

## Research Article

Barbara Braid\*

# The Frankenstein Meme: *Penny Dreadful* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* as Adaptations

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0021>

Received September 1, 2017; accepted November 5, 2017

**Abstract:** Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the most adaptable and adapted novels of all time, spurring countless renditions in film, television, comic books, cartoons, and other products of popular culture. Like a meme, this story adapts itself to changing cultural contexts by replication with mutation. This article examines the adaptive and appropriative features of two recent examples of such renditions in the form of television series, *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015). It discusses palimpsestic appropriations used in these shows, their depiction of Frankenstein and his Creatures, and above all, the themes and their meanings which these twenty-first-century appropriations of *Frankenstein* offer.

**Keywords:** appropriation, palimpsest, biofiction

## Introduction

Within the 200 years since its first publication, Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* has spurred countless adaptations, rewritings, and appropriations. The novel itself is an adaptation of the Prometheus myth and of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, to mention Shelley’s most obvious inspirations. Dennis R. Perry uses the metaphor of Frankenstein’s fragmented creation as a symbol of adaptation: “[t]he patchwork creation of Frankenstein’s monster, of course, is a perfect analogy for the underlying intertextual processes of artistic creation itself” (138). *Frankenstein* is thus an epitome of adaptation; its intertextuality and fragmented form are linked to its hyperadaptability (Perry 138), that is, an enormous potential for inviting new readings and appropriations—a feature which continues well into the twenty-first century. What is more, adapting and appropriating *Frankenstein* is often transmedial; most of the contemporary consumers of cultural products know about Frankenstein and his creature not because they have read Shelley’s novel, but due to a myriad of its renditions in films, television shows, theatre plays, cartoons, graphic books, video games, and many other forms of storytelling that made this text one of the cornerstones of contemporary culture. This cornerstone, however, is not stable and immobile—it travels through generations and cultures in the form of continuously reinvented variations of the story of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature.

Such a “journey” of a story is mentioned by Linda Hutcheon in her pivotal book on theory of adaptation in reference to Richard Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and his concept of a meme, which Hutcheon applies to cultural adaptation. A meme, like a gene, undergoes replication with mutation (Hutcheon 31-2), and it is this repetition with a difference that is the foundation of adaptation, according to Hutcheon, who sees the essence of adaptation to be “the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (4). Therefore stories, Hutcheon claims, can be memes too—“retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments *by virtue of* mutation—in their

\*Corresponding author: Barbara Braid, Institute of English, Szczecin University, 70-453 Szczecin, Poland,  
E-mail: barbara.braid@usz.edu.pl

‘offspring’ or their adaptations” (Hutcheon 32, emphasis in the original). On the basis of its prevalence in culture, it may be presumed that *Frankenstein* is one of the strongest memes of modernity, characterised by “stability and penetrance in the cultural environment” (Dawkins 193). But with each new material and cultural environment, each adaptation of *Frankenstein* reflects the values and ideas of the period in which it is adapted and received. As Perry has noted, “each adaptation [of *Frankenstein*] reinterprets and adds new dimensions to the original text, drawing on the cultural anxieties of the time” (140), and the figure of Frankenstein’s Creature “represents all of our inadequacies, fears and social anxieties” (Perry 137). Yet, each new adaptation is rarely a complete transmutation of a meme; it is rather an addition to the existing cluster of previous adaptations. This phenomenon—of the reading of an adaptation as a simultaneous reception of the sourcetext and subsequent adaptations—has been named by Hutcheon as palimpsestic. The meme/adaptation travels through time and place, gathering meanings and interpretations, palimpsestically offering instantaneous old and new readings. Again, this is true when it comes to *Frankenstein*—what becomes increasingly evident in its twenty-first century renditions is the fact that the remediations of this story do not only adapt Shelley’s novel, but they also offer intertextual references to successive adaptations of the story, from the classic 1931 *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale, to the 1994 *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, directed by Kenneth Branagh, to name the most popular examples. Thus, they fulfil what Thomas Leitch calls “a triangular notion of intertextuality” as they constitute “readaptations of a common literary source while masking their debt to earlier film adaptations of that source” (95).

In this theoretical context, the article offers a reading of the Frankenstein Meme in the recent television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016) written by John Logan and directed by Sam Mendes, and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015) created by Benjamin Ross. The paper examines the palimpsestic character of these renditions and other adaptive practices in order to trace the meanings which the Frankenstein Meme holds for the contemporary viewers.

