
**THE FORMATION OF THE FRANKENSTEIN
MYTH: FROM MARY SHELLEY'S NOVEL TO EARLY
THEATRICAL AND CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS**

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-712-3-2-25>

INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, first published in 1818, is one of the most influential works of world literature, whose cultural impact extends far beyond its historical and literary context. Combining Gothic aesthetics, Romantic philosophy, scientific discourse, and ethical reflection, the novel has become a cultural myth that continues to shape literature, theatre, cinema, and popular culture. As C. Baldick observes, the *Frankenstein* narrative gradually developed into a cultural model through which monstrosity, scientific transgression, and moral responsibility are conceptualised¹.

The relevance of the present study lies in the need to examine the early formation of the *Frankenstein* myth through the interaction of literary, theatrical, and cinematic traditions. Although Mary Shelley's novel and its adaptations have been extensively studied, the transformation of the *Frankenstein* narrative from literature to theatre and early cinema has rarely been analysed as a continuous intermedial process. Particular attention should therefore be paid to the ways in which theatrical and cinematic adaptations reshaped the representation of the Creature, the act of creation, and the central ethical conflict.

The theoretical framework combines mythopoetic, intertextual, and adaptation approaches. Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality explains the interaction of the novel with earlier cultural traditions², while Gérard Genette's theory of hypertextuality³ and Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation⁴,

¹ Baldick C. In *Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. pp. 1–10.

² Kristeva J. Word, Dialogue and Novel. In: Moi T. (ed.). *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. P. 34–61.

³ Genette G. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. pp. 5–7.

⁴ Hutcheon L., O'Flynn S. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013. pp. 7–8, 21–22.

provide the methodological basis for analysing theatrical and cinematic reinterpretations. These approaches make it possible to examine adaptations not as literal reproductions of the literary source but as independent artistic texts that reinterpret its meanings through the expressive resources of different media.

The degree of scholarly engagement with the subject is demonstrated by studies devoted to the novel's poetics, mythopoetics, theatrical adaptations, and cinematic reception. C. Baldick analyses the transformation of the Frankenstein narrative into a cultural myth⁵; E. Nitchie examines the literary context of Mary Shelley's work⁶; S. E. Forry investigates the history of the novel's dramatisations⁷; and D. F. Glut traces the development of the Frankenstein legend in theatre and cinema⁸.

The aim of this study is to identify the mythopoetic, intertextual, and intermedial mechanisms involved in the formation of the Frankenstein myth in Mary Shelley's novel and to trace their transformation in early theatrical and cinematic adaptations.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following objectives:

- to characterise the mythopoetic structure of the novel and determine the functions of its classical, biblical, Miltonic, Romantic, and Faustian motifs;
- to examine the intertextual mechanisms involved in the construction of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature;
- to trace the transformation of the novel in early nineteenth-century theatrical productions;
- to determine the influence of theatrical traditions on the emergence of the first cinematic interpretations;
- to analyse how the change of medium affected the composition, character system, representation of the protagonists' inner worlds, and distribution of moral responsibility;
- to establish the role of early theatrical and cinematic adaptations in the formation of the Frankenstein myth.

The object of the study is Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* and its theatrical and cinematic adaptations of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.

⁵ Baldick C. In *Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. pp. 1–10.

⁶ Nitchie E. *Mary Shelley: Author of Frankenstein*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953. 275 p.

⁷ Forry S. E. *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. pp. 3–24.

⁸ Glut D. F. *The Frankenstein Legend: A Tribute to Mary Shelley and Boris Karloff*. Metuchen, NJ; London: The Scarecrow Press, 1973. pp. 39–42.

The subject of the study is the mythopoetic, intertextual, and intermedial mechanisms through which the Frankenstein narrative and its system of images were transformed in the transition from literary text to theatre and cinema.

The material of the study comprises Mary Shelley's novel, Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, early nineteenth-century stage adaptations, J. Searle Dawley's *Frankenstein* (1910), Peggy Webling's *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre*, and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931).

The methodological framework combines mythopoetic, intertextual, comparative, intermedial, and semiotic methods.

The scholarly novelty of the study lies in its comprehensive analysis of the early formation of the Frankenstein myth as a continuous intermedial process, demonstrating how theatrical adaptations established narrative and visual models that were later inherited and transformed by early cinema.

The practical significance of the findings lies in their potential application in courses on world literature, comparative literature, adaptation studies, intermedial studies, theatre history, and film history.

1. The Mythopoetic Model of Mary Shelley's Novel as a Basis for Cultural Transformations

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* belongs to the category of literary works that have transcended their original historical and literary context and acquired the characteristics of a cultural myth. Its enduring presence in world culture can be explained not only by the artistic value of the source text but also by the universal nature of its central conflicts. As C. Baldick observes, the story of Frankenstein gradually detached itself from the specific literary work and developed into a cultural model through which monstrosity, alienation, the transgression of natural boundaries, and the uncontrollable consequences of human creative activity are conceptualised⁹.

The mythopoetic structure of the novel is formed at the intersection of classical, biblical, Miltonic, Faustian, Romantic, and scientific traditions. These cultural codes do not function in isolation but interact with and reinterpret one another, creating a multilayered system of meanings. Owing to this structure, the narrative cannot be reduced to the story of a failed scientific experiment; instead, it raises fundamental questions concerning the limits of knowledge, the creator's responsibility, the nature of evil, social rejection, and the created being's right to recognition.

⁹ Baldick C. In *Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. pp. 1–10.

The novel's full title, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, explicitly invokes the ancient myth of Prometheus. In classical tradition, Prometheus appears as a cultural hero who gives humanity fire and the knowledge associated with it, thereby violating the order established by the gods. His action is ambivalent: on the one hand, it contributes to human development; on the other, it represents the transgression of the boundary between the divine and the human.

Victor Frankenstein similarly seeks to overcome the limits of knowledge available to humankind. His goal is to penetrate the mystery of life and achieve victory over death. He believes that a new species will be grateful to him as its creator and that future generations will acknowledge him as their benefactor¹⁰. In this ambition, he reproduces the Promethean model: he acquires forbidden knowledge, attempts to alter the natural order, and appropriates a function traditionally associated with divine creation.

Mary Shelley, however, substantially reinterprets the ancient myth. Her modern Prometheus does not become a benefactor of humankind. Scientific discovery brings no liberation but instead causes a moral catastrophe. Frankenstein achieves his objective, yet immediately after bringing the Creature to life, he rejects it, refuses to acknowledge his obligation towards the life he has created, and attempts to distance himself from the consequences of his experiment¹¹.

The Promethean motif therefore acquires a distinct ethical dimension in the novel. The tragedy is caused not by the pursuit of knowledge itself but by the separation of creative power from moral responsibility. Victor seeks to appropriate the right to create but refuses to accept the obligations of a creator. He is technically capable of producing life, yet he is unprepared to recognise the being he has created as a subject requiring care, protection, education, and social belonging.

