

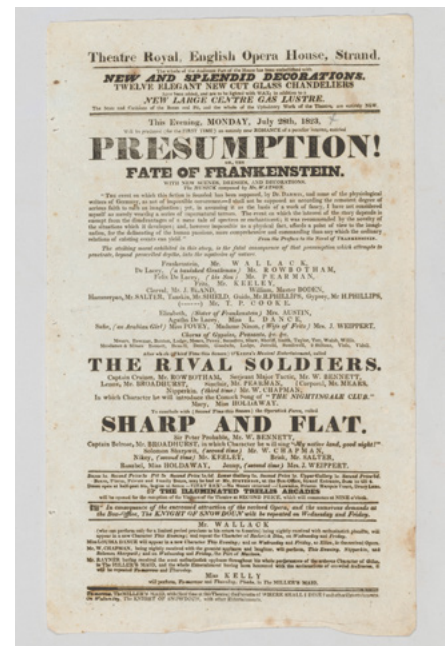
SECTION FOUR: FRANKENSTEIN ON STAGE AND SCREEN; OTHER ADAPTATIONS

STAGE ADAPTATIONS

The first stage adaptation of *Frankenstein* had a major impact on those that followed. Produced in 1823 by Richard Brinsley Peake, ***Presumption! or, the Fate of Frankenstein*** was made while Mary Shelley was alive, even before the publishing of the third edition of the book. We know that Shelley did not think the play's story was "well managed," but, like most others who saw it, she thought the part of the Creature was played "extremely well" (qtd. in Denlinger, 195). Indeed, Thomas Potter Cooke's portrayal of the Creature became the dominant visual image of the character for many years. Cooke was over six feet tall, wore a gray-blue leotard with his skin painted to match, and a toga on top. His movements were graceful and athletic, and unlike the Creature in the novel, he did not speak. His character had no name and was indicated on playbills with a series of hyphens—about which Shelley said, this "nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good" (qtd. in Denlinger, 195). In the changes, however, much was lost. The eloquent creature of the novel was gone.

This adaptation altered many other aspects of the novel as well, starting with the title. The script did not retain the moral subtleties of Mary Shelley's novel but instead condemned Victor's presumption: that he dared to make a creature when only God should create life. The Creature's muteness only strengthens this condemnation. Despite leaflets about the immorality of the novel, and rumors about P. B. Shelley's atheism, the play was a hit. Since only two theaters in London were allowed to produce pure drama, the play had to include song and dance. Musical gypsies and a comic servant named Fritz were added. This element continues in film adaptations with Igor playing a similar role in the films. In the novel, much of the plot happens through internal monologue, but in the theatrical and film productions, a foil character was needed to create a dialogue the audience could understand.

Because there was no copyright protection at the time, many other adaptations followed—at least fifteen between 1823 and 1826 using characters and themes from the novel in both England and France. Parodies soon followed, including one in which the scientist becomes a tailor. (Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* continued this tradition 150 years later.) Peake himself wrote two parodies. Productions continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century.



Lyceum Theatre (London, England), *This evening, Monday, July 28th, 1823, will be produced (for the first time) an entirely new romance of a peculiar interest, entitled Presumption! or, the fate of Frankenstein*, London: s.n., 1823. The Morgan Library & Museum, PML 196172.



Roman Freulich, Jack Pierce devising makeup for Boris Karloff as the Creature in *Bride of Frankenstein*, ca. 1935. Photograph, The John Kobal Foundation, Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC, © 1935 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.



Colin Clive in *Frankenstein*, movie clip, 1931. Library of Congress, Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC, © 1931 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.

FILM ADAPTATIONS

With the onset of film, adaptations of *Frankenstein* established some of the key visual imagery still associated with the novel. The version that remains the most iconic is James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein: The Man Who Made a Monster*. This film is "so powerful," argues Elizabeth C. Denlinger in the exhibition catalogue, "that the impact of its vision on the popular psyche has been deeper than that of the novel" and has given it the "strength of a myth" (196). Perhaps Whale's most memorable contributions to the iconography of *Frankenstein* are his laboratory creation scene and the costume and make-up for Boris Karloff's Creature, including the famous **electrodes** protruding from his neck. Boris Karloff's look is still restricted by a copyright that does not run out until 2026.

