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***Banias N. Yu.,***
*PhD, Associate Professor,*
*Department of Philology,*
*Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University*
*https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-0790*

***Banias V. V.,***
*PHD, Associate Professor*
*Department of Philology*
*Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University*
*http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6880-8805*

***Lizak K. M.,***
*Associate Professor,*
*Department of Philology,*
*Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University*
*https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7873-0535*

# NARRATIVE TRANSLATION AND CINEMATIC INTERPRETATION: CHARLES MATTHAU'S ADAPTATION OF TRUMAN CAPOTE'S LYRICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL NOVEL *THE GRASS HARP*

**Summary.** The article examines the relationship between Truman Capote's novel *The Grass Harp* and Charles Matthau's 1995 film adaptation through the lens of adaptation studies, narratology, and intermedial analysis. While Capote's novel is distinguished by its lyrical prose, introspective narration, and subtle exploration of memory, individuality, and human relationships, Matthau's film translates these literary qualities into a visual medium by employing cinematic narrative techniques, performance, music, and symbolic imagery. The study investigates how the adaptation negotiates the transition from verbal to audiovisual storytelling, identifying both the preservation and transformation of the novel's thematic and aesthetic features.

Particular attention is devoted to the representation of the American South as a cultural and symbolic space that shapes the characters' identities and moral choices. The article explores the ways in which the film reconstructs Capote's portrayal of Southern values, family relationships, social conventions, and personal freedom while responding to the expectations of a contemporary cinematic audience. The analysis demonstrates that the adaptation does not merely reproduce the literary source but offers an independent artistic interpretation that expands certain narrative elements, restructures episodes, and modifies characterization in accordance with the expressive possibilities of film.

The comparative analysis reveals that although the film preserves the central philosophical ideas of Capote's novel, that is compassion, friendship, tolerance, self-discovery, and resistance to social conformity, it inevitably reduces the psychological depth achieved through the narrator's reflective voice. Conversely, the cinematic version compensates for this loss through visual symbolism, expressive acting, carefully composed settings, and an emotionally resonant soundtrack that communicate meanings unavailable in the literary medium. The article argues that Matthau's adaptation exemplifies the creative nature of literary adaptation, demonstrating how cinema reinterprets rather than replicates a literary text. Ultimately, the study contributes to adaptation theory by illustrating the dynamic interaction between literature and film and highlighting the continuing cultural relevance of *The Grass Harp* across different artistic media.

**Key words:** Truman Capote, *The Grass Harp*, film adaptation, adaptation studies, intermediality, narratology.

**Problem statement.** The growing scholarly interest in literary adaptations reflects the need to understand how literary texts are transformed when transferred to the cinematic medium. Although Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* has attracted considerable attention from literary critics, Charles Matthau's 1995 film adaptation remains comparatively underexplored, particularly from the perspective of comparative literary and film analysis. Existing studies primarily focus on the novel's autobiographical dimensions, Southern Gothic aesthetics, and philosophical themes, while insufficient attention has been paid to the adaptation strategies through which the film reconstructs Capote's narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, and thematic system.

The problem addressed in this article lies in identifying the mechanisms through which the film adaptation preserves, modifies, or reinterprets the artistic features of the original work. Particular emphasis is placed on the transformation of narrative perspective, characterization, symbolic imagery, and the representation of Southern cultural identity in the process of adaptation. By examining the similarities and differences between the literary and cinematic texts, the study seeks to determine how the expressive resources of film influence the interpretation of Capote's ideas and whether the adaptation should be regarded as a faithful

reproduction or as an independent artistic work. Addressing this problem contributes to a broader understanding of adaptation as an intermedial dialogue between literature and cinema.

