The Graduate

The 1967 film, *The Graduate*, follows Benjamin Braddock while he tries to sort out his life after graduating from a prestigious college. The hit movie, directed by Mike Nichols and starring Dustin Hoffman, is based on Charles Webb’s novel of the same title. The film far surpasses the book in popularity, and the defining quote, “Mrs. Robinson, you’re trying to seduce me,” has become a favorite in popular culture. Although the film is much better known than the book, the two sources are actually very similar. The movie is a traditional translation of the written text but is enhanced so much by the visuals that a film can provide. It follows the guidelines of the aesthetic rubric for a successful book to film translation, which accounts for its success as the latter.

In the novel Webb portrays Benjamin’s indecision about his future and his desire to find something in life that makes him happy. He has graduated from college with a scholarship to teach which is something he does not want to do. He is doted on by friends and pushed by his parents to attend graduate school. This is not important to him and he is frustrated by all the attention and all the pressure to make decisions that he is not yet ready to make. Nichols uses visuals not available through written text to get these ideas across to the audience. For example, at the start of the movie Benjamin is on a moving sidewalk at the airport. As he stands there, the sidewalk moves him along, while other people pass by him. This portrays Ben’s disinterest in moving forward. Time is going on and he is going on with it but through no effort of his own. At the end of the film a similar visual is used to show the growth in Benjamin. He is running with full force to the church where Elaine Robinson is getting married because he loves her and wants to stop the wedding. Finally he has something to chase after and something he wants to gain and uses all of his strength to obtain it.

The actors in the film are also an important aspect of communicating the ideas presented in the book. Hoffman is the epitome of a young adult who is confused about his future and is just trying to take control. His blank expressions and monotone voice clearly portray his repression of his fears while simultaneously showing disgust and frustration of the world around him. Hoffman also gives Benjamin a certain charm that is lacking in the text. Webb’s novel is mostly dialogue, which portrays the coldness and simplicity of Ben and his world, but is also shallow. Hoffman provides facial expressions and reactions
that help the audience like him. This is particularly true when Ben is courting Elaine and the audience can see how happy she makes him from his smiling.

Hoffman is not the only actor who enhances the characters in Webb’s novel. Katherine Ross (Elaine) and Ann Bancroft (Mrs. Robinson) bring new dimensions to their characters as well. Elaine, who is integral to the plot but lacks depth in the book is brought to life by Ross. Similar to Hoffman she proves that she cares for Ben by smiling and kissing him—things we cannot see in the book. Bancroft brings more to the character of Mrs. Robinson than just her bluntness and cruelty, but reality shows how sad and lost she is when she describes the life she lost when she got married. Ann Bancroft’s eyes portray a deep emotion that is impossible to describe, but is obvious when seen.

Nichols also uses a combination of filmmaking skills for this movie. One example is the scene in which Ben is demonstrating his new SCUBA gear in his pool. As he goes under water and keeps floating up Nichols shows us the scene from Ben’s point of view. The camera shows the view out of Ben’s goggles as he goes up and down in the water. After a few bobs the camera cuts away to show Ben just floating beneath the surface.

Nichols also uses a mixture of close-ups and long shots. There are several examples of the camera being focused on Benjamin’s face and then pulled back to reveal his surroundings. However, the best example of a long shot may be the most famous shot in the whole movie. The camera pulls back to show Mrs. Robinson’s bent leg in the foreground and Benjamin in the background, seen through the crook of her leg just as he asks, “Mrs. Robinson, you’re trying to seduce me.” The shot is very funny and visually interesting.

Another interesting thing Nichols does in this film is use montages. He uses a montage to portray Ben’s days and how they blend into one another. It first shows him lying in the pool and then when he is getting up he is getting out of his bed and when he returns to bed it is his bed with Mrs. Robinson. All of the shots flow together to show how Ben’s days run into one another and he is just drifting through his summer.

Since so many people have seen this movie and have not read the book it is safe to say that The Graduate is a self-reliant film. One does not need to read the book in order to understand or appreciate the movie. The film sets itself apart from the novel by cutting some things from the book and adding things
that were not present. For example, the film cuts some dialogue that is redundant. Throughout the book there is a lot of discussion about what Ben wants to do with his life and while it works for the book which attempts to sound redundant in order to portray Ben’s frustration, it would be annoying to film audiences. In the book there is a long discussion between Ben and Elaine about him traveling somewhere, but it is cut from the film to save time because it is really not necessary. The fact that Ben is aimless has been clearly communicated. Nichol’s also changes the way that Ben discovers where Elaine is getting married. In the book he finds a note that her groom-to-be has left for a friend of his. In the film Ben finds the groom’s fraternity brothers and through their idiotic dialogue Ben gets clues to where the church is. In addition to his clues the audience also learns that the other guy is kind of a playboy and it makes him less likeable, whereas in the book not much of an opinion is formed about him.

Another thing that is completely different in the film translation of this text is the soundtrack. Obviously a novel cannot have music, and its presence in the movie is so important. The soundtrack, provided entirely by Simon and Garfunkle, changes throughout the film to suit Ben’s mood. It also is used to show passage of time. It is first used during Ben’s travel home from school, and in the montage that covers half of the summer. It is also used when Ben is traveling to see Elaine and rushing to find the church, and again at the end of the film as their bus pulls away. The music replaces the narration present in the novel instead of just being used for no significant reason.

The film does stand alone but the plot and main ideas of the novel are all included. The Graduate is a phenomenal example of how the same set of ideas can be presented in two ways while still getting the main point across. The novel uses the frustrating dialogue of the characters to frustrate the readers so that they may sympathize with Ben. However, the film uses visuals and realistic acting to gain that same sympathy. Both the film and novel are top quality, but they are completely different experiences.