darcy's actions seem to sustain her view of him as a proud man.

When Elizabeth speaks to Wickham, it is the manner he speaks that makes her impressed by him. The narrator states that “the commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic might be rendered interesting by the skill of the speaker” (p. 66) and that is why Elizabeth is so willing to hear him. Once again, he is set apart from the other men, since he has the power of making any topic seem interesting.

After some casual conversation, they arrive at the topic that clearly interests Elizabeth and the reader: the encounter that Wickham and Darcy had. Wickham seems keen on sharing his story: he is the one who inquires about Darcy’s stay in Netherfield and who starts sharing their history. He is very careful painting the picture of Darcy. Since he still does not know how people see him, he cannot say only bad things. He is mindful as to not give his own opinion on Darcy directly stating that “(he has) no right to give (his) opinion” since “(he is) not qualified to form one” (p. 68). And hearing the impressions of the locals, he states that most people would not agree with them, since they are usually blinded by wealth. By doing so, Wickham places Elizabeth and her townspeople above everyone else who cannot see the truth behind Darcy’s façade, and also indicates his true feelings for the man.

Besides shining a bad light over Darcy’s attitude, Wickham manages to portray himself as a forgiving character, one that would be willing to forget all the mistreatment he received from Darcy in respect over his dear father, who was such a good friend for him. This gives the impression that the only thing separating the men from becoming friendly again is Darcy’s pride – something that has already been noticed by the protagonist. And although Wickham changes topics, to not sound too outspoken, he manages to find his way back to the destruction caused by Darcy. When they are in the topic of professions, he resents having to be in the military, but explains that is all that is left for him, since the one true life he had imagined was taken from his hands.

In the midst of appraising Darcy’s father, and explaining how much they cared for each other, the unwillingness of Darcy to fulfill his wish of giving Wickham a parsonage sounds even more evil. He even affirms that he cannot take any revenge on the man since he regards the memory of his father so highly. Thus, his assertion that they are both very different men is met with approval by Elizabeth who sees him “handsomer than ever” (p. 70).

Elizabeth never questions Wickham's accusations: since he had been so specific on the allegations, and had seemed so honest, there was no doubt on his honesty. Besides, everyone she met, and that she cared for, seemed to like him and despise Darcy, which makes her conclusion simple enough. Hearing different accounts of Wickham from Darcy himself or Caroline does not change her mind on his regard, since they only corroborate her belief that Wickham had been mistreated because of his lack of wealth. Thus, through careful disclosing information and playing with the preconceptions of the protagonist, Wickham manages to convince the people around him that he is a man to be trusted, who is well-mannered and who has good connections. He is only in such a low position because of what other people have done to him, but he can act as a true gentleman. He is the underdog of the situation, the one to be pitied, who has been wronged for seemingly no reason.

If at first Wickham had seemed cautious as to whom he revealed his and Darcy's story to, when the latter leaves town, he is not anymore: wherever he goes, he finds a way of sharing his unfortunate past and how the proud man that everybody hates managed to ruin his future. He makes people form such a high opinion of himself that, even when he also leaves town with the militia, Elizabeth still regards him as "her model of amiable and pleasing" (p. 129).

It is not until hearing the other side of Wickham's story that Elizabeth starts seeing Wickham for who he really is – even when he starts courting another woman, she still sees the best side of him. When she hears Darcy's side of the story, she notices how it makes much more sense than Wickham's and she realizes that she had been fooled by him: "She tried to recollect some instance of goodness [...] But no such recollection befriended her" (p. 174). His virtue had been asserted because of his manners.

Through the discovery of the elopement between him and Lydia, Wickham's true villainy is made clear to everyone. Although it had been disclosed to Elizabeth the vicious actions he had had, the society was still enchanted by his façade. When he elopes with Lydia, without even signaling a future marriage, and leaves debt behind, the whole town manages to see him beyond the mask he had put up. Instead of being seen as agreeable and charming, he was now regarded as "imprudent", "extravagant", "false" and "deceitful" (p. 235, 241).