## Adaptations or Appropriations?

The cultural texts selected for this analysis are not obvious examples of adaptations, although they do fulfil Hutcheon’s definition of an adaptation, inasmuch as they are acknowledged, extended and intertextual reworkings of Shelley’s novel and/or previous filmic adaptations, and are creative and interpretative rather than repetitive (Hutcheon 8). Nevertheless, they locate themselves somewhere between adaptation and appropriation. The distinction between these two terms is far from clear in the adaptation studies, as it has been noted by Leitch (88). Hutcheon does not seem to differentiate between these two terms in her book, using them interchangeably, suggesting that “adaptation” and “appropriation” are synonymous concepts. Julie Sanders, on the other hand, distinguishes adaptation from appropriation by means of their relationship to the sourcetext: while adaptation is ostensibly a reworking of a source, appropriation is more opaquely related to the original text, with a possible generic shift, variations to the plot and characters, and less obvious signals about the adaptive nature of the new cultural product (Sanders 24). Traditionally, appropriation is associated with cultural cannibalisation and transformation of the sourcetext for one’s own purposes; “associated with abduction, adoption and theft, appropriation’s central tenet is the desire for possession, . . . [for] making this object one’s own, controlling it by possessing it . . . ; it has connotations of usurpation, of seizure for one’s own uses” (Mardsen 1). In other words, appropriation signifies an impulse to both possess and appreciate the adapted text, an impulse which Hutcheon finds present in all forms of adaptation (20).

Inevitably, then, the visual representations of *Frankenstein* selected for this analysis locate themselves in different places in the spectrum between adaptation and appropriation. *Penny Dreadful*, as Benjamin Poore has noted, “is neither an adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, nor of *Dracula*, nor of *Frankenstein*” (70), but rather a hybrid appropriation, combining fragmented and transformed characters and plots taken from the British nineteenth-century gothic fiction, including, apart from the aforementioned texts, also *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in season three, as well as cultural references, such as European folklore, spiritualism, the late Victorian fascination with Egyptology, the Whitechapel murders and colonial

imperialism (Poore 66). It also freely mixes sources from various periods in nineteenth-century history, as the use of *Frankenstein* along fin de siècle texts entails, in this way “disrupt[ing] linearity and undermin[ing] notions of the authority and priority of an originating text” (Lee and King, para. 1). In this respect, the series’ exploitation of a mixture of fictional and cultural sources recreates the genre of penny dreadfuls to which it alludes in its title (Poore 66). The kaleidoscope of gothic characters also appropriates *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (in itself an appropriative and transmedial franchise), as the characters—including the central one, Vanessa Ives, a spiritualist medium, a witch and the incarnation of an Egyptian goddess Amunet; Sir Malcolm Murray, an imperial explorer; Ethan Chandler, an American gunslinger and the Werewolf; Dr Victor Frankenstein (later joined by his friend from medical school, Dr Jekyll), Sir Malcolm’s servant Sembene, and Ferdinand Lyle, a flamboyant scholar of ancient Egypt—fight the villain known, variably, as the Master, Amun-Ra, Dracula, and the Devil. The plot of *Frankenstein* is, therefore, one of the subplots of this hybrid series, growing as part of a larger plot structure, as Dr Frankenstein creates three different beings, including a female counterpart of the Creature.

On the other hand, *The Frankenstein Chronicles* provides a combination of a biofiction of Mary Shelley and of her Creature, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, as the crime plot leads the Bow Street runner cum detective John Marlott to discover not only a tragic and unfortunate inspiration behind Shelley’s novel but also the perpetrator of crimes in which children are being murdered and later sutured together in experiments which constituted a desperate attempt to conquer death and disease. The series, then, offers an appropriation of *Frankenstein* in an interesting combination of re-enactments of some fragments of the novel, and metareferences to the author and the text itself.