Frankenstein's punishment also differs from that of the ancient Prometheus. It is not imposed by an external divine power but emerges from his own action and subsequent decisions. The loss of his loved ones, loneliness, guilt, and the gradual destruction of his personality result not from an abstract violation of a prohibition but from his specific rejection of the life he has created.

The novel thus redirects attention from the question of whether a human being has the right to create life to the question of responsibility for the consequences of such creation. This shift defines the modern character of Mary

¹⁰ Shelley M. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. p. 51.

¹¹ Shelley M. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. pp. 54–58.

Shelley's Promethean model. The work does not reject scientific inquiry as such; rather, it demonstrates the danger of knowledge separated from responsibility, care, and the recognition of the Other.

The mythopoetic structure of the novel is not limited to the classical narrative. Biblical allusions also play an important role, particularly the motifs of the creation of humanity, the Fall, exile, and the disruption of primordial harmony. Frankenstein attempts to occupy the position of the Creator but proves incapable of fulfilling the roles of father, mentor, and protector. His creation enters existence not within a system of love, law, and familial continuity but in the conditions of a secret experiment, isolation, and immediate rejection.

The act of creation in the novel may be interpreted as a paradoxical repetition of the biblical model. Victor outwardly imitates the divine creation of humanity but deprives it of its principal ethical component: responsibility for the created life. He animates a body but gives the Creature neither a name nor a place in the world, a moral orientation, or the right to belong to the human community.

The Creature is therefore compelled to search independently for cultural models through which it may understand its origin. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is particularly significant in the formation of its self-awareness. After reading the poem, the Creature compares itself simultaneously to Adam and Satan¹².

Like Adam, the Creature is brought into existence without natural birth. It is also the first and only representative of its kind, has no parental past, and must discover the surrounding world independently. Unlike Adam, however, it receives no love from its creator, does not inhabit a harmonious environment, and has no companion. From the very beginning, its existence is defined not by blessing but by rejection.

The Creature resembles Satan through its experience of exile, loneliness, and rebellion against its creator. This parallel, however, is also incomplete. Satan consciously rebels against the established order, whereas the Creature initially seeks love, acceptance, and peaceful coexistence. Its aggression gradually develops in response to systematic rejection, physical violence, and the impossibility of belonging to the human community.

Its dual self-identification through Adam and Satan reveals the character's internal contradiction. The Creature appears simultaneously as an innocent creation and an avenger, a victim and an agent of violence, a potential human being and an entity defined by society as a monster. The mythopoetic parallels do not assign it an unambiguous status but instead demonstrate the impossibility of fully incorporating the character into established cultural categories.

¹² Milton J. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by John Leonard. London: Penguin Classics, 2003. 752 p.

The Miltonic intertext performs a dual function in the novel. On the one hand, it provides the Creature with a language through which it can interpret its condition. On the other, it intensifies its tragedy because none of the available models accounts for the existence of a being that possesses consciousness, moral needs, and the capacity for compassion but remains unrecognised both by society and by its own creator.

The Creature's self-awareness develops through reading. Since its creator gives it no name and transmits no system of moral or social values, it must construct its identity through other people's texts. *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* become models of history, morality, emotion, and human conduct.

Literature opens the world of culture to the Creature but simultaneously enables it to recognise its difference from human beings. It acquires language and learns about social relations, love, family, inequality, and moral obligations. Yet the more deeply it understands the human world, the more acutely it experiences its own isolation.

The Creature's observation of the De Lacey family plays a central role in the development of its moral consciousness. It learns language and discovers familial love, compassion, mutual support, and social injustice¹³. It is not born as an embodiment of evil but gradually assimilates human values. The awareness of these values, however, intensifies its suffering by revealing the impossibility of being included in the world it has learned to understand.

Evil in the novel therefore does not appear as an inherent property of a deformed body. It develops through the interaction between the Creature, its creator, and society. The character becomes violent not because it was created through an unnatural process but because it is consistently deprived of love, recognition, and the possibility of ethical coexistence.

This model complicates the conventional Gothic division between hero and monster. The Creature's external deformity does not correspond to its initial moral orientation, while Victor's socially acceptable appearance does not guarantee ethical behaviour. The novel transfers monstrosity from the body to the sphere of action: not only the created being but also the creator who rejects responsibility may prove monstrous.

Victor and the Creature gradually form a structure of doubling. Initially, they are opposed as creator and creation, human being and artificially created life, member of society and outcast. As the narrative develops, however, they display an increasing number of shared characteristics. Both isolate themselves

¹³ Shelley M. *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. pp. 91–115.

from others, lose their loved ones, subordinate their lives to revenge, and gradually destroy their own capacity for compassion.

Doubling does not imply the characters' complete moral equivalence, but it emphasises their interdependence. Victor physically creates the Creature, while the Creature gradually determines the future direction of Victor's life. Each becomes the cause of the other's transformation. Consequently, the boundary between subject and consequence, pursuer and pursued, victim and offender is continually destabilised.

The Creature materialises the repressed consequences of Victor's actions. It is not merely the result of his experiment but also the visible embodiment of his ambition, fear, and rejection of responsibility. At the same time, Frankenstein himself gradually approaches the condition of the outcast he has created: he loses his connection with society, remains isolated, and subordinates his existence to destructive revenge.

The structure of doubling substantially complicates the question of the origin of monstrosity. The novel does not allow evil to be located exclusively within the Creature. Monstrosity emerges from the interaction among the bodily otherness of the created being, the creator's irresponsibility, and society's intolerance of the Other.

The mythopoetic model of the novel is also based on the motif of forbidden knowledge. Victor seeks absolute understanding and rejects the moral limitations that might obstruct his experiment. In this respect, he resembles not only Prometheus but also Faust and the alchemist who seeks to master the concealed secrets of nature.

Unlike the traditional Faust, however, Frankenstein does not enter into a literal agreement with a demonic power. The source of danger is his own ambition. He himself transforms knowledge into an absolute value and subordinates every other aspect of life to it. The tragedy therefore has an ethical rather than a supernatural origin.

Scientific inquiry is not presented in the novel as unambiguously negative. The problem lies not in the investigation of nature itself but in the scientist's isolation, disregard for his relationships with other people, and refusal to anticipate the consequences of his actions. Victor works in secrecy, separates himself from his family, and gradually loses the ability to evaluate his experiment beyond the limits of his personal ambition.

The scientific narrative thus acquires mythopoetic significance: the laboratory experiment becomes a modern version of the archaic act of creation, while the scientist becomes a figure attempting to appropriate divine power. The distinctive feature of this model is that creation is accomplished not through

magic or supernatural intervention but through rational knowledge, technology, and individual will.