In Whale's 1935 sequel, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, the actress Elsa Lanchester plays both Mary Shelley and the Creature's bride. Both Whale films create audience **sympathy** for the Creature, who encounters human cruelty and yet does not kill Victor's family and friends like Shelley's Creature in the novel. In these two films, the Creature uses violence primarily in self-defense or through childlike innocence. Like Cooke's theatrical adaptation, the Creature of film is often mute, or speaks simply.



Daniel Parker, torso model of Robert De Niro's makeup for his role as the Creature in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, fiberglass, 1994. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

OBJECTS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

OBJECT: N. WHITTOCK AFTER (1791–1860), MR. T. P. COOKE, OF THE THEATRE ROYAL COVENT GARDEN, IN THE CHARACTER OF THE MONSTER IN THE DRAMATIC ROMANCE OF FRANKENSTEIN, BETWEEN 1832 AND 1834

Unlike Mary Shelley's Creature, Thomas Potter, (T. P.) Cooke's Creature was neither "too horrible for human eyes" nor articulate (qtd. in Denlinger, 11). Instead, he had grace, beauty, and brute power. Whereas Boris Karloff's Creature in the 1931 film aroused compassion, Cooke's character aroused pity. The audience watched as he discovered that fire was painful, delighted in music, and made "gestures of conciliation" to Victor (Denlinger, 206).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- ⚡ Before looking at this image, ask students to draw what they imagine the Creature looks like. (Teachers may choose to combine this activity with the previous activity 'Painting 21st Century Gothic' in Section One.) Compare the drawings. Ask students to think about what inspired their images. Was it film, television, comic books? Was it a specific passage in the novel?
- ⚡ Now look together at this image of T. P. Cooke playing the Creature. Ask students what they notice about how he is portrayed. What can students surmise about the way this stage adaptation presented the character? Compare this image of the Creature to their drawings.
- ⚡ While Mary Shelley thought the role was played "extremely well" and Cooke's portrayal was popular for many years, the character was quite different from the novel (qtd. in Denlinger, 195). He was not horrible to look at. Cooke's performance of the Creature was informed by the actor's study of mime. Cooke portrayed the character with grace, and also as completely mute. His vulnerable version of the Creature became more sympathetic. Ask students to discuss how these differences would change the story of the novel. What relationships would change? How would the meaning of the novel change for them?

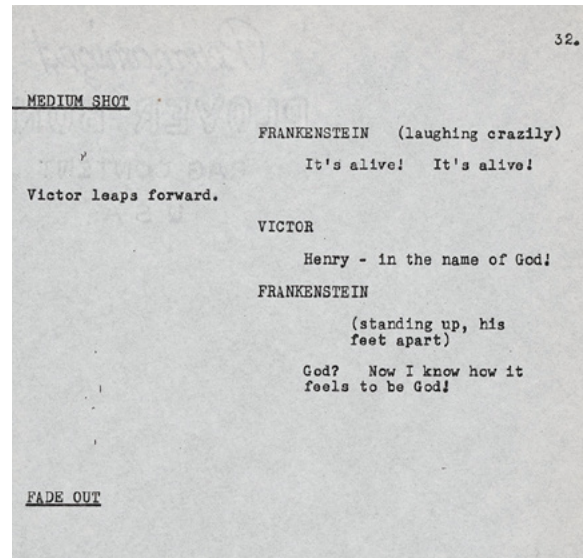


N. Whittock after (1791 - 1860), Mr. T. P. Cooke, of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, in the character of the monster in the dramatic romance of Frankenstein, between 1832 and 1834, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

OBJECT: GARRETT FORT, *FRANKENSTEIN* SCREENPLAY, 12 AUGUST 1931


Adaptations of the novel must contend with how to translate scenes that occur mostly in characters' minds into dialogue and action. The scene in which the Creature comes to life is particularly important. In the T. P. Cooke stage version, the comic servant, Fritz, watches through a window and runs off in terror when Frankenstein exclaims: "It lives!" Fritz then cries "Oh dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" and runs off while Frankenstein repeats himself: "It lives! It lives!" In the same director's burlesque version, Frankenstein instead yells: "It lives—it snores—it cries!"