In the contemporary cultural criticism, particularly in neo-Victorian scholarship, a question often arises about the reasons for the incomparable attractiveness of the nineteenth-century settings, texts and themes for contemporary adaptations and appropriations. Possible reasons may vary; one of them is the canonicity of the Victorian literary texts (Sanders 120), which provokes de-canonised reworkings constituting both a homage and a confrontation (Letisser 113). Furthermore, the Victorian ancestry is sometimes perceived in terms of an “inheritance model” (S. J. Carroll 177) according to which there is a viable correspondence between us and our Victorian forefathers (Sadoff and Kucich xi), in terms of technologies, social issues, and culture; our Victorian ancestors “moulded our culture, defined our sensibilities, built a world for us to live in” (Sweet 231). This is a post-Victorian world the contemporaries inhabit, and in many respects, although we define ourselves in the opposition to the Victorians (Sweet 231), but we also “are the Victorians” (Kirchknopf 58, emphasis in the original). Thus, if the Victorians are the ones who “gave birth” to contemporary culture, the Frankenstein Meme discussed below may be perceived as a metaphorical illustration of this phenomenon, in which Victor Frankenstein represents our nineteenth-century forefathers, while the Creature is their offspring, the contemporary culture born out of the Victorian era.

## ***Penny Dreadful: Frankenstein’s Creatures***

This series spreading through three seasons features the story of Dr Frankenstein and his experiments in an appropriation which offers a degree of faithfulness to Shelley’s novel but at the same time re-invents this text in creative ways which pose interesting questions relating to human identity and social roles. Except for the fact that Dr Frankenstein is a member of Sir Malcolm’s and Vanessa Ives’s team of vampire and demon hunters and thus performs a stock role of a medical professional and researcher, this character is also provided with his own sub-plot in the script which constitutes an appropriation of *Frankenstein*. The circumstances in which Victor is first shown at work (S01E01)—his laboratory in an attic, the storm, a corpse lying in a bath of ice, attached to electrodes—is a typical background of many adaptations, particularly Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994), to which the series seems to be most indebted when it comes to the Frankenstein subplot. This episode shows Frankenstein accidentally triggering his machine during a storm, and the electric shock gives life to the male corpse lying in his bath. Initially horror-inducing, the scene showing the creature’s wide open, blood-shot eyes in the storm’s lightning turns out to be a symbol of the philosophical implications of the story, as the creature and Victor face each

other. Palimpsestically, the viewer aware of the Promethean and Biblical undertones in Shelley's novel appreciates the fact that as the creature touches Victor's face, he recognises his own identity, while Victor acknowledges the fact that this creature is made in his own image. Thus, *Penny Dreadful's* appropriation of Shelley's story seems to mend Frankenstein's mistakes from the novel. The creature is not shunned by Victor, but welcomed, given a name and taught language and basic life skills.

The scene in which the name for the creature is selected is significant. When Victor decides "We should give you a name. You're a form of new mankind" (S01E02), he first thinks of "Adam" (which would be very fitting considering Miltonian overtones in Shelley's novel), but rejects this idea as too "theological." This indicates that the "new mankind" is one without Christian background. Instead, he allows the creature to randomly select a name from a book of Shakespeare's plays—a symbol of secular roots for the new mankind—thus a text of literature replaces a text of religion. The name turns out to be "Proteus," a character from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. More significantly, however, Ancient Greek "πρωτος" (*protos*) means "first," and "πρωτόγονος" (*protogonos*) means "primordial" or the "firstborn" (Bartoněk 94), thus ultimately being a non-Christian replacement for "Adam." The Greek god Proteus, Poseidon's oldest son (Bartoněk 94), is an ancient sea god (Grove 1824), which refers to Frankenstein's Proteus's previous life as a sailor. The term is also associated with change, versatility, mutation and adaptability (Grove 1824). On the one hand, this connotation represents that Frankenstein's "new mankind" is, above all, characterized by skills of mutability and versatility; on the other hand, Proteus becomes also the embodiment of the Frankenstein Meme, a mutable story of modern science and humanity, which since its publication in 1818 has "[taken] on the protean forms that popular culture imposed upon them" (Tropp 23). If one follows the interpretation suggested above, Frankenstein's Proteus represents the contemporary culture, with its replacement of grand religious narratives with the secular ones, and its necessity for adaptability and fluid identity.

Yet, as the association of Proteus with the first-born turns out to be false, similarly this vision of contemporary humanity is more of a projection than actuality. As Victor and Proteus befriend each other, and Proteus seems to gradually remember his previous life, Victor's first creature violently enters the scene, literally tearing Proteus apart. In a series of flashbacks, one learns about Victor's first, unsuccessful creation in a story more faithfully adapting Shelley's novel. This creature's birth is far from Proteus's calm realization of his humanity, as it takes place in pain and blood. The Creature's primaeval scream of terror and suffering drives Victor away from his creation, and its violent re-entrance to the fore of the series signifies that the protean flexibility of the contemporary culture has a dark undercurrent of trauma, the pain of rejection, and violence. We are still the modern orphan, abandoned by God, in an ambiguous relationship to technology and science as the Creature has been throughout various adaptations since Shelley's 1818 novel.