The mythologisation of natural space also plays an important role in the novel. Alpine landscapes, glaciers, mountains, storms, and the Arctic wilderness are not merely backgrounds to the action. They reflect the characters' psychological states, produce an atmosphere of the Romantic sublime, and give the conflict a cosmic dimension.

For Victor, turning to nature becomes a means of temporarily restoring his internal equilibrium. This restoration is always short-lived, however, because he does not eliminate the cause of the tragedy. He seeks emotional relief but does not accept responsibility for the Creature. Natural space therefore provides no genuine moral purification and merely postpones the return of the conflict.

For the Creature, nature initially constitutes the only environment that does not judge it by its appearance. It discovers the world through light, warmth, cold, hunger, and the changing seasons. Yet even natural freedom cannot replace human community. The character requires not only physical survival but also recognition, compassion, and social belonging.

The Arctic setting at the end of the novel performs a distinctive symbolic function. It becomes a liminal territory in which the conflict between creator and creation moves beyond society and acquires an almost mythical character. The white wilderness symbolises absolute loneliness, exhaustion, the destruction of human bonds, and the conclusion of the Promethean project.

Robert Walton's frame narrative strengthens the novel's mythopoetic dimension. Walton repeats Victor's pursuit of glory, discovery, and the transgression of the boundaries of the known world. His Arctic expedition parallels Frankenstein's scientific experiment: both men are prepared to risk themselves and others for the sake of an exceptional achievement.

Walton, however, is given the opportunity to interrupt the repetition of the tragedy. Having heard Victor's story and confronted the demands of his crew, he abandons the dangerous continuation of the voyage and turns back. The frame narrative therefore demonstrates not only the recurrence of the Promethean model but also the possibility of its ethical correction.

In this respect, the novel does not end in absolute pessimism. Frankenstein's story can serve as a warning if another subject is willing to hear it and alter his behaviour. Walton accomplishes what Victor could not: he relates personal ambition to responsibility for the lives of others.

The multilayered narrative structure also affects the perception of the moral conflict. Victor's story is conveyed through Walton's letters, while the Creature's voice appears within Frankenstein's narrative. As a result of this narrative layering, no perspective acquires the status of absolute objectivity. The

reader must compare different versions of events and independently determine the degree of guilt borne by each character.

The novel's mythopoetic structure is dynamic rather than static. Classical, biblical, and Miltonic models are not simply quoted but are tested under new historical conditions. Prometheus is transformed into a scientist, divine creation into a laboratory experiment, Adam into an abandoned Creature, and the story of the Fall into a narrative concerning responsibility for artificially created life.

This process may be more fully understood through Roland Barthes's semiotic conception of myth. Barthes defines myth as a secondary semiological system in which a sign formed at the first level of signification becomes the signifier of a new cultural message¹⁴.

From this perspective, Mary Shelley's novel may be regarded as a primary artistic model whose individual elements the creator, artificially created life, the abandoned creation, the transgression of natural boundaries, and uncontrollable consequences acquired the capacity to function independently of the complete narrative structure. The Frankenstein model thus became transferable to other historical, medial, and cultural contexts.

The universality of this model explains the novel's continual reactivation in discussions of scientific development, biotechnology, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and posthumanism. In each case, the fundamental configuration remains: a human being creates a new form of existence, proves unable fully to control its subsequent development, and is compelled to confront the ethical consequences of such intervention.

This reactivation does not, however, involve a literal repetition of the novel. The cultural myth preserves a recognisable semantic structure while adapting its specific content to the social anxieties, scientific discoveries, and technological possibilities of a particular period. The Frankenstein narrative can therefore adjust to new contexts without losing its central conflict between creative power and moral responsibility.

The mythopoetic model of the novel is consequently formed at the intersection of several interconnected narratives: the Promethean acquisition of forbidden knowledge, the biblical creation of humanity, the Miltonic conflict between creator and rejected creation, the Faustian pursuit of absolute knowledge, and the Romantic motif of doubling. Their combination transforms the story of Victor Frankenstein into a universal model for conceptualising the limits of human creativity.

¹⁴ Barthes R. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage Classics, 2009. pp. 109–114.

The principal result of this combination is the reorientation of myth from the heroism of knowledge towards an ethics of responsibility. Mary Shelley demonstrates that the act of creation does not end with the appearance of new life but initiates an enduring relationship between the creator and the created Other. The rejection of this relationship transforms scientific achievement into moral catastrophe.

The mythopoetic structure of the novel therefore established an open system of meanings suitable for subsequent intertextual and intermedial transformations. The interaction of classical, biblical, Miltonic, Romantic, and scientific codes ensured the universality of the Frankenstein narrative and provided the foundation for its subsequent development in theatre and cinema.

2. Intertextual Mechanisms in the Transformation of Frankenstein and the Creature

The intertextuality of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* manifests itself not only through its incorporation of classical, biblical, Miltonic, Gothic, and Romantic traditions. Equally significant is the reverse process whereby the novel itself became the source of new narrative models, characters, images, and visual conventions. In theatrical and cinematic adaptations, these elements are not reproduced literally but are reorganised according to the expressive possibilities of a particular medium, genre conventions, audience expectations, and the cultural demands of a specific historical period.

The theoretical framework for understanding this process is provided by Julia Kristeva's concept of the text as a space where previous utterances and cultural codes intersect¹⁵. Although Mary Shelley's novel is itself constructed through numerous intertexts, after its publication it also began to function as a source of further transformations. Its characters entered into dialogue with melodrama, pantomime, Gothic spectacle, cinematic expressionism, and the developing conventions of horror cinema.

From this perspective, the history of the Frankenstein myth should not be understood as a sequence of isolated adaptations but as a complex network of intertextual and intermedial relationships. According to Gérard Genette, a hypertext emerges through the transformation of a preceding text rather than through its mechanical reproduction¹⁶. A theatrical production or film may therefore preserve the central conflict between creator and creation while

¹⁵ Kristeva J. Word, Dialogue and Novel. In: Moi T. (ed.). *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. P. 34–61.

¹⁶ Genette G. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. pp. 5–7.

simultaneously altering the composition, system of characters, mode of creation, genre conventions, and ethical perspective.

Adaptation should consequently be regarded not as a departure from an allegedly "correct" original but as a selective actualisation and recoding of its meanings. Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation simultaneously combines repetition with difference and functions as an independent creative work rather than a simple copy of its source¹⁷. The modifications introduced by theatre and cinema may simplify certain aspects of the novel while simultaneously generating new cultural meanings that shape subsequent modes of reception.

One of the most significant transformations concerns the status of the Creature. In the novel, the Creature possesses its own narrative voice and functions as a fully developed narrative subject. Victor's story is framed by Robert Walton's letters, while Frankenstein's own narrative contains the Creature's extensive autobiographical account. This multilayered structure prevents the reader from accepting a single authoritative version of events and instead encourages a comparison of different perspectives.