In this screenplay from James Whale's 1931 film, screenwriter Garrett Fort continues the "presumption" focus from the early stage adaptation of *Frankenstein*, emphasizing the hubris of creation. As the Creature comes to life, Victor Frankenstein shouts: "It's alive! It's alive! ...Now I know how it feels to be God."



Garrett Fort (1900–1945) and Francis Edwards Faragoh (1895–1966), *Frankenstein*, typescript screenplay, 12 August 1931. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, gift of Philip Riley, 1990. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC. © 1931 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.


DISCUSSION PROMPTS:


 Read the passage in the novel where the Creature first comes to life.



See the included [Film Guide for Timestamps](#) of significant scenes, as well as the text and citation in the novel.

How does Victor react? What does he do or say or think? How does Mary Shelley let the reader know that the Creature has come to life?

 Compare this passage to the scene in which the Creature comes to life in the 1931 film. What does Frankenstein do or say in this moment? How do we know the Creature has come to life?

 Ask students to think more about the line: "Now I know how it feels to be God." Tell them that early stage adaptations emphasized the moral hazard of playing God by creating life. Think about how Mary Shelley deals with this notion in her novel. Does she condemn Victor for creating life? Why or why not? What are the ultimate fates of both Victor and the Creature? Encourage students to argue their point of view with evidence from the text.

- How would the line "Now I know how it feels to be God" be understood differently in 1818 (when the novel was first published) versus 1931 (when James Whale adapted the novel as a film) versus today? How have changing ethical and religious views altered its meaning?
- Tell students that the line was cut by censors in some versions of the 1931 film. Ask them to think about why and to come up with alternative lines that they think would have been considered acceptable. How do these alternative lines change the story's meaning?

OBJECT: P. B. SHELLEY, MARY SHELLEY, AND LORD BYRON, PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPH FOR BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1935), PHOTOGRAPH WITH ROMAN FREULICH, ELSA LANCHESTER AND BORIS KARLOFF IN THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1935)

In James Whale's 1935 sequel, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, Elsa Lanchester plays both Mary Shelley and the Creature's bride. In the first film production photograph, Elsa Lanchester, as Mary Shelley, is shown between Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley. By having Lanchester play both roles, James Whale made the bride an **alter ego** of the author, challenging audiences to find a relationship between the beautiful woman and the uncanny creation. In the film, Byron asks: "Can you believe that bland and lovely brow could have conceived of *Frankenstein*?" And Lanchester replies as Mary Shelley: "Why shouldn't I write of monsters?" Were it not for the censors, the line would have been longer: "You say look at me. I say look at [P. B.] Shelley—who would suspect that pink and white innocence, gentle as a dove, was thrown out of Oxford University as a menace to morality, had run away from his lawful spouse with innocent me but 17...I am already ostracized as a free thinker, so why shouldn't I write of monsters?" (qtd. in Denlinger, 233). The film emphasized "Mary Shelley's" femininity by portraying her in a fairytale-like dress, pricking her finger while sewing.

Later in the film, Lanchester's monster bride is beautiful and strange. The bride's fear of the Creature evokes the audience's sympathy; even his intended mate does not love him. In the novel, by contrast, the bride is never completed and Victor tosses the unfinished pieces of her into the North Sea.

In *The Bride of Frankenstein*, the film's moral responsibility is different. Victor is not the only scientist; he has been tempted to make the bride by his mentor Dr. Pretorius. The older scientist is a clearly villainous character, manipulating both Victor and the Creature. After his bride rejects him, the Creature helps Victor and his wife Elizabeth escape the castle, but makes Dr. Pretorius and the newly created bride stay. After announcing, "We belong dead," he crashes the tower down on them all.