Frankenstein's actual first-born remains unnamed and rejected, and from an upstairs window of the laboratory he learns about human cruelty as he observes the life of the villagers, and acquires language and reading skills from Victor's books of Romantic poetry. Thus, the countryside episode from Shelley's novel, where the creature learns about social relationships and language from observing a tender family of farmers, which is influenced by Rousseau's concept of a natural man (Yousef 207), is replaced by loneliness and cruelty first, and later by an urban setting with its anonymity and negligence. Yet, the character of a gentle old man who becomes the Creature's only friend and a figure of mercy becomes embodied in Vincent Brand, a director of the Grand Guignol theatre, as the Creature decides to move to London in an attempt to find his creator. The famous scene of the old blind man who feeds the Creature and gives him wine and a cigar, splendidly presented in the iconic *Bride of Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, 1935) and parodied in Mel Brooke's *Young Frankenstein* (1974), is further ironically reproduced in an urban context when Vincent Brand offers the Creature gin from a vial hidden in his walking stick and later buys him dinner in a pub. He also offers him a job as a stage rat in the Grand Guignol and names him Caliban. The name is, again, ironic, as the Creature, like Caliban, wants revenge on his "master"—his creator. The creature thus continues to observe life and humanity, hidden behind the theatre curtains.

Therefore, there is a clear shift in *Penny Dreadful* from the Shelleyan Swiss countryside where the Creature gains his education and the Alps where he tells Victor his story, to London and its popular institutions: its streets, a pub, a theatre, a freak show and Victor's laboratory. Thus the creature is not a

thing of nature—it cannot be, being created by a man, and not via natural means—but a thing of the city and of technology and modern life, as the Creature himself summarizes: “I am not a creation of the antique pastoral world. I am modernity personified” (*Penny Dreadful*, S01E03). Again, if the Creature embodies “new mankind” as Victor hopes (representing contemporary culture) it is one of technology and industry: “We are men of iron and mechanization now. We are steam engines and turbines. Were you really so naïve to imagine that we’d see eternity in a daffodil?” (*Penny Dreadful*, S01E03), and these words are ironically reflected by the theatre director’s assumption about an industrial accident in which the Creature must have been disfigured. The Romantic contrast between nature and civilization—one of the key themes of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*—is thus removed from this appropriation, as there is no natural context to speak of, except as a nostalgic thug the Creature feels when reading Keats, Wordsworth and Clare. Yet, the Creature is truly and completely a child of urbanity and modernity, and so is the “new mankind” of which *Frankenstein* dreams, and ourselves.

The conversation between *Frankenstein* and the Creature which takes place in the Alps in Shelley’s novel ends with a demand for a female counterpart, so that the burden of being the ultimate Other among humans may be alleviated by companionship. A similar demand is made by the Creature/Caliban in *Penny Dreadful*, and it becomes fulfilled in season two, as Victor Frankenstein takes the body of Brona Croft (an Irish prostitute and Nathan Chandler’s lover from season one) and turns her into another immortal creature, whom he calls Lily, “the flower of resurrection and rebirth” (*Penny Dreadful*, S02E02). This third being made by Frankenstein finds herself in the long tradition of female Creatures in *Frankenstein* adaptations (which in Shelley’s novel Victor ultimately refuses to make), going back to Whale’s *The Bride of Frankenstein*. This trope could be perceived as a gothic variation of the Pygmalion and Galatea motif, although the woman created by Frankenstein is not intended for himself, but for the Creature. From a feminist perspective, the creation of the Bride of Frankenstein is obviously problematic, as she is made for the sole purpose of becoming a desired mate for the male counterpart. Yet, in the famous scene from Whale’s iconic movie, the Bride of Frankenstein rejects the Creature and soon dies in a blast at the end of the film. In turn, in Branagh’s adaptation of Shelley’s novel, Elizabeth, revived by Victor after being killed by the Creature, is made for Victor, not for his Creation. Thus the scene following Elizabeth’s revival shows Victor and the Creature both trying to convince Elizabeth to choose one of them. Yet, she refuses to be an object of male rivalry, nor does she desire to continue her existence as an undead creature, so she kills herself by putting herself on fire. Therefore a female rebellion against being an object of exchange between men is embodied in Branagh’s film via self-sacrifice, suicide being the only viable option to escape male domination and objectification, and death being the inevitable fate of the Bride of Frankenstein.