The Creature's speech occupies a particularly important position within this narrative structure. It demonstrates the ability to analyse its own experiences, formulate moral judgements, construct logical arguments, and express profound emotional reflection. Its account of observing the De Lacey family, acquiring language, reading books, and gradually recognising its own condition transforms an externally monstrous figure into a fully developed human subject¹⁸.

Through language, the Creature explains the process by which its original benevolence is transformed into hatred and revenge. Its eloquence performs not merely a characterising function but an ethical one, undermining any direct correspondence between physical appearance and moral nature. The being whom others perceive only as a monster proves capable of rational thought, compassion, suffering, and moral judgement.

Victor Frankenstein, by contrast, despite his socially acceptable appearance, repeatedly fails to assume responsibility for the life he has created. This inversion complicates the conventional Gothic opposition between hero and monster. Monstrosity is transferred from bodily appearance to ethical behaviour.

Early theatrical adaptations substantially reduced this narrative complexity. In Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823), the Creature was deprived of extended speech. Its inner life was represented primarily through gesture, bodily movement, facial expression, and emotional

¹⁷ Hutcheon L., O'Flynn S. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013. pp. 7–8.

¹⁸ Shelley M. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. pp. 91–140.

reactions. As D. W. Hoehn and Elizabeth Nitchie observe, the theatrical Creature responded to events physically, whereas the literary Creature articulated a coherent system of ethical claims directed both towards its creator and society¹⁹.

The loss of speech represents far more than a simple reduction of literary material. It fundamentally transforms the ethical structure of the narrative. Without the ability to explain its actions, the Creature ceases to function as an equal participant in the conflict and becomes instead an object of visual observation. Its behaviour is interpreted primarily through its appearance rather than through its consciousness.

In the novel, violence develops through rejection, abandonment, and the creator's refusal to assume responsibility. On the stage, where the Creature can no longer explain its own experience, aggression increasingly appears as an inherent characteristic of monstrosity itself. Consequently, a medial transformation of speech produces a corresponding ideological transformation of the character.

Within the literary text, the Creature interprets its own history. In the theatre, its meaning is produced by other characters, theatrical performance, costume, staging, and audience perception. The narrative subject becomes a visible body, while verbal argumentation gives way to immediate emotional impact.

Peake's adaptation established several narrative and visual elements that later came to be regarded as inherent components of the Frankenstein story itself. These include the mute Creature, the scientist's assistant, the spectacular laboratory scene, an intensified romantic subplot, and a catastrophic finale.

In Mary Shelley's novel, the technical process of creating life remains deliberately undisclosed. Victor refuses to reveal the secret of his discovery, fearing that others might repeat his experiment²⁰. The literary narrative therefore emphasises the ethical consequences of creation rather than its scientific procedure.

Theatre, however, required the act of creation to become materially visible. What remains deliberately ambiguous in the novel had to be translated into physical action. Light, thunder, mechanical devices, elaborate stage machinery, and the dramatic appearance of the Creature transformed a private scientific experiment into a public theatrical spectacle. This process may be described as **intermedial concretisation**. It results from translating verbal indeterminacy into visual performance. The act of creating life ceases to exist merely as

¹⁹ Hoehn D. W. *The First Season of Presumption!*; or, *The Fate of Frankenstein*. Romantic Circles.

²⁰ Shelley M. *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. pp. 54–58.

Victor's recollection and instead becomes the central spectacular event of the drama.

This scenic concretisation profoundly influenced later adaptations. The repeated use of storms, lightning, and electrical machinery gradually established electricity as the supposed method of animation, despite the fact that Mary Shelley never explicitly describes such a process. Adaptation therefore did not simply visualise an undefined episode in the novel; it effectively created a new cultural interpretation of it.

As Steven Earl Forry demonstrates, early theatrical productions not only popularised the novel but also created an independent tradition of reception that profoundly shaped subsequent interpretations²¹. Theatre thus became the first medium to provide the Creature with a concrete body, recognisable physical behaviour, costume, and visual identity.

One of the most influential theatrical innovations was the introduction of the scientist's assistant. Peake's play presents Fritz, a character entirely absent from Mary Shelley's novel. Initially conceived as a comic servant associated with melodramatic conventions, Fritz later underwent considerable transformation in both theatre and cinema.

Gradually, he became the scientist's assistant, collaborator, and intermediary between the laboratory and the outside world. Later cinematic traditions merged characteristics of Fritz, the hunchbacked servant, and Igor into a single popular cultural archetype.

This process may be described as **intertextual fusion**. Elements originating in different texts and different characters gradually lose their identifiable origins while forming a new recognisable cultural model. Eventually, this composite figure comes to be regarded as an inseparable component of the Frankenstein myth despite having no basis in Mary Shelley's original narrative.

The persistence of the assistant can be explained through dramatic necessity. He materialises the scientist's isolation, creates dialogue within laboratory scenes, performs practical tasks that would otherwise remain invisible, and frequently provides comic or grotesque contrast to the tragic action.

The emergence of Fritz demonstrates that cultural myths develop not only through direct adaptation of literary texts but also through repeated innovations introduced by later interpreters. As these innovations accumulate, audiences gradually forget their specific origins while accepting them as authentic components of the original story.

²¹ Forry S. E. *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. pp. 3–24.

The early theatrical tradition transformed not only the Creature but also the character of Frankenstein himself. In the novel, Victor is a psychologically contradictory figure. His intellectual ambition is combined with fear, physical weakness, guilt, and an inability to act consistently. His principal fault lies not only in creating the Creature but also in immediately rejecting it after bringing it to life.

In theatrical versions, this internal conflict gradually gives way to the more outwardly expressive image of the obsessed scientist. The protagonist increasingly appears as a man who consciously violates moral and religious prohibitions in pursuit of absolute knowledge. This transformation contributed to the formation of one of the most persistent stereotypes in popular culture: the “mad scientist.”

This image emerges through the interaction of the Frankenstein narrative with the broader Faustian tradition. Frankenstein comes to be associated with Faust, the alchemist, and the seeker of forbidden knowledge. In Peake’s play, the parallel with Faust is stated explicitly, while the Creature is associated with Satan.

Such a comparison made the narrative more accessible to theatrical audiences but simultaneously simplified the novel’s moral ambiguity by recasting it as a conflict between good and evil. In Mary Shelley’s work, Victor enters into no agreement with a demonic force; the source of the tragedy is his own ambition and rejection of responsibility.

In stage versions, this distinction becomes less pronounced. To make the conflict more dramatically effective, adapters emphasise the act of transgression itself rather than the long-term consequences of the creator’s rejection of the life he has produced. Frankenstein therefore appears increasingly not as a weak and irresponsible creator but as a dangerous experimenter.