The only solution for such a character is to have him removed from such society, which is what happens. Wickham is encouraged to leave the militia and be quartered in the North, distant from those who previously knew him. And when he returns to the midst of those people, his pleasing character is not enough to conceal his true identity.

His character works as a constant reminder of how prejudice may blind us. Even though Elizabeth had no evidence and had been warned against it, she trusted Wickham's judgment and was deceived by his pleasing character and agreeable looks.

### **What makes a great antagonist: the gorgeous Wickham**

When Wickham is first introduced in the webseries, he is not interrupted by the arrival of other characters. In fact, this encounter occupies an episode of itself later on. At first, we hear about him through Lizzie's retelling of their introduction – which happens much earlier than in the book. The setting in which they first meet, although different – in the novel it happens in Meryton, in the series, in a bar – Carter's – serve the same purpose: they are both used as a means of finding suitors for, mostly, Lydia.

Lizzie's impressions of him resemble much of what we find in the novel: in the midst of many men who seem unfit for the protagonist, there is one gentleman who sets himself apart from the rest. At first, there is extra emphasis given to how charming he is and not to his looks. He is, in the first episode, already portrayed in comparison to Darcy: while one is seen as “rude, arrogant, or stuck up”, the other is one of those *rare, rare gentlemen* (episode 18). While Lizzie describes their first conversation, the viewers can notice that he has the ability of telling what she wishes to hear.

It is not until many episodes later that Wickham receives any mentioning and the viewer learns that they have been texting for a while. It is interesting to mention that Lizzie heavily emphasizes his physical attributes, although his “witty” conversation is also mentioned. When listing the things she likes about him, she specifies his conversation, passions, the fact that he is still keeping in touch with her even though he is in a different state, and, his “charming shoulders”. This would not be the only time that his looks are mentioned.

When the meeting between Darcy and Wickham happens, the viewers are already familiarized with Wickham, and so is Lizzie. However, the drama that is narrated in the novel does not reflect well on the screen. It is because of Lizzie's

exaggeration that the viewers notice any tension between the characters. Darcy leaving the bar is not seen as a reaction of Wickham's presence by Jane, who was also there, but Lizzie's reenactment of the scene emphasizes his departure because of him being irritated by his presence. Like in the novel, the audience and Lizzie are left to wonder why they would behave in such a way.

At first, Wickham seems less eager to tell the history they share, but that quickly changes.

In the next episode, we get to see Wickham for ourselves. He is first filmed standing, which does not capture his face. The viewers see Lizzie scanning George's body while he looks at her books, once again, overly emphasizing his physical looks, which happens one more time at the end of the video when he is seen shirtless, because Lydia has strategically spilled her drink on him. Upon meeting him, it would not be surprising for the viewer to question Lizzie's attachment to Wickham: they seem like extremely different people and his tastes are on things Lizzie would usually criticize in other people. Nevertheless, we are meant to believe there are feelings between them.

Although he does not make much effort into hiding the history he has with Darcy, in the adaptation, Lizzie has to do much more investigation and questioning in order to get the full story between them. His attitude towards the retelling, however, is much less nonchalant than in the novel – we can clearly see that he fully blames Darcy and does not make any effort into trying to hide his feelings. One of the reasons as to why he may behave in such a way is because he already knows how Lizzie feels about Darcy – he admits having seen her videos, therefore, he does not need to tread carefully around the offenses he shares of him. Wickham also does not elaborate on his attachment to Darcy's father. If in the novel he stresses many times how Darcy's father was important to him, here, he is a mere vessel for the promise he made of paying him his college. This gives a less genuine impression of truth to the viewer: it is hard for us to empathize with his feelings, we only access his anger towards Darcy. The multiplicity of emotions Wickham portrays in the novel is simplified. No more fear for sharing their history, resentment for what he feels is a betrayal on Darcy's part, grief over the death of a man he truly loved nor bitterness for what his life has become. We only see mockery and the irritation he has towards Darcy.