*Penny Dreadful*’s palimpsestic comment on this motif in the form of Lily evokes these two renditions, but offers a different solution to the female creation who refuses to belong to either the Creature (who in season two goes by the name of John Clare, a Romantic peasant-poet) nor to Victor Frankenstein, who falls in love with her in spite of his promise to the Creature and thus ultimately fulfils his role as a Pygmalion falling for his Galatea. Unlike Branagh’s grotesque Elizabeth, or Whale’s Bride of Frankenstein, who, although beautiful, represents ultimate abjection, Lily is physical perfection, as sweet and innocent as her flowery name suggests. Initially, she plays the role of the Angel in the House, fulfilling the expectations of Victorian femininity. She replaces Elizabeth from Shelley’s novel as Victor’s romantic interest and a female promising him domestic bliss. Yet, Lily soon reveals that her innocent persona has been a deception, as she had remembered her past life and wants revenge on men for abusing her when she was a prostitute. In this way, Victor’s Eve turns into a Lilith (Green, n. pag.), an avenger of femininity against patriarchy, representing a very Victorian fear that the Angel in the House may turn into a demonic New Woman. It is, however, a conscious addition of a female perspective, replacing the androcentric one of the previous adaptations, albeit a monstrous one.

Stephanie Green in her article about Lily as a Gothic New Woman pinpoints the feminist politics evident in the construction of this character. When she finally becomes aware of her own power and immortality, Lily turns into a murderous monster, an avenger of the sexual trauma suffered from men in her previous life. She vows: “Never again will I kneel to any man. Now they shall kneel to me” (*Penny Dreadful*, S02E08). Lily, a “product of industrial manufacture” (Green, n. pag.) prophesizes that the new mankind will take over

the world and people it with the offspring of the dead: “And the blood of mankind will water our Garden. Us and our kin and our children, and our generations. We are the conquerors. We are the pure blood. We are steel and sinew both. We are the next thousand years” (*Penny Dreadful*, S02E08). The Creature/John Clare, the Romantic poet at heart, cannot accept Lily’s monstrosity—as an uncastrated woman (Creed 6), ‘power-in-difference’ (Williams, qtd. in Creed 6), she terrifies him and is even more abject than himself. She seeks another immortal companion—Dorian Gray, and in season three, together with Justine, a teenage prostitute saved by them from murder, they create a monstrous, queer family/ *ménage à trois*. Her desire to create a supreme race and a world without patriarchal control is, however, not a feminist one, as she rejects suffragettes for being too naïve as to their goals and methods: “Our enemies are the same but they seek equality. And we? Mastery. . . . How do you accomplish anything in this life? By craft. By stealth. By poison. By the throat quietly slit in the dead of the night. By the careful and silent accumulation of power” (*Penny Dreadful*, S03E03). Lily manages to create an army of women—prostitutes, women wronged and traumatized by men—and teaches them to murder men. In a passionate speech to her army of women, she paints a vision which deflects the Jack the Ripper scenario: “Rise up! Go into those dark streets you know so well, those foul alleys and secret back lanes and find me a bad man! . . . A scrofulous john fucking some girl just like you, and quick with the back of his hand while he’s at it. Find him and bring me his right hand! Cut it off and hold it bleeding to your breast!” (*Penny Dreadful*, S03E07). In this way, the series makes a full circle, reversing the scene from the second episode of the first season, where a sex worker is murdered in a dark alley by a secret Jack-the-Ripperesque killer.

Yet, two men Lily refuses to annihilate, her partner Dorian and her creator Victor, become the two who destroy her dream of doom for mankind. Together with Dr Jekyll they kidnap her and, with the use of Dr Jekyll’s serum, attempt to turn her back into the submissive Lily with whom Victor Frankenstein fell in love once he created her. The scene in Bedlam where Dr Jekyll has his laboratory pinpoints the gender politics that Lily is fighting with—men representing power and institution gang up to control and destroy the monstrous woman, using the discourse of normalization of what they see as abnormal:

LILY: What are you going to do to me?

JEKYLL: We’re going to make you better.

LILY: Better than what?

VICTOR: He means we’re going to make you well.

DORIAN: As you were before.

LILY: As I was before what?

VICTOR: Before. When we were happy.

LILY: When you were happy, you mean.