The theatrical medium intensified the melodramatic component of the Frankenstein story. Early productions foregrounded romantic relationships, family secrets, pursuit, recognition scenes, and the final catastrophe. In Peake’s play, Elizabeth became Frankenstein’s sister, while Clerval was presented as her beloved. New characters and musical numbers were introduced, whereas Walton’s frame narrative, much of the Creature’s history, and the account of its intellectual development were omitted.

These changes resulted not only from the playwright’s individual decisions. The theatrical system of early nineteenth-century England restricted the performance of serious drama in theatres that did not possess the appropriate patent. Consequently, adapting literary material frequently required the introduction of music, pantomime, comic episodes, and melodramatic effects²².

²² Forry S. E. *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. pp. 3–24.

The transformation of a philosophical novel into melodramatic spectacle had a dual effect. On the one hand, the multilayered composition, moral ambiguity, and subjectivity of the Creature were considerably reduced. On the other hand, theatre enabled the rapid dissemination of the Frankenstein story among audiences who may never have read the literary source.

Only five years after the novel's first publication, its characters began to exist within a new medial space, acquiring concrete bodies, costumes, gestures, and modes of stage behaviour. Theatre did not merely retell the novel; it created a new form of its cultural existence.

Mary Shelley attended a performance of *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* on 29 August 1823. In her journal, she noted that the Creature was represented by a dash in the theatrical programme. This detail is particularly revealing: namelessness, which carries complex social and philosophical significance in the novel, was transformed in the stage version into a visual sign of the character's undefined status²³.

This episode illustrates a fundamental feature of adaptation. Once a literary work enters the public cultural sphere, its author can no longer fully control its meaning. The theatrical production begins to function as an independent text capable of shaping not only audience reception but also subsequent readings of the novel itself.

Theatre initiated the formation of the Creature's visual identity. Thomas Potter Cooke, who performed the role in Peake's production, became so closely associated with the Monster that the part significantly shaped his theatrical reputation.

The actor therefore becomes not merely an interpreter of the character but also a mediator of cultural memory. The actor's body, movement, make-up, and appearance can outlive a particular production and be reproduced in later versions. As a result, the literary description begins to compete with a canonised performance image that possesses far greater potential for mass circulation.

This process was later repeated in cinema, where Boris Karloff's appearance in Jack Pierce's make-up became virtually inseparable from the popular image of Frankenstein's creation. The foundation of this bond between actor and character, however, was established by the theatrical tradition.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Frankenstein narrative actively interacted with other Gothic stories. Its relationship with John Polidori's *The Vampyre* became particularly significant, since the conception of both this work and Mary Shelley's novel was connected with the events at the Villa Diodati during the summer of 1816.

²³ Forry S. E. *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. pp. 17–19.

The theatrical versions of both works appeared at approximately the same time, and their characters were later combined within shared stage productions. D. F. Glut refers to the 1887 production *The Model Man*, which brought together elements of the vampire and Frankenstein traditions²⁴.

This combination had long-term consequences. Frankenstein, Dracula, the werewolf, the mummy, and other characters gradually formed a shared popular-cultural pantheon of monsters despite the substantial differences among their literary sources and philosophical concerns.

Intertextuality is realised here not merely through the interaction of one text with another but through the formation of a common genre space. A character may lose some of its individual features while retaining a sufficient set of traits to remain recognisable.

The interaction between theatre and early cinema marked the next stage in the transformation of the Frankenstein myth. Early filmmakers borrowed compositional solutions, character systems, scenery, costumes, and performance styles from theatrical productions. J. Searle Dawley's short film *Frankenstein* (1910) largely preserved theatrical convention: the action unfolded within a restricted space, while emotional and psychological states were conveyed through exaggerated gestures and symbolic scenes.

Cinema nevertheless introduced new means of visualising the creation of life. In Dawley's film, the Creature does not emerge through the assembly of body parts or the use of electrical energy but is formed in a vessel containing a chemical substance. The effect was produced by reversing footage of a model being destroyed.

As a result, destruction on screen was transformed into creation, while chaotic matter appeared to assume human form by itself. This technique not only demonstrated the technological possibilities of early cinema but also reinterpreted the status of the Creature.

In the film, the Creature functions as the materialisation of Frankenstein's own moral corruption. The final mirror motif makes the concealed relationship between the characters visible: the scientist first sees the Monster reflected in the mirror, after which the Monster's image is replaced by Frankenstein's own reflection.

In the novel, the Creature is not Victor's literal double, although the characters share a psychological and structural resemblance. Both isolate themselves from society, lose their loved ones, subordinate their lives to revenge, and gradually become dependent upon one another. The cinematic

²⁴ Glut D. F. *The Frankenstein Legend: A Tribute to Mary Shelley and Boris Karloff*. Metuchen, NJ; London: The Scarecrow Press, 1973. pp. 39–42.

metaphor of the mirror concretises this connection and transforms the external conflict into the protagonist's struggle with his own dark reflection.

At the same time, this interpretation deprives the Creature of autonomy. If it functions merely as a projection of Frankenstein's internal evil, its own experience, suffering, and moral claims lose their independent significance. Dawley's film therefore does not merely abbreviate the novel's narrative but fundamentally transforms the status of the created being.

The direction of intermedial influence subsequently changed. While early cinema actively relied upon theatrical models, the success of twentieth-century films meant that cinematic images increasingly began to shape later stage interpretations.

Peggy Webling's *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre* (1927) became a particularly important link in this development, as it served as one of the sources for Universal's 1931 film. James Whale's screen version therefore did not emerge through a direct transfer of Mary Shelley's novel but through the mediation of a long theatrical tradition.

As Linda Hutcheon argues, adaptations frequently engage not with a single source text but with a plurality of earlier texts and modes of interpretation²⁵. A film may declare its connection with the novel while simultaneously borrowing its structure from a play, its visual model from a previous production, and its genre conventions from an already established tradition of horror.

As a result of this accumulation, each subsequent version preserves traces of earlier interpretations even when it does not quote them directly. A visual image, gesture, line of dialogue, or narrative situation may pass from one medium to another while gradually losing its association with a particular author.

This process contributed to the establishment of the electrical laboratory, the mute Monster, the deformed assistant, and the spectacular animation scene as supposedly original elements of the Frankenstein story. These components are either absent from the novel or carry different meanings within it, yet repeated theatrical and cinematic representation endowed them with exceptional cultural stability.

The transformation of Frankenstein and the Creature therefore does not occur through a direct movement from the novel to each subsequent version but through a complex network of intertextual and intermedial relationships. Early theatre deprived the Creature of extended speech, gave it a distinctive physical performance style, intensified the melodramatic dimension, and introduced the scientist's assistant. Cinema transformed the act of animation into a central spectacle, concretised the doubling of creator and creation, and made the mass circulation of visual codes possible.

