

TEACHERS NOTES

This study guide is aimed at students of A' level French. The guide looks at the historical background of the film, the issues around adapting Balzac's original text for film, the themes and critical approaches to adaptations in general and this film in particular. The guide uses sections of interviews with the director of the film and an excerpt from the screenplay. Where we have made reference to Balzac's text, we have given page references from the Le Livre de Poche edition (1994).

THE FILM

'Le Colonel Chabert', a film directed by Yves Angelo with the participation of Claude Rich, is based on a short story (nouvelle) written by Honore de Balzac in 1832. The film will be released at selected cinemas in the UK on April 21, 1995. It has a 'PG' certificate and runs for 111 minutes.

MAIN CREDITS

Technical credits

Director: Yves Angelo
Producer: Jean-Louis Livi
Screenplay: Jean Cosmos,
& adaptation: Yves Angelo

Cast

Chabert
Countess Ferraud
Derville
Count Ferraud

Gerard Depardieu
Fanny Ardant
Fabrice Luchini
Andre Dussollier

THE STORY AND ITS CHARACTERS

Colonel Chabert, an heroic soldier in Napoleon's army, officially declared dead and buried at the battle of Eylau, reappears in Paris ten years later to demand the restitution of his property, his rank and his wife. He had gone off to war as a rich and famous Napoleonic hero, and returns, after recovering from horrific head wounds, to a society which has completely changed, and has turned against all that Napoleon stood for.

The lawyer Derville is what we would now term a workaholic. His motives are never straightforward and he is the character who can be most closely identified with Balzac himself. Although successful and cynical he is moved by Chabert's story, and agrees to take on his case.

He is also the lawyer of Chabert's wife Rose, now Comtesse de Ferraud and mother of Comte Ferraud's two children.

As Rose Chapotel, she had been a prostitute whom Chabert had picked up and married. Her beauty and intelligence made her an important figure in Napoleonic society – perhaps a fictional equivalent of Mine Roland, Mine Recamier or even Josephine de Beauharnais. When Rose first hears of Chabert's 'death' she sets about safeguarding her inherited fortune and place in society. Despite receiving letters from Chabert claiming that he is alive, she marries Comte Ferraud of the old Bourbon aristocracy. Ferraud's ambitions seem likely to lead him to divorce Rose so that he can marry into another Ancien Regime family and become a 'Pair de France'.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The film opens with the desolate aftermath of the Battle of Eylau. This took place in 1807 during the Napoleonic campaign against Russia, which would eventually end in the debacle of the retreat from Moscow in 1812. Napoleon inspired almost fanatical loyalty in his soldiers, especially in those of humble origin who were promoted to high rank. Napoleon was defeated in 1814 and exiled to Elba. The Ancien Regime was restored and a brother of the guillotined Louis XVI, Louis XVIII was put on the throne. The reactionary aristocracy of the 'Restoration', although attempting to obliterate the years of the 'usurpateur', found that their often shaky financial condition forced them to marry with the bourgeoisie or the Napoleonic aristocracy where fortunes had been amassed since the Revolution, while at the same time they affected to despise the sources of their new-found wealth.

ADAPTATION

This is the 5th adaptation for the screen of 'Le Colonel Chabert', the most recent of these being the 1943 version. It has also been adapted for the theatre in 8 different versions, the last being in 1925.

Yves Angelo claims: "...il me semble que j'ai été plus fidèle à l'esprit de l'auteur de *La Comédie humaine* qu' à celui du *Colonel Chabert*. J'ose supposer que si Balzac avait écrit cette histoire en 1840 (et non en 1832) il l'aurait d'avantage traité dans cet esprit-la."

As in every film adaptation from a book, the director makes certain changes. The following sections detail a few of the changes made by Yves Angelo in transposing 'Le Colonel Chabert' to film.

THE BATTLE FIELD

- The visualisation of the battlefield at Eylau.