**Theoretical background.** The analysis adopts a comparative close-reading methodology grounded in Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* [1]. Hutcheon reframes adaptations not as inferior derivatives evaluated primarily through strict fidelity but as "palimpsestuous" works–layered texts that both repeat and transform their sources. She emphasizes three primary modes of engagement: "telling" (literature's reliance on symbolic, imaginative signs that excel in internalized consciousness, metaphorical density, temporal flexibility, and ambiguity), "showing" (film and theater's concrete presentation of embodied people, places, actions, and performances through cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, sound design, and actor embodiment), "interacting". Robert Stam [2] challenges fidelity-based criticism and emphasizes the intertextual nature of film adaptations.

**Aim.** The aim of the article is to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of Truman Capote's semi-autobiographical 1951 novella *The Grass Harp* and its 1995 cinematic adaptation directed by Charles Matthau. Drawing primarily on Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, the study investigates how the transition from literary *"telling"* [1] to cinematic *"showing"*[1] reshapes narrative perspective, characterization, central symbols (the grass harp and intertwined China trees), and key themes including isolation versus chosen community, freedom versus conformity, loneliness, and redemptive renewal through relation to others.

**Presentation of the main material.** Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*, first published in 1951 by Random House, occupies a significant position in the author's early oeuvre as a semi-autobiographical work infused with memories of his Alabama childhood, feelings of otherness, and encounters with eccentric relatives. *The Grass Harp* has a narrative frame that begins and ends in the present, with the story placed in between" [3]. "*The Grass Harp* is an exquisitely rendered screen version of Truman Capote's 1950 autobiographical novella set in the south during the 1940s" [4]. Set in a small Southern town evocative of Monroeville during the late 1930s or early 1940s, the novella centers on young Collin Fenwick, who is orphaned after his parents' deaths and comes to live with his two maiden aunts in their Queen Anne-style mansion.

The gentle, childlike Dolly Talbo crafts a homemade dropsy cure from herbs gathered in a field of tall Indian grass, a folk remedy she shares freely with townsfolk. Her domineering sister Verena, a shrewd businesswoman who owns much of the local economy, enlists the slick outsider Morris Ritz to commercialize the remedy for profit. When Dolly refuses to cooperate, she, Collin, and the outspoken housekeeper Catherine Creek (who proudly claims Indian rather than Black heritage) flee to a treehouse built in a massive double-trunked China tree overlooking the grass field. There, they form an unlikely chosen family with other societal misfits, including the widowed Judge Charlie Cool and the rebellious teenager Riley Henderson. The treehouse becomes a liminal sanctuary for philosophical conversations, shared meals, budding romances, laughter, and quiet defiance against materialism, conformity, and rigid *"common sense."*

Capote frames the entire narrative through Collin's retrospective first-person voice as an adult looking back on these formative events. This technique infuses the story with *"tender laughter," "charming human warmth,"* and a *"special poetry"* found in lives untouched by overly rigid rationality.

Key recurring motifs include: the "grass harp" (the wind-strummed Indian grass that sings "human music" and knows the stories of all who have lived) and the intertwined China trees symbolizing sanctuary, interconnected lives, and imaginative freedom.

The work explores Capote's recurring concerns with loneliness, nonconformity, alienation, and the search for authentic connection and identity, marking a shift from the intense isolation depicted in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) toward discovery of self through relationships with others. Critics have noted occasional plot contrivances, such as Morris Ritz's theft or slapstick confrontations with the sheriff, and a delicate balance between whimsy and pathos, yet many praise its celebration of freedom, imagination, nature's bounty, and the redemptive power of eccentricity. Capote himself reportedly viewed it fondly as one of his more personal and balanced early pieces.

Charles Matthau's 1995 film adaptation, released by Fine Line Features with a runtime of approximately 107 minutes, features a screenplay by Stirling Silliphant (his final credited work) and Kirk Ellis. As a passion project directed by the son of one of its leads, the film assembles a luminous ensemble cast: Piper Laurie as the fragile yet resilient Dolly Talbo, Sissy Spacek as the stern and pragmatic Verena Talbo, Edward Furlong as the young Collin Fenwick, Walter Matthau as the courtly Judge Charlie Cool, Nell Carter as Catherine Creek, and supporting performances by Jack Lemmon (Morris Ritz), Mary Steenburgen (Sister Ida and her evangelist troupe), Roddy McDowall, Charles Durning, and others. The production faithfully retains the 1940s Southern setting, core plot arc, much of the dialogue, and the novella's gentle tone while capitalizing on cinema's visual poetry, spatial embodiment, ensemble chemistry, and musical score (by Patrick Williams).

Contemporary critical reception was largely positive, describing the film as a "jewel," "beguiling," "exquisitely rendered," and a "sensitive screenplay adaptation" that evokes Capote's wistful reminiscences without lapsing into mawkishness. "Helmer Charles Matthau combines a sensitive screenplay adaptation of Truman Capote's autobiographical novel *The Grass Harp* with a wonderful ensemble cast to create a jewel of a film... A Fine Line Features release of a Charles Matthau-Jerry Tokofsky-John Davis production. Produced by James T. Davis. Executive producers, John Winfield, Solomon LeFlore, Michael Mendelsohn. Co-producers, Kirk Ellis, Stirling Silliphant. Directed by Charles Matthau. Screenplay, Stirling Silliphant, Kirk Ellis, based on the novel by Truman Capote" [5]. Reviewers highlighted the warm ensemble performances, sensitive handling of rebirth and renewal within a "tough-minded view of life," and the film's ability to celebrate spiritual virtues of freedom, love, individuality, and storytelling. Some critiques noted its "old-fashioned" pacing, occasional broad comedy or laborious exposition via voice-over narration, and the inherent challenge of translating Capote's glittering prose lyricism into images that sometimes spell out emotional beats too plainly or broaden eccentricities. Despite modest box office returns the film earned praise for its atmospheric sense of time and place and uniformly expert performances.

This expanded paper argues that Matthau's adaptation achieves strong narrative, thematic, and affective fidelity while undergoing inevitable transformations dictated by medium specificity. The novella's introspective literary "telling" gives way to cinema's concrete "showing," enhancing accessibility and communal emotional engagement at the partial expense of poetic ambiguity

and internalized reflection. Such shifts illuminate broader questions in adaptation theory: the pleasures of repetition with variation, the palimpsestuous layering of interpretations, and how different modes of engagement reshape audience experience.

**Plot fidelity and structural adaptations**

The film demonstrates notable plot fidelity, closely following the novella's major events, such as:

– Collin's orphaning and relocation to the aunts' home;

– Verena's commercialization scheme involving Morris Ritz;

– Dolly's principled refusal leading to the flight with Collin and Catherine to the treehouse in the double-trunked China tree;

– the gradual arrival of allies like Riley Henderson and Judge Cool;

– life in the sanctuary with shared stories, meals, and budding connections; external intervention by the sheriff and townsfolk;

– comic confrontations during the siege (including ropes and nooses);

– the eventual reconciliation marked by Verena's recognition of her deeper isolation.

Subplots, such as the evangelist Sister Ida's troupe, receive condensation to fit cinematic pacing, while visual humor in the siege amplifies the novella's occasional contrivances into more performative slapstick.

Voice-over narration by the older Collin attempts to recapture the retrospective frame, yet functions primarily as expository linkage rather than the pervasive, wistful introspective filter of Capote's prose. Reviewers observe that the film's images often convey narrative beats more plainly, with emotional moments "laboriously spelt out" through performance and visuals, trading literary density for immediate accessibility.Variety