²⁵ Hutcheon L., O'Flynn S. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013. pp. 21–22.

Every adaptation makes a selection: it foregrounds certain elements of the novel, reduces others, and replaces some with new models. This selectivity ensures both the recognisability and the variability of the Frankenstein myth. The accumulation of theatrical and early cinematic conventions established the foundation for the emergence of the classical screen canon, which will be examined in the following section.

3. Theatrical and Cinematic Adaptations as a Mechanism of Cultural Memory Formation

The transition of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* from literature to theatre and subsequently to cinema represents not merely a sequence of adaptations but a continuous process through which the novel acquired the status of a modern cultural myth. Each new medium selected, transformed, and stabilised particular elements of Mary Shelley's narrative while simultaneously suppressing others. As a result, public memory gradually ceased to preserve the novel in its entirety and instead retained a system of highly recognisable visual and narrative signs.

Aleida Erll argues that cultural memory is shaped not only by historical events or literary texts themselves but also by the media through which they are repeatedly represented, circulated, and remembered²⁶. Theatre and cinema therefore function not simply as channels transmitting Mary Shelley's novel but as active agents in constructing the cultural memory of Frankenstein.

Unlike the literary text, which relies upon verbal narration, internal monologue, and psychological reflection, theatrical and cinematic media communicate primarily through visual images, bodily performance, spatial organisation, sound, and repetition. Consequently, each adaptation necessarily performs an act of selection. Elements that can be effectively represented visually are reinforced, whereas philosophical reflection, narrative complexity, and psychological introspection are often reduced.

Nineteenth-century theatre became the first medium to transform Mary Shelley's literary narrative into a shared public cultural experience. Unlike individual reading, theatrical performance addressed collective audiences simultaneously, thereby establishing common visual expectations regarding the appearance of characters, their gestures, and the structure of the narrative.

Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823) played a decisive role in this process. The production introduced several innovations that later became permanent components of the Frankenstein myth

²⁶ Erll A. *Memory in Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. pp. 113–116.

despite their absence from the original novel. Among these were the mute Creature, the scientist's assistant, the spectacular laboratory scene, and the emphasis on melodramatic conflict.

Theatre therefore performed a dual function. It simultaneously simplified the philosophical complexity of Mary Shelley's narrative while dramatically expanding its cultural accessibility. Audiences no longer needed to read the novel in order to recognise Frankenstein or the Creature. Stage performance itself became an autonomous source of cultural memory.

As Steven Earl Forry demonstrates, nineteenth-century dramatic adaptations rapidly developed into an independent interpretative tradition that significantly influenced both subsequent theatrical productions and later cinematic versions²⁷.

One of the most significant transformations introduced by theatre concerns the representation of creation itself.

Mary Shelley deliberately conceals the precise scientific procedure through which Victor animates the Creature. The narrative focuses instead upon Victor's emotional response, his immediate horror, and the ethical implications of his achievement²⁸. The technical process remains deliberately undefined.

Stage performance, however, required this invisible process to become materially observable. Lightning, smoke, mechanical devices, elaborate stage machinery, dramatic lighting, and spectacular entrances transformed the scientific experiment into theatrical spectacle.

This visualisation fundamentally altered audience perception.

Rather than concentrating on Victor's ethical responsibility, spectators increasingly remembered the spectacular act of bringing life into existence. The process of animation itself gradually became the defining image of the Frankenstein narrative.

Cinema later inherited precisely this theatrical emphasis.

Early cinema inherited numerous theatrical conventions while simultaneously developing new visual possibilities unavailable on the stage.

James Searle Dawley's *Frankenstein* (1910) still retained many characteristics of theatrical performance. Restricted interior settings, exaggerated acting, and symbolic staging reflected the influence of nineteenth-century melodrama.

Nevertheless, cinema introduced fundamentally new techniques.

The Creature's formation inside a chemical vessel was created through reverse-motion photography. Instead of assembling body parts before the

²⁷ Forry S. E. *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. pp. 3–24.

²⁸ Shelley M. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. pp. 54–58.

audience, the film presents chaotic matter gradually organising itself into human form.

This sequence demonstrates that cinematic technology itself became part of the narrative meaning.

The special effect does more than illustrate the story. It symbolically transforms destruction into creation and allows spectators to witness the impossible directly.

Equally significant is the film's concluding mirror sequence.

The scientist first sees the Monster reflected in the mirror; moments later, his own reflection replaces it.

Cinema therefore externalises the psychological doubling already present in Mary Shelley's novel.

Where the literary text suggests the moral similarity between creator and creation through narrative structure, the film renders this relationship immediately visible.

At the same time, such visualisation alters the Creature's narrative status.

Rather than existing as an autonomous moral subject, it increasingly functions as the external projection of Frankenstein's own psychological corruption.

Its independent history and ethical arguments become secondary to the symbolic relationship between the two figures.

The development of cinema fundamentally transformed the relationship between literary description and cultural memory.

In the novel, the Creature is described through language.

Its appearance remains partially dependent upon each reader's imagination.

Cinema, by contrast, replaces imaginative reconstruction with visual certainty.

Once a particular physical appearance has been repeatedly reproduced on screen, it gradually becomes culturally canonical.

The process had already begun in nineteenth-century theatre through actors such as Thomas Potter Cooke.

Cinema dramatically intensified this tendency.

A single visual interpretation could now be reproduced thousands of times without alteration.

The actor's body therefore became inseparable from the fictional character.

This mechanism later reached its fullest expression through Boris Karloff's performance in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), whose appearance ultimately displaced Mary Shelley's own literary description in popular imagination.

One of the defining characteristics of cultural memory is repetition.

According to Aleida Erll, memory is maintained not through the preservation of every detail but through the continual reproduction of selected images and narratives²⁹.

The Frankenstein myth illustrates this principle particularly clearly.

Across successive theatrical productions and films, audiences repeatedly encountered the laboratory, the Creature, the act of animation, the creator's ambition, and the catastrophic consequences of scientific transgression.

Repeated exposure gradually transformed these elements into stable cultural signs.

Conversely, components that resisted visual representation such as Walton's frame narrative, the Creature's philosophical reflections, or the extensive discussion of *Paradise Lost* became increasingly marginal within public memory.

Thus, cultural memory functions through selection rather than preservation. It remembers what can most effectively circulate across media.

As theatrical and cinematic adaptations accumulated, the Frankenstein narrative progressively detached itself from Mary Shelley's novel.

The myth no longer depended upon direct familiarity with the literary source.

Instead, audiences recognised a constellation of visual and narrative conventions that circulated independently of the original text.

Roland Barthes's concept of myth as a secondary semiological system helps explain this transformation³⁰.