The opening sequence of the corpses being despoiled and buried at Eylau and the memory of Chabert's escape from death, are both depicted as his memories through the use of accompanying elegiac music which distances the horror of what we see.

- The vision of the battlefield appears twice again. Chabert relives the cavalry charge where he met his 'death' after Derville's visit to the yard, and at the end of the film he again falls into a reverie where we are back on the battlefield and the final shot descends once more into the common grave.

COMTE FERRAUD

The character of Comte Ferraud and the scenes in which he appears with his wife are particular to the film and aim to give us a graphic exposition of the dilemma in which the Comtesse finds herself.

Yves Angelo justifies the appearance in the film (which is not in the book) of Comte Ferraud: "...c'est justement pour que le drame vécu par la Comtesse Ferraud soit beaucoup plus affirmé elle se retrouve dos au mur..."

What are the dilemmas of the Comtesse? What does each of her 'husbands' have to offer her? In what ways are the choices that she is forced to make imposed on her by her situation in society as opposed to her own feelings?

NOVEL AND FILM

The director of the film 'Le Colonel Chabert' describes his approach to adapting the novel to film, stressing the ways in which the novel is a point of departure for the film:

“Le roman de Balzac a constitué un point de départ à partir duquel l'adaptation filmique ne serait pas un travail de mimétisme ou d'esclavage par rapport au texte mais un travail du texte tout en explorant ses potentialités, ses latences, et bien sûr nos désirs en allant plus loin.”

We need to consider what the differences are between reading a story in print and 'reading' a story on film. For example, how do we get our information about character from a book and how do we get this information from a film? How long does it take us, on average, to read a book compared to watching a film? List as many differences as you can think of.

<i>Book</i>	<i>Film</i>

Reading a book is a solitary experience. Our imaginations must work with the author's narrative as the story unfolds. The image we form of the characters and events could well be different from that formed by a friend who has read the same book.

When we go to the cinema it is usually in the company of other people and everyone sees the same actors, the same settings and locations. There is more of a chance, then, that the audience's interpretations of what they see will be similar. If the film we are watching has been adapted from a novel, we are viewing the director's interpretation of the story. there is always the possibility that some of the audience will read what

they see in a different way from that intended by the director.

The critic Roland Barthes sums this up in the following way:

“Un texte n'existe que par ses lectures.”

When reading, we are in control. But with film, the director and his/her team have come up with a 'view' of the text. In a film, there are no lengthy descriptions of people and places to contend with. The camera acts as a universal eye, showing us each character and location, be it house, apartment, office, ocean liner or spaceship. We don't need to use our imaginations to visualise the setting.

Dialogue is another area where the differences between book and film are evident. In a book we occasionally have to retrace our steps to check whether we are sure which character is speaking. In a film, we know instantly who is speaking at any given moment, and even if we can't see them, we recognise their voices. We can also gauge from their tone what mood they are in .whether they are angry, sad, amused or good-natured.

SETTINGS

In many ways Balzac's descriptions of place could be described as cinematic. His eyes rove around a scene, resting on a telling detail here and there, just as the camera would, in the future, pan a scene, focusing on what we are particularly meant to notice.

When we watch a film, the location in which the action is set, the context in which we see the characters, can be used by the director to convey ideas.

Write down a list of the major locations within the film and then describe the ways in which they are presented. How does each location tell us something about the characters that we see there?

Balzac, like Dickens, often wrote very detailed descriptions of background.

In Balzac's description of Derville's Etude, which opens the book, the clerks' mocking attitude and the little messenger's mischievousness perfectly match the background.

When Chabert is taking his leave of Derville after his nocturnal visit, he notices the stacks of files, each with a red seal dangling from it. It recalls an Italian cemetery, and he asks “Ma femme est là?”

TA S K

Before you see the film, read Balzac's description of Derville's Etude (bottom of p.64 . mid-page 66 in the Le Livre de Poche edition). Keep an eye out for this location in the film. How effectively has the scene been transposed to film?