VICTOR: Lily, we’re going to try to make you healthy. Take away all your anger and pain and replace them with something much better.

LILY: What?

VICTOR: Calm, poise, serenity. We’re going to make you into a proper woman.

(*Penny Dreadful*, S03E07)

The discourse of Victorian psychiatry—the setting being Bedlam, and Dr Jekyll’s experimentation in regulating his patients’ terrifying impulses by means of chemistry—is strengthened even more by a reference to angry and uncontrollable femininity as irregular, which Lily addresses in the next episode by evoking *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha: “Even if you keep me locked in the attic, render me with the mind of an obliging child, I will always see that dark little space that so yearns to be a soul” (*Penny Dreadful*, S03E08). She recognizes the objectification that lies at the foundation of her origin as Frankenstein’s creature: “I was an offering! A whore, resurrected to be given to your Creature” (*Penny Dreadful*, S03E08).

The vision of “proper womanhood” is terrifying to Lily—not only because it violates her freedom, but because, perhaps more poignantly, Dr Jekyll’s serum offers obliteration of her past. As she explains in her final conversation with Victor, the memory of her traumas is her identity. As it turns out, the source of Lily’s rage lies in her previous life as Brona, in the memory of her baby’s death, caused indirectly by a

ruthless punter who beats Brona unconscious and in this way stops her from coming home and taking care of her baby daughter. In this respect, Lily recalls Mary Shelley, whom loss of her baby inspired to writing *Frankenstein*—but here the creator of a monster is not Victor, but actually, Lily herself, as she decides to transform her pain into violence and revenge. In all of Victor’s creations, memory of the previous life before their transformation is an important element—absent from Shelley’s original, and largely from most adaptations, although questions of identity do feature, for instance, in Branagh’s film—yet it is only Lily for whom traumatic memory of the past life is a foundational element of her present monstrosity. Lily is what the previous creatures have not managed to be: a threat to mankind, with the thirst for power, a protean figure of change, an urban, industrial woman of the future. Lily is the self-made woman confronting her creator, a female subject rebelling against male power shaping her, giving her identity and controlling her. She has suffered pain from patriarchy and she chooses to transform that into who she is on her own terms. She needs no man to take away her pain—she embraces it, and the trauma is a constituent of her identity: “there are scars which makes us who we are. But without them, we don’t exist” (*Penny Dreadful*, S03E08). Lily is the Creature of the key conflict in the *Frankenstein* story: the rebellion of the creation against their creator, the Satanic Eve rebelling against her God, to use a Miltonic reference that Shelley mentioned in her novel. Adapting *Frankenstein* into a story in which the female Creature is the main focus pinpoints the message on the role of female in patriarchal society, but also on the role trauma plays in identity construction. But it perhaps also speaks of our culture’s ambivalent attitude to radical feminism, and the fear that the feminist will turn out to be a man-eater—a fear akin to that felt by the Victorians towards the concept of the New Woman.

## ***The Frankenstein Chronicles: the Creature and the Beast***

Two key points—that concerning the plight of the marginalised in the nineteenth-century society and that regarding the role of traumatic memory in the construction of one’s identity—bind *The Frankenstein Chronicles* to *Penny Dreadful*, although in terms of genres and modes, both shows are very different. *The Frankenstein Chronicles* is a crime mystery series, which combines features of noir with references to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and elements of biofiction referring to historical characters of the literary and political life of pre-Victorian London. The perspective is that of an outsider to the *Frankenstein* story—the detective—who sees the results of unsuccessful experimentation in the form of body fragments of children sutured together. The plot faces an unexpected twist in the last episode of the series, which is partly a recreation of the key event in Shelley’s novel.

The series is haunted not only by the spirit of Mary Shelley’s monstrous Creation, but, surprisingly, by William Blake and the political comment on the exploitation of working-class children in a newly urban, capitalist society so evident in his poetry. The children are, so far, the only victims of the Frankenstein murderer. In his investigation, Marlott is particularly adamant to find one such child—Alice Evans, a girl who left her house in her favourite pink dress and disappeared on Spitalfields meat market. Her portrait is marked with letters L, Y, C, A, and soon Marlott finds a print with Blake’s poem “The Little Girl Lost,” which includes the following lines: “Sleeping Lyca lay/ While the beasts of prey/ Come from caverns deep/ Viewed the maid asleep” (Blake 76). The connection between the poem and the final solution of the crime has not been uncovered, stressing the supernatural, prophetic nature of Blake’s involvement in the plot. Alice turns out to be the only surviving child of the Frankenstein murderer, or “the Beast with the face of a man” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E02) as Blake claims. Therefore she holds the key to the mystery of Frankenstein murders. In his chase after the perpetrator, Marlott even sees himself as the Beast in his dream in episode five, signifying, on the one hand, his guilt about the death of his family (his baby daughter who died of syphilis contracted from him via her mother, who in her despair committed suicide), but on the other representing the prophecy of Blake’s accusation, considering the fact that in the last episode Marlott indirectly brings death to Flora, a teenage would-be prostitute escaped from Billy Oakes that Marlott was supposed to protect.