Individual narrative elements the scientist, the artificial being, the laboratory, the act of creation, and catastrophic consequences gradually ceased functioning merely as components of a literary work.

They acquired independent cultural meanings capable of entering new historical contexts.

Consequently, Frankenstein became less a literary character than a cultural metaphor.

Scientific responsibility, uncontrolled technological development, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and posthuman identity all came to be interpreted through narrative patterns originally established by Mary Shelley and subsequently transformed through theatre and cinema.

Theatrical and cinematic adaptations therefore should not be understood simply as secondary versions of the novel.

²⁹ Erll A. *Memory in Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. pp. 113–116].

³⁰ Barthes R. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage Classics, 2009. pp. 109–114.

They function as active mechanisms of cultural memory, selecting, reorganising, and stabilising those aspects of the literary narrative that proved most adaptable to repeated visual representation.

Through continual intermedial transformation, *Frankenstein* evolved from an individual literary work into one of the most enduring cultural myths of modern Western civilisation.

4. The Transfer of the Name *Frankenstein* from the Scientist to the Creature as a Mechanism of Cultural Memory

One of the most remarkable transformations in the cultural history of Mary Shelley's novel concerns the gradual transfer of the name *Frankenstein* from the scientist to the Creature. Although this phenomenon is frequently mentioned in studies of popular culture, it has rarely been analysed as an independent mechanism of cultural memory formation. The present study argues that the change cannot be explained simply as a widespread public mistake. Rather, it represents the cumulative result of more than a century of theatrical, cinematic, and visual adaptations that progressively altered the relationship between the creator and the created being.

In Mary Shelley's novel, the distinction between Victor Frankenstein and the Creature is carefully maintained throughout the narrative. Victor possesses a personal name, family history, education, and social identity. The Creature, by contrast, remains unnamed. This absence of a personal name is not accidental but constitutes one of the novel's central philosophical devices. The refusal to name the Creature symbolises Victor's rejection of paternal responsibility and denies the created being a stable position within the symbolic order of human society.

The Creature repeatedly seeks recognition rather than merely physical survival. Its demand is not for biological existence but for identity. Significantly, this identity is never granted. Throughout the novel, the Creature is described through designations such as *daemon*, *monster*, *wretch*, *fiend*, *creature*, and *being*, yet it never receives an individual name from either its creator or society³¹.

This absence becomes one of the principal reasons why later adaptations gradually substitute another available signifier.

From a semiotic perspective, every narrative requires stable mechanisms of identification. Literary fiction can preserve ambiguity because readers encounter characters within an extended textual structure. Theatre and cinema function

³¹ Shelley M. *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. 524 p.

differently. Audiences must immediately recognise individual characters through visual and verbal markers. Consequently, the unnamed Creature presents a practical problem for adaptation.

Early theatrical productions already began to weaken the distinction established by the novel. Promotional materials frequently foregrounded the surname *Frankenstein* while paying considerably less attention to Victor's personal identity. Posters, advertisements, theatre programmes, and newspaper reviews increasingly treated *Frankenstein* as the title of the spectacle rather than the name of a particular literary character.

Cinema intensified this tendency.

Unlike readers of the novel, film audiences often encountered the story only through its title. The title *Frankenstein* appeared before the image of the Monster rather than before the scientist. As a consequence, the visual association between the title and the Creature gradually became stronger than the textual association between the name and Victor Frankenstein.

This process demonstrates an important characteristic of cultural memory.

Memory frequently preserves the most visually dominant element of a narrative while simplifying the relationships among its components.

Within cinematic adaptations, the Creature occupies substantially more screen time than the scientist during many of the most memorable scenes. The Monster becomes the visible centre of emotional engagement, whereas Victor increasingly functions as the narrative catalyst rather than the principal object of audience identification.

The development of visual culture further accelerated this transformation.

Book covers, film posters, toys, Halloween costumes, comic books, cartoons, and commercial illustrations generally present only the Creature while simultaneously using the word *Frankenstein* as the identifying label.

The audience therefore learns to associate the name with the visible body rather than with the absent scientist.

Importantly, this process should not be interpreted as evidence of cultural ignorance. Instead, it illustrates how collective memory reorganises literary material according to principles of cognitive economy.

Memory tends to preserve the most efficient and immediately recognisable associations. Since the Creature constitutes the dominant visual image of the Frankenstein myth, the name attached to the narrative gradually migrates towards the figure occupying the central position within public imagination.

Roland Barthes' conception of myth provides an appropriate theoretical explanation for this phenomenon. In a secondary semiological system, signs no longer preserve their original literary meanings but acquire new cultural

functions³². The word *Frankenstein* therefore ceases to function exclusively as a surname belonging to Victor Frankenstein and becomes a sign referring to the cultural myth as a whole.

The transfer of the name consequently reflects a broader transformation.

The literary narrative distinguishes between creator and creation.

Cultural memory increasingly fuses them into a single symbolic unit.

The scientist, the Creature, the laboratory, artificial life, scientific transgression, and technological anxiety all become integrated within one recognisable cultural sign: **Frankenstein**.

This process may therefore be understood as a mechanism of semantic condensation.

Instead of preserving every structural distinction present in the literary source, cultural memory compresses multiple narrative relationships into a single highly efficient symbol capable of functioning independently across different media and historical contexts.

The migration of the name from Victor Frankenstein to the Creature should thus be interpreted not as an error but as evidence of the autonomous development of the Frankenstein myth. Once detached from the literary text, the myth begins to organise its own system of meanings according to the principles of visual recognisability, medial repetition, and collective cultural memory. The name *Frankenstein* ultimately becomes less the designation of an individual fictional character than a universal cultural symbol representing the complex relationship between scientific creation, technological power, and the ethical responsibility of humanity for its own inventions.

5. Adaptation Memory as a Mechanism of Cultural Image Accumulation

The analysis of Mary Shelley's novel together with its theatrical and cinematic adaptations demonstrates that the cultural history of *Frankenstein* cannot be explained solely through the concepts of adaptation, reception, or intertextuality. These approaches successfully describe individual transformations of the literary source but do not fully account for the cumulative character of the Frankenstein myth. Each new adaptation is influenced not only by Mary Shelley's novel but also by previous theatrical productions, films, visual representations, and popular cultural interpretations. Consequently, the object transmitted through culture is no longer the original text itself but an evolving network of accumulated representations.

³² Barthes R. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage Classics, 2009. pp. 109–114.

To describe this phenomenon, the present study proposes the concept of **adaptation memory**.

Adaptation memory may be defined as the cumulative process through which repeated adaptations preserve, transform, reinforce, and selectively transmit particular images, narrative structures, and symbolic meanings until they become independent components of collective cultural memory.

Unlike adaptation, which refers to an individual transformation of one work into another medium, adaptation memory concerns the long-term interaction among multiple adaptations. It therefore shifts analytical attention from the relationship between an original text and a single adaptation to the relationship among successive adaptations themselves.