The scene of Vergniaud's yard is also described in great detail in both book and film, although the film changes certain details.

TASK

Read the description from p.90-93 (*Le Livre de Poche*) and compare this with the film version where you have the character *Boutin*, an old comrade, amalgamated with Chabert's 'landlord' *Vergniaud*. *Boutin* had been essential in helping Chabert make his way back to France, making some money from his two performing polar bears. These, we see in the wretched yard. Instead of *Vergniaud*'s three sons we see a squad of young men being trained in sabre fighting as if to prepare for a future anti-restoration coup. Chabert is given the comment: "Les pères sont morts au service de l'Empereur. Nous éduquons les fils."

In what ways are the details of the written descriptions adapted into what we see on screen? Often an author will give us information about a character by the way in which their room is furnished or by the way in which they are dressed. Do we think about these details when we see a film or do we accept them without questioning why they are presented to us in this way?

TASK

In the chart below, think of the locations where we see certain characters. Describe the locations (in English or in French). Then say what each location tells us about the character.

Character	Location	What location tells us about character
<i>Derville</i>		
<i>La Comtesse Ferraud</i>		
<i>Le Colonel Chabert</i>		

THE LANGUAGE

The dialogue of the film manages to sound very like the language of the book, although many details have been adapted. Sometimes this is for dramatic reasons and sometimes to make obsolete words or references more easily comprehensible; for example in the book the clerks' initial reaction to Chabert is focussed on his coachman's cape - *ce vieux carrick* - where in the film they call him "l'epouvantail - le bonhomme au chapeau vissé à la tête".

The haggling over how much Rose should pay Chabert is more specific than in the book, but typical of later Balzac, as are the precise references to undeclared items belonging to Chabert, such as the cabinet of antique coins. Such detail occurs in many of Balzac's works and illustrates an important preoccupation/motivation of many of his characters.

In order to compare the different types of use of language in the two texts, look at Balzac's nouvelle (p.77-78 *Le Livre de Poche*). Then compare this with Chabert's speech in the film which is given below.

"Mais je sais quoi dire sur la mort! La mort c'est rouge. Et puis c'est blen ... Et puis c'est froid. Et par-dessus tout ça devient un silence...! Silence ... Au debut, vous entendez comme le bruit d'un ruisseau ... les derniers souffles des camarades, les gémissements, vous en avez qui pleurent, oui, oui. Les os craquent, le grincement des dents ... Seigneur!"

Notice the short phrases of the film script. What has been left out of Balzac's original text? Why do you think that this has happened?

TASK

We have now looked at some of the changes made by Yves Angelo in adapting this short story to film, including the last shots which take us back to the battlefield. There are several others to identify. Discuss whether they are justified. Consider why Angelo has made the changes, then try to decide whether they enhance the book or detract from it? Has the director been faithful to the book? Does the film stand on its own as a work of art?

CHARACTERS

'Le Colonel Chabert' dates from the beginning of the period when Balzac conceived, and developed the idea of describing all aspects of human life as 'La Comédie humaine'. His training as a lawyer at Tours obviously provided the material for the acute observation of Derville's Etude, and the cynicism of those who worked in such a milieu, entrusted with the secrets of human greed and self-interest.

Balzac includes many lawyers, doctors and priests in his works. Derville says towards the end of the book: "... il existe dans notre société trois hommes, le Prêtre, le Médecin, et l'Homme de justice, qui ne peuvent pas estimer le monde? Ils ont des robes noires, peut-être parce qu'ils portent le deuil de toutes les vertus, de toutes les illusions ... Le plus malheureux des trois est l'avoué ... nous autres avoués, nous voyons se répéter les mêmes sentiments mauvais, rien ne les corrige

TASK

How does the story of 'Le Colonel Chabert' illustrate this point?

Why do you think that the lawyer Derville takes Chabert's case? Does he wish to help Chabert or are there other reasons for his interest in the case?

In your work on the film and the book, you will probably have noted that characters are very important for both media when it comes to telling a story.