Yet, the Beast Marlott is looking for is not the only one who abuses children. In Blake’s words, “all children are the lost children” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S02E02), and therefore, in a way, the whole

London is the Beast. When in the first episode Marlott starts his investigation by asking Bow Street runners for a list of missing children, the reply he gets is: “If it’s missing children you want, go to a window and throw a coin” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E01). The series is abundant in images of homeless and impoverished children, ready to do anything for a penny, living in the mud of a meat market, in underground tunnels, or on a landfill. They become easy prey for criminals such as Billy Oates, whose child gang resembles scenes from *Oliver Twist*, or the Bishops, who kill in order to sell corpses to resurrectionists. Yet the impoverished children are not the only abused group in the nineteenth-century London of *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. One of the central conflicts of the series is that of class. The privileged metaphorically feed on the underprivileged, including children, exploiting them in life as in death, robbing them of their corpses and, as many believe, of an afterlife. As the grave robbing trade shows, people are disposable in London of 1827; the Bishop family’s business ran in Burke and Hare’s style goes on for years unnoticed, because they prey on the impoverished, not the privileged.

The other central conflict, linked to that of class, is that of religion. The Anatomy Act is presented by its opponents as a means to deprive the poor of an afterlife, as the bodies of those who pass away at workhouses would be available for dissection. The trade of resurrectionists, who claim that grave robbing is not theft, as body is not property (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E02), underlines the fact that the poor are abused by the privileged in life as well as in death; capitalist exploitation is the driving force behind the business in cadaver trade, as the anatomists of the privileged classes benefit from the ultimate objectification of the bodies of the poor. Paradoxically, the bodies of the poor *are* commodities, in life (through physical work) as in death (as a cadaver). Thus, as in Shelley’s novel, where Frankenstein’s creation is the triumph of science over the natural law or God, the conflict arises between religion and its promise of an afterlife, and science and its belief in progress. The anatomists in the series present themselves as rationalist and scientists, working for the good of mankind, as Frankenstein claimed. Sir Robert Peele says, “[t]his city is dragged kicking and screaming, like raucous infant, into a better future” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E02). These patronising words represent his position of superiority towards those who believe in an afterlife (these are compared to an unruly baby), whose resistance towards progress is irrational and futile. Yet, the problem of the Anatomy Act lies perhaps, more importantly, in the abuse of one’s freedom; the impoverished classes lack freedom in life due to their lack of privilege, and are devoid, in the light of the Anatomy Act, of a freedom to decide what would happen to their bodies after death. Among those is also Marlott, for whom afterlife constitutes a promise of redemption and reunion with his wife and child, presented in the series of dreams and visions, in which a natural landscape stands for heaven, in contrast with the squalor of London in the life on earth.

Thus, these two central conflicts are linked to power yielded in society by the privileged, and a need for rebellion. Mary Shelley in her conversations with Marlott stresses that her novel’s point is that of the need to rebel against those who rule with “tyranny and oppression,” claiming that their power comes from God:

MARLOTT: The title. Why Prometheus?

SHELLEY: He stole fire from the gods and moulded human flesh from clay. Like my Victor. A symbol of rebellion.

MARLOTT: For you and Blake both?

SHELLEY: For all of us... who oppose tyranny and oppression.

MARLOTT: Tyranny and oppression? Or the laws of God?

SHELLEY: What would he not do to defeat death, Mr Marlott? Might we not defy God’s laws... in order to be reunited with those we love?

(*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E03)

The trauma of losing the loved ones is what binds Marlott and Mary Shelley, and her parting words to Marlott turn out to be visionary: “[p]eople like myself and Mr Blake create things that are strange and uncanny, where men may find themselves reflected. Sometimes, people like yourself mistakenly come to us when strange and uncanny things happen to them. Rather than looking in the mirror... and facing what is strange and uncanny in themselves” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E03). As it turns out, the monster



Marlott sees in the mirror in his dream vision is himself, as he becomes the Frankenstein's creature in the last episode of the series.

As it turns out, the solution of the Frankenstein murders is provided not among the anatomists and proponents of the Anatomy Act, but among its challengers, the aristocratic siblings Daniel and Jemima Hervey who oppose the Act due to its religious implications. Daniel Hervey is a holistic doctor who runs a hospital on the outskirts of London, near the river Thames (a place which, complete with ruins of an abbey, is a classic gothic setting) and he is against dissection or modern medical science as such. This character not only adapts Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but also a historical figure Johann Dippel, whom Hervey mentions as his mentor. Dippel, born in Castle Frankenstein, is known as a controversial theologian and alchemist, inventor of Prussian Blue dye and Dippel's Oil (Hervey also creates his own substances and medicines) (Aynsley and Campbell 281-86) who is believed to be a possible inspiration for Mary Shelley's novel (cf. Florescu 1975). His sister Jemima falls in love with Marlott, but is engaged to Sir Bentley Warburton, a member of Parliament who is Peele's opponent, and decides to marry him in spite of his indiscretions in order to finance her brother's research into alternative medicine. Thus the Hervey's family relationships replicate those found in *Frankenstein*—yet, not in Shelley's novel, but in Peake's 1823 play, where Elizabeth is Henry Frankenstein's sister and his friend's Victor Clerval fiancée. This set of characters from the adapted version of *Frankenstein* is complemented by the servant and assistant Lloris, the classic Fritz/Igor figure, whom the children of London's streets call the Monster. He is the one who has procured children's corpses for Daniel Hervey for his experiments. Thus, the “cave baestiam” (beware the beast) sign at the entrance of Hervey's hospital is not a remnant of a medieval menagerie, as he claimed, but a prophetic sign that Daniel Hervey is the Beast, the incarnation of Victor Frankenstein.

Thus, in a twist of the plot, when Daniel Hervey and Lloris incriminate John Marlott in the murder of Flora, for which he is sentenced to death, his corpse becomes available for dissection, as it was the case with executed criminals before the Anatomy Act. Thus, his body is taken by Hervey/Frankenstein and turned into the Creature, his first successful experiment on an adult body. Interestingly, Hervey manages to do that not with dissection and suturing together body parts, but by experimentation with what now would be called stem cells:

Perhaps you were expecting electricity. The keys to life lie deeper than that, much deeper. Inside us. Not around. My teacher, Johann Dippel. He hated the surgeons as much as I did. He wanted to comprehend life, so I studied under him, birth, gestation, generation. When I terminated that poor girl's child I was harvesting raw material for my work. The substance that brought you back from the grave came from her foetus and thousands of others like it (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E06).

Thus, with the famous exclamation, “He lives!” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E06), Hervey turns Marlott into the Creature, the un-dead, robbing him of his chance for redemption and hope for meeting his family again. As the main character—the detective, no less, which in crime mystery genre is usually the character with which the reader or viewer identifies—becomes the Other, one gains the Creature's perspective. Hervey's act of resurrection is perceived by him as the ultimate achievement, a great gift to mankind (as is the case with Shelley's *Frankenstein*): “You are the next step, an existence where there is no suffering because there is no death” (*The Frankenstein Chronicles*, S01E06). Yet, this act constitutes the ultimate violation of Marlott's freedom, as the epigraph of Mary Shelley's novel (from Milton's *Paradise Lost*) suggests: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/ To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/ From darkness to promote me?” (*Paradise Lost* X 743-45).

The corpse being an object without volition or identity is manipulated freely by resurrectionists, anatomists, and finally by Hervey/Frankenstein, yet once it is reanimated, its ultimate objectification becomes evident. For Marlott, life—or in this case, re-animation—is not an ultimate gift and value, and death he was robbed of was not suffering, as Hervey claims. The memory of his family's death constituted his identity, and his penance was his motivation in life. The series is a comment on the contemporary commodification of bodies, but also a reference to the Victorian era as an ambiguous legacy, obsessed both by religious concerns as well as scientific and technological progress, a conflict internalised and represented by Harvey. Therefore, like *Penny Dreadful's* Lily, Marlott/the Creature rebels against lack of

control over his own fate, and his trauma (the death of family) is ultimately his driving force