During the whole interaction, however, we are presented with some interests by Wickham that seem incompatible to Lizzie: he likes Vin Diesel, the Rock and Batman, things that do not interest her. He is also incredibly interested in his physique: his twitter feed is full of posts of him stating the workout he has done each day and it seems that he does not have any emotional attachment to anyone in particular.

On discovering Darcy's side of the story regarding Wickham, Lizzie still seems reluctant to accepting that to be the truth. She seems affected by the story she has been told, but admits that does not know who to believe in, since she does not have any proof from either side. However, a few episodes later, she reports Darcy's story in a way that shows how much she trusts his version of the facts.

When it is revealed what he has done to Lydia – which in the show is a threat to release a sex tape between them –, Wickham's villainy does not come as a shock to any of the participants in the story, besides Lydia herself. All of them, having caught up with Lizzie's videos knew what he had done to Gigi and how he had tried fooling Darcy. Therefore, he is not exposed to society as he had been in the novel, which is understandable, since the relevance of societal bonds is extremely different in the current setting. Furthermore, in the novel, his true identity is never discovered by his wife, who is incapable of seeing him for who he really is. Here, her heart is truly broken because she believed in his love, which makes him so much more vicious. And, although no material damage is done, since the sex tape is not released, he seems more evil because the scars he leaves on Lydia are real.

### **The cruelty of the antagonist**

Although both Wickham resemble in some areas – they are charming and seen as handsome – the way they are portrayed and their personality vary immensely, leading to different reactions of the audience and characters. Each of them could be considered cruel because of how they act even though the consequences the characters face because of them are different.

While the novel Wickham is able to convince the people around him of his morals and gentleman attitude because of his charisma, the series Wickham exerts some influence over some characters because of his looks and charms. He does not try to make people believe he has good morals, since that is not so important in 21<sup>st</sup> century

society, instead, he tries to present his job as a way of pursuing his passion of teaching young kids, making him seem an overall *nice* guy.

In the middle of the story, both versions of the character distance themselves from the protagonist, revealing different traits of them. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Wickham shows his interest in marrying another woman because of her dowry: since Elizabeth was not entailed a lot of money, and he must think of his future, this is not seen as morally reproachable; marriage and money were intrinsically connected. In *LBD*, he leaves because of a swimming competition in a different state – which not necessarily is seen as something problematic -, however his lack of contact or explanation to Lizzie about their distance is not seen well by the viewers; it seems that he is *ghosting* her, which is not acceptable.

The way they portray Darcy also reveals different personalities: while the novel version seems more careful and caring about the way he talks about an old childhood friend, the webseries version only sounds resentful and without any empathy for the person he once knew. It is much harder to sympathize with the swimmer Wickham because of that.

As to their final act of villainy, although they are both seen as cruel, they result into very different consequences. In the novel, Wickham is exposed to the society, he is forced to marry a woman he did not intend to, he is made to leave his position in the militia and has to leave the area. Although he does not suffer great consequences, most of the people realize who he is behind his gentleman façade. As to his relationship with Lydia, that is not affected, since she does not realize his character: she remains oblivious to how reproachable their conduct was to the morals of the time. If in the novel Wickham does not suffer enough for what he did, in *LDB* he leaves scot-free. While Lydia is left heartbroken because she was used by the man she loved, what happens to him is not presented. When the sex tape disappears from the story, so does he. The viewers are left to imagine what happens to him, but it is hard to believe he suffered any consequences because of how he behaved, since no crime actually occurred.

If in *Pride and Prejudice* neither Lydia nor Wickham are affected by what happened to them, in *LDB* Lydia is. She goes through a transformation in her character because of how betrayed she feels by Wickham. His actions have an impact in her story instead of Elizabeth's. That might be the largest difference in the stories: instead of

Wickham's actions being there to affect Elizabeth, the protagonist, they create a new protagonist, Lydia, one that has to go through trauma to come out the other side a better person, able to be the actor of her own story. That is why her storyline continues after Lizzie's ends, and we can follow her adventures the way she wishes to tell.

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