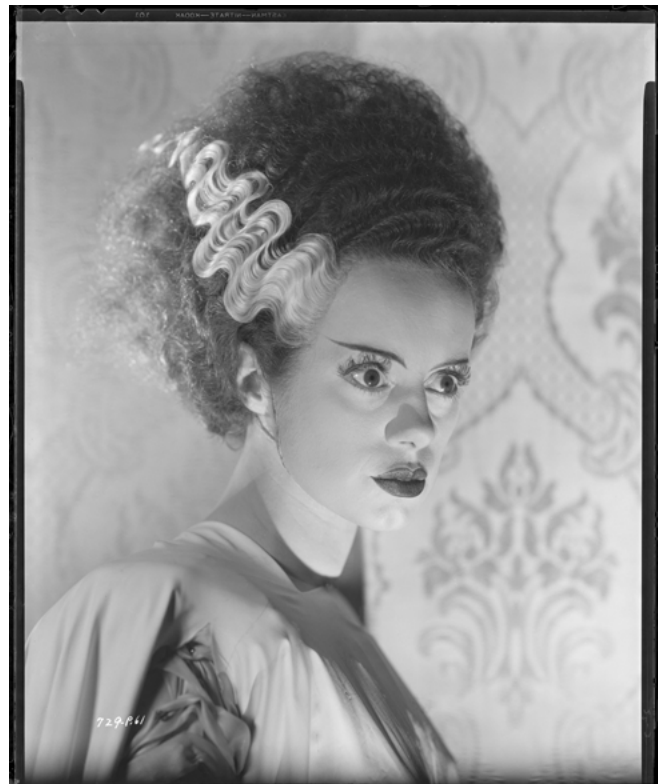
Gavin Gordon (1901–1983), Elsa Lanchester (1902–1986), and Douglas Walton (1901–1961) in *The Bride of Frankenstein*, photograph, 1935. Core Collection Production Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC, © 1935 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.



Elsa Lanchester and Boris Karloff in *The Bride of Frankenstein*, photograph, 1935. Core Collection Production Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC, © 1935 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- ⚡ As a class, look together at the production photograph of Elsa Lanchester playing Mary Shelley in *The Bride of Frankenstein*. What do students notice about her character and how she is interacting with the others – Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley?
- ⚡ Compare this photograph to the next—of Lanchester playing the Creature's bride. Ask students to discuss why they think James Whale, the director, might have chosen one actress to play both roles. Explore the concept of the alter ego, or the **doppelgänger**. Can students think of other examples in literature or popular culture? How and why are mirror images both fascinating and strange?
- ⚡ In Mary Shelley's novel, the characters of Victor and the Creature are connected—one always pursuing the other, inextricably tied together. In *Bride*, Lanchester plays both roles, implying a connection between Mary Shelley and the Creature's bride. Ask students to look for other examples of alter egos in the novel. What do they imply about the characters and the meaning of the story?
- ⚡ *Bride* ends quite differently than the novel with the Creature choosing to save Victor and Elizabeth. Both stories end with the Creature's suggested suicide, but the film version transforms the Creature into a hero. Which version do students prefer and why?



Roman Freulich, Elsa Lanchester as the bride, production photograph for *The Bride of Frankenstein*, 1935, The John Kobal Foundation, Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC, © 1935 Universal Pictures Company, Inc.

FRANKENSTEIN IN OTHER LITERARY WORKS AND ADAPTATIONS

Mary Shelley's story is influential to other literary works and has been adapted into different textual media, sometimes faithfully following the novel, sometimes loosely inspired by film and other adaptations. Her themes of an embattled creator and creation, and a mysterious technical breakthrough, strike a chord with the concept of **dystopia**, especially the idea of an imagined future where science has led to some negative outcome in society.

Anxieties about scientific progress that may lead to dystopian societies and dehumanization are a legacy of *Frankenstein*. Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy, beginning with the novel *Oryx and Crake*, explores genetic engineering run amok. The ethics of cloning and the rights of cloned humans are explored in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (adapted into a film by Mark Romanek.) The Frankensteinian themes can be adapted to lighter works as well, such as the young adult novel *Cadaver & Queen* by Alisa Kwitney, which reimagines the romance of Victor and Elizabeth as medical students and features Victor as the reanimated corpse.

The graphic novel combines textual elements of a traditional novel with greater visual interpretation, placing it in between the media of book and film. In adaptation, the Creature's agency and characterization can shift and change from Mary Shelley's original work.

Contemporary artists have created their own images of the Creature for illustrated editions of the novel, such as Barry Moser, or graphic novel editions, such as Gris Grimly. For example, Grimly's adaptation combines the Gothic imagery of *Frankenstein* with a steampunk aesthetic, emphasizing the technical wonderment of the story, and his Creature has visible bones and tendons, accentuating the decay of his corpse body.



Le Monstre et le magicien . . . Ambigu-Comique, souvenir fan, 1861, color lithograph. Matthieu Biger (CPHB Collection).