**Characterization and ensemble performance**

The star-studded casting enriches interpersonal dynamics while shifting emphasis from internal nuance to external embodiment. Piper Laurie delivers a luminous performance as Dolly, capturing the *"shy-lady fern"* fragility, poetic soul, and quiet inner strength described in the book–her gentle philosophizing and love of nature feel authentic and radiant. Sissy Spacek, cast against type as Verena, externalizes the character's cold pragmatism and business-like control through stern posture, clipped delivery, icy glances, and a gradual revelation of vulnerability in key reconciliation scenes, heightening the heart-versus-head contrast between the sisters (imagination and freedom versus rationality and materialism). Edward Furlong's Collin serves as a sensitive, observant youth whose growth from detached spy to active participant gains visual clarity in treehouse interactions, though the objective camera reduces some of the novella's internalized adolescent detachment. Walter Matthau brings paternal warmth, courtly wisdom, and tender physicality to Judge Cool, particularly in his late-life courtship of Dolly, while Nell Carter's adds vibrant energy and more overt dramatization of cultural outsider themes. Supporting eccentrics benefit from charismatic turns (Lemmon's comedic-sinister Ritz, Steenburgen's energetic Sister Ida), though some performances broaden quirks into mildly comic or "irritating" beats, softening the novella's underlying melancholy pathos. Overall, the ensemble chemistry creates a warm, ingratiating sense of chosen community that reviewers praise as uniformly expert and sharp.

**Symbolism and visual translation**

The grass harp undergoes the most profound medium-driven transformation. In Capote's prose, it functions as a central poetic motif framing the narrative: *"below the hill grows a field of high Indian grass that changes color with the seasons... the autumn winds strum on its dry leaves sighing human music, a harp of voices... that is the grass harp, always telling a story–it knows the stories of all the people on the hill, of all the people who ever lived, and when we are dead it will tell ours too"* [6, p. 5]. This evokes transience, memory, nature's storytelling power, and the contrast between imaginative freedom (the living, singing field) and rigidity/death (the adjacent cemetery). The descriptions invite readerly imagination and metaphorical resonance. The film literalizes and visualizes this through sweeping aerial shots of swaying grass, dappled sunlight, changing seasonal colors, and a gentle harp-like musical score, turning the symbol into a recurring cinematic leitmotif that heightens emotional immediacy and visual poetry while risking a reduction of elusive ambiguity to tangible spectacle.Goodreads

Similarly, the double-trunked China tree and its treehouse gain concrete spatiality – creaking planks as a *"raft floating in the sea of leaves,"* [6, p. 14] filtered sunlight through intertwined branches, communal gatherings under the canopy–making the themes of sanctuary, chosen family, and interconnected lives vividly embodied and sensorially accessible. The film's color palette reinforces thematic contrasts: cooler, more rigid tones in Verena's controlled interiors versus warm, golden, dappled light in the treehouse and grass field scenes, externalizing the novella's internalized oppositions between restriction and freedom.Sheilaomalley

**Thematic continuities and medium-driven shifts**

Both texts meditate deeply on isolation versus community, freedom versus societal restriction, alienation, and the renewal of nonconforming innocents who briefly find their place. The novella traces Collin's evolution from detached observer to participant in relational identity, culminating in quiet acceptance of life's frailties and Verena's epiphany that she is the more profoundly lonely figure despite her material control. It celebrates the "spiritual virtues of freedom, love, and storytelling" while maintaining a delicate ambiguity and tough-minded humanism. The film amplifies ensemble bonds, redemptive arcs (Dolly's gentle awakening, reconciliations, and moments of rebirth), and the poetry of ordinary eccentric lives, fostering empathetic spectatorship through performance and visuals. However, star-driven charisma and cinematic clarity occasionally tilt toward broader comedy or sentiment where the prose sustains wistful subtlety. In Hutcheon's framework, these changes represent productive transpositions: losses in introspective lyricism and metaphorical density are offset by gains in performative vitality, spatial embodiment, and broader emotional accessibility, allowing Capote's Southern fable to resonate with viewers less attuned to dense literary style.

Critical reception underscores these dynamics, with praise for the film's heart and avoidance of fairy-tale excess alongside acknowledgments that it sometimes lacks the full glitter of Capote's prose or richly drawn internal descriptions.

**Conclusion.** Charles Matthau's 1995 adaptation of *The Grass Harp* exemplifies a largely successful and respectful creative transposition that honors the novella's core spirit of gentle humanism while fully embracing cinema's distinctive strengths in visualization, ensemble performance, and sensory immediacy. By transforming the grass harp into a visually and sonically evocative leitmotif and animating its community of eccentrics through luminous casting and warm chemistry, the film amplifies themes of chosen family, renewal amid loss, the redemptive power of nature and non-

conformity, and the search for authentic connection in a conformist world. The inevitable medium-specific trade-offs, lyrical introspection and poetic ambiguity yielding to concrete embodiment and accessible emotion, highlight adaptation as a palimpsestuous process of layering new interpretations rather than mere replication.

This comparison vividly illuminates the impact of medium specificity on narrative voice, symbolism, audience engagement, and thematic resonance: Capote's novella invites private, reflective contemplation of transience and relational identity; the film fosters shared spectatorship, empathy, and communal warmth. Both versions ultimately affirm that stories, much like the wind moving through the grass, persist, evolve, and gain new voices through retelling, each iteration adding resonance to Capote's enduring fable of freedom, love, individuality, and the poetry found in ordinary, unconventional lives.

The novella employs a lyrical, retrospective first-person narration by the adult Collin Fenwick, creating an introspective, wistful tone that blends whimsy with underlying melancholy and invites solitary reflection on transience and identity formation. The film preserves high plot and dialogic fidelity while utilizing an all-star ensemble, visual cinematography, spatial dynamics, and a gentle score to externalize these elements, yielding greater emotional immediacy, accessibility, and communal spectatorship.

However, this comes at the cost of some prose subtlety, metaphorical ambiguity, and internalized psychological depth. Results demonstrate that the adaptation functions as a productive "creative transposition" and "palimpsestuous" work that amplifies Capote's gentle humanism and celebration of nonconforming eccentrics for a broader audience, even as it occasionally broadens quirks into comedic or sentimental registers. The conclusion underscores medium-specific trade-offs and affirms the enduring power of Capote's fable in exploring the search for authentic connection amid societal pressures.

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**Баняс Н., Баняс В., Лізак К., Оповідь та кінематографічна інтерпретація: адаптація Чарльзом Меттау лірико-філософського роману Трумена Капоте «Трав'яна арфа»**


**Анотація.** Статтю присвячено порівняльному аналізу роману Трумена Капоте «Трав'яна арфа» та його екранізації, здійсненої Чарльзом Меттоу у 1995 році. Дослідження ґрунтується на засадах адаптаційних студій, наратології та інтермедіального аналізу й має на меті з'ясувати особливості трансформації художнього твору під час його перенесення з літературного до кінематографічного медіуму. Особливу увагу приділено способам відтворення авторського стилю Капоте, ліричної оповіді, символічної системи, психологізму та філософської проблематики роману засобами кіномови.

У статті проаналізовано зміни у композиції, сюжетній організації, характеристиці персонажів, наративній перспективі та художній образності, що виникають у процесі адаптації. Доведено, що фільм не є буквальним відтворенням першоджерела, а постає самостійною мистецькою інтерпретацією, яка зберігає провідні гуманістичні ідеї роману, водночас трансформуючи окремі сюжетні лінії та психологічні акценти відповідно до специфіки аудіовізуального мистецтва. Значну увагу приділено дослідженню образу американського Півдня як культурного простору, що визначає світогляд персонажів, їхні моральні цінності та міжособистісні взаємини.

Порівняльний аналіз засвідчує, що втрата внутрішньої авторської оповіді у фільмі компенсується виразними візуальними образами, акторською грою, музичним супроводом, символікою простору та кінематографічними засобами створення емоційної атмосфери. Зроблено висновок, що екранізація Чарльза Меттоу репрезентує творчу модель адаптації, у якій літературний текст не копіюється, а переосмислюється відповідно до законів кіномистецтва. Отримані результати поглиблюють розуміння міжмедійної взаємодії літератури й кіно та демонструють актуальність творчої спадщини Трумена Капоте в сучасному гуманітарному дискурсі.



**Ключові слова:** Трумен Капоте, *Трав'яна арфа*, екранізація, інтермедіальність, наратологія.

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