Which would you say are the most important characters in 'Le Colonel Chabert'? Why are they important?

Try to give a brief description of each of these characters and then explain their importance, both to the story and then to the 'message' of the film.

THEMES

Themes are communicated to us through both characters and events. We might also associate certain settings with particular themes.

Look carefully at the way in which the film has been described by its director, Yves Angelo:

"J'ai avant tout voulu faire un film qui parle de la mobilité des êtres, du mystère de leur identité des masques successifs qu'ils se croient obligés de porter, du règne du leurre, du faux-semblant et du non-dit, de l'ambiguïté souterraine ou volontairement affichée, de la férocité et de la cruauté des rapports entre les personnages."

"En faisant passer toute la description des horreurs de la société humaine faite par Derville

an début, et non à la fin comme le fait Balzac, je rends Derville davantage blindé par la cruauté de la vie, plus cynique et aussi plus ambigu, l'ambiguïté des personnages étant un des thèmes récurrents du film."

"Lorsque Chabert rencontre les deux enfants de son ex-femme dans le jardin, c'est peut-être la première fois de sa vie que son regard s'attarde sur des enfants. Lui-même est un enfant trouvé, et de plus, on lui a fait perdre h nouveau son identité'

"Si l'on veut rester dans une forme de pureté, il faut peut-être renoncer et quitter toute cette société c'est ce que fait Chabert même s'il n'y a pas de dimension politique dans son geste."

What does Angelo seem to be saying the film is about? List the themes that he outlines. Are there any others that you would add to this list?

Having made your list of the themes explored in 'Le Colonel Chabert', try to identify the characters and events which relate to each theme.

When you have completed this exercise, you should try to decide which of the themes you consider to be the most important.

THE WARRIOR

The theme of the warrior returned has run through works dating from Homers 'Odyssey' (where Odysseus is not at first recognised by his wife Penelope) to 'The Return of Martin Guerre' (also one of Dépardieu's 80 films). In the latter, the theme of recognition is central, but the same question arises with Chabert: although Rose's immediate reaction betrays to Derville that she does recognise Chabert, she denies it and the film plays with a certain suspense as to whether the Chabert character is not merely 'un fou', 'un charlatan' or as Derville says "le plus habile comédien de notre époque". (p.255)

The question is begged that after an absence of 10 or so years and such traumatic experiences, can the person be recognised as the same? Note that Chabert himself denies his glorious past and wishes to be known only as Hypolite. He has failed to come back to life .too much has changed, and it only remains for him to await a permanent death.

In what ways is Chabert obsessed with his previous life? Is he anything but a warrior? How much is his relationship with his wife based on his being a valiant soldier?

THE CRITICS

Some critics have been ready to condemn all adaptations from book to film: "The actors don't match the characters, the plot has been twisted around" and "a novel works as a communication of the writer's inner thoughts .this cannot be transmitted through images and acting" are examples of the sort of comment often made about filmed adaptations of classic texts. An opposite, though still condemnatory view, is that a film has been too timid, too literal, too ploddingly faithful to the surface, rather than the spirit of the book.

The film has been both praised and attacked.

Here are two French critics:

CONTRE

"Un film dont chaque plan aboie son académisme."

Gérard Lefort, Liberation.

POUR:

"Trois grands acteurs pour un scénario formidable ... Il y a surtout l'amour, la mort, l'argent, la peur, la revanche, le désespoir, tout ce qui fait toujours marcher et pleurer le monde."

Annie Coppermann, Les Echos.

TASK

Write a critique of the film 'Le Colonel Chabert' for a newspaper or magazine.

You might refer to other film versions of novels e.g. Emile Zola's 'Germinal' directed by Claude

Bern, Flaubert's 'Madame Bovary' filmed by Claude Chabrol, the BBC Television version of Steudhal's 'Le Rouge et le Noir' or Schlöndorff's 'Un Amour de Swan n'. Consider what a film director must do to capture the spirit of a classic text.