From this perspective, every new version of *Frankenstein* simultaneously performs two functions.

First, it reinterprets Mary Shelley's novel.

Second, it preserves selected elements inherited from previous adaptations.

Thus, cultural memory develops not linearly but cumulatively.

Each new interpretation adds another layer to an already existing cultural image.

This process may be visualised as follows:

Literary text

↓

Theatrical adaptation

↓

Early cinema

↓

Classical cinematic canon

↓

Popular culture

↓

Collective cultural memory

At each stage, certain elements disappear while others acquire increasing stability. For example, the novel presents the Creature as an articulate intellectual capable of philosophical reflection.

Early theatre removes extended speech but introduces a distinctive bodily performance.

Cinema retains the theatrical body while adding highly recognisable visual characteristics.

Later popular culture preserves only the most immediately identifiable features.

Thus, memory functions through accumulation rather than faithful preservation.

Adaptation memory operates through selective retention.

Not every component of a literary text possesses equal potential for long-term survival.

Certain elements prove highly adaptable because they are visually expressive, emotionally powerful, and easily reproduced across different media.

Others gradually disappear because they depend upon prolonged reading or philosophical reflection.

Mary Shelley's novel provides an excellent example of this process.

The following elements demonstrate particularly high cultural persistence:

- the ambitious scientist;
- artificial creation;
- the laboratory;
- scientific transgression;
- the Monster;
- catastrophic consequences.

Other important components become progressively marginal:

- Walton's frame narrative;
- the Creature's autobiographical narration;
- the Miltonic intertext;
- philosophical discussions of responsibility;

Romantic descriptions of nature.

This asymmetry illustrates one of the principal characteristics of adaptation memory.

Culture remembers what can be repeated.

The cumulative effect of repeated adaptations eventually produces a visual canon.

A visual canon consists of those representations that become immediately recognisable regardless of familiarity with the literary source.

Importantly, canonical images are not necessarily those created by the original author.

Rather, they emerge through continual repetition across different media.

The history of *Frankenstein* illustrates this process particularly clearly.

Mary Shelley never describes electrical machinery.

She never mentions bolts attached to the Creature's neck.

She never introduces a hunchbacked assistant.

Nevertheless, repeated theatrical productions, early cinema, Universal films, comic books, advertising, toys, cartoons, and Halloween culture transformed these additions into apparently "authentic" elements of the *Frankenstein* story.

Adaptation memory therefore possesses creative rather than merely reproductive functions.

It generates new cultural meanings that may eventually become more influential than the literary source itself.

Another defining feature of adaptation memory is semantic compression.

Complex literary narratives are gradually reduced to compact symbolic structures.

The process does not necessarily impoverish meaning.

Instead, it increases cultural mobility.

A simplified image circulates more efficiently than a philosophically complex narrative.

For this reason, the entire structure of Mary Shelley's novel eventually becomes condensed into several highly recognisable signs:

Frankenstein;

- the Monster;
- laboratory;
- lightning;
- scientific experiment;
- uncontrolled consequences.

Together these elements function as a complete cultural message despite representing only a small proportion of the original literary text.

Roland Barthes describes myth as precisely such a secondary semiological system in which cultural signs become detached from their original context while preserving recognisable symbolic functions³³.

The Frankenstein myth demonstrates this process exceptionally clearly.

Adaptation memory should also be understood as a fundamentally intermedial phenomenon.

Literature, theatre, cinema, television, comics, illustration, advertising, digital media, and computer games all contribute to the formation of the same cultural image.

Each medium introduces its own expressive possibilities.

Literature contributes narrative complexity.

Theatre provides corporeality.

Cinema creates visual standardisation.

Television ensures continual repetition.

Digital culture enables endless circulation and transformation.

Consequently, cultural memory no longer belongs to any individual medium.

It exists between media.

³³ Barthes R. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage Classics, 2009. pp. 109–114.

Each adaptation becomes simultaneously both a recipient of previous interpretations and a source for future ones.

The cumulative development of adaptation memory eventually produces an autonomous cultural system.

Once this stage has been reached, new adaptations are no longer required to return directly to Mary Shelley's novel.

Instead, they increasingly interact with previous films, theatrical productions, illustrations, and already established visual conventions.

The Frankenstein myth therefore acquires a form of cultural self-regulation.

Its future development depends less upon the literary source than upon the accumulated history of its own representations.

Each new adaptation modifies the myth while simultaneously preserving its recognisable identity.

This dynamic explains why contemporary audiences immediately recognise Frankenstein despite never having read Mary Shelley's novel.

What they recognise is not the literary text itself but the product of two centuries of adaptation memory.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of **adaptation memory** proposed in this study provides a theoretical framework for understanding how literary narratives evolve into enduring cultural myths.

Unlike traditional adaptation theory, which primarily examines the relationship between an original work and its individual adaptations, adaptation memory focuses on the cumulative interaction among successive reinterpretations across different media.

The Frankenstein myth demonstrates that cultural memory develops through continual processes of selection, repetition, visualisation, semantic compression, and intermedial circulation.

Repeated adaptations preserve only those elements capable of effective reproduction while simultaneously generating new cultural meanings that gradually acquire canonical status.

Consequently, theatre and cinema should not be regarded merely as secondary interpretations of Mary Shelley's novel.

They function as active mechanisms of cultural memory, continually reconstructing the Frankenstein myth for new historical periods, media environments, and audiences.

The concept of adaptation memory may therefore be applied not only to *Frankenstein* but also to other literary works that have undergone extensive intermedial transformation and become part of global cultural memory.

SUMMARY

This chapter examines the formation of the Frankenstein myth through the interaction of mythopoetic, intertextual, and intermedial mechanisms in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* and its early theatrical and cinematic adaptations. The study aims to identify how the novel's classical, biblical, Miltonic, Faustian, and Romantic codes were transformed during the transition from literature to theatre and film. The research applies mythopoetic, comparative, intertextual, intermedial, and semiotic approaches to analyse the reinterpretation of the central images, narrative structure, and ethical conflicts. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of the Creature's narrative status, the visualisation of the act of creation, the emergence of new characters, and the influence of theatrical conventions on early cinema. The chapter demonstrates that nineteenth-century stage adaptations established a number of visual and narrative models that later became integral components of the Frankenstein myth in popular culture. It is argued that early cinematic interpretations inherited and further developed these theatrical innovations, contributing to the formation of a stable visual canon. The study also reveals that the enduring cultural significance of the Frankenstein narrative results from its open mythopoetic structure and its capacity for continuous reinterpretation across different media and historical contexts. The findings contribute to adaptation studies, comparative literature, intermedial research, and the study of cultural memory by explaining the mechanisms through which a literary work evolves into a lasting cultural myth.

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