Bernie Wrightson, *Accursed Creator! Why Did You Form a Monster So Hideous That Even You Turned from Me in Disgust?*, lithograph in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, New York: Tyrannosaurus Press, 1978. The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Gordon N. Ray Fund, 2017, PML 197645. © 2018 Bernie Wrightson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

FRANKENSTEIN IN POLITICAL CARTOONS

The concept of an uncontrollable creation has inspired political cartoonists for many years, starting as early as the 1830s. (Denlinger, 275). Heads of state and other political figures undone by their own creations appears to be eternally ripe for satire. For example, in 1866, John Tenniel drew a cartoon he called “The Brummagem Frankenstein,” in which he portrayed the Quaker reformer John Bright as Victor terrified by the monster he created by achieving universal suffrage. In this case, his “Creature” is a looming, empowered working class man. Bright creeps by the Creature, stuttering: “I have no fe-fe-fear of ma-manhood suffrage.”

John Tenniel cartoon:

The sitting presidents of the United States, as well as presidential candidates, are frequently a source of political cartoons using the metaphor of Frankenstein. In a 2017 cartoon by Steve Sack, Trumpcare is the Creature and President Trump is Victor. “It’s alive!” declares Trump over the body. “No wait—it’s dead. No wait—it’s alive again! No wait...”

Steve Sack cartoon:

For a list of contemporary examples including President Donald Trump, President Barack Obama and other contemporary American political figures, [here is a selection:](#)



Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), *The Covent Garden Night Mare*, hand-colored etching on paper, [London]: W. Humphrey, 1784. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

ACTIVITIES

1. NOVEL VS. STAGE VS. SCREEN :

Comparisons between the novel and its stage and screen adaptations offer an opportunity to see how the meaning of the story can change with a few alterations—as well as to see what works in different mediums.

Three scenes are of particular interest:

1. The Creature's creation,
2. The Creature's contact with a young child,
3. The Creature's interaction with Elizabeth on her wedding night.



See the [Guide to Film Adaptations: Three Key Scenes](#) below for the timestamped location of each scene in its respective film and the corresponding text from the novel.



For this activity, begin by comparing one or all of these scenes in the novel and in films. How does James Whale's 1931 film depict the moment the Creature comes to life versus Mary Shelley's novel? How does it handle the meeting of the Creature and Elizabeth on her wedding night? If you have time, view another film version for an additional comparison, such as Kenneth Branagh's version. Discuss how the changes alter the characters and the story as a whole.



Then assign students to choose one of these sections of the story and create their own version. They could write a synopsis or treatment for their section and possibly even perform it for the class. They should be prepared to discuss how their version departs from the original and how it affects the work as a whole.

2. FRANKENSTEINIAN TERM:



The term **Frankensteinian** entered the lexicon shortly after the publication of Mary Shelley's novel. It can be defined as "a thing that destroys its creator," and it has been used to describe situations ranging from unexpected outcomes in political elections to anxieties about artificial intelligence. For this activity, ask students to discuss the adjective and identify circumstances that it could describe. Then students can either write poems (for example a "list poem," a list or inventory of items, people, places, or ideas) or make collages that explore the term. What do they include? How is "Frankensteinian" a valuable lens through which to view objects we have created in our world?

3. FRANKENSTEINIAN STORY:



As an extension or alternative to the above activity, assign students to write either a short story or screenplay synopsis about "a thing that destroys its creator." First, as a class, discuss movies, television shows, or books they already know about that extend this concept in new ways. These could include movies about robots gone rogue, such as *The Terminator*. Next, ask them to create their own version. What kind of creation could they imagine that might eventually destroy its creator? Encourage them to incorporate modern technologies they have heard or read about (and to research this technology before they write). Then tell them they can tell their story in one of two forms: either as a short story or as a screenplay synopsis. A screenplay synopsis is a brief summary of a film or potential film written in a few paragraphs and including only a general outline of events.

When students have completed their stories, ask them to share with the class. Which new developments or technologies have inspired creations that destroy their creators? What do they tell us about our world today? What themes or ethical questions do they have in common with *Frankenstein*?

***How to write a synopsis:**



MATERIALS SUPPLEMENTS FOR THIS SECTION

1. [Suggested Films](#)
2. [Guide to Film with Timestamps](#)
3. [Related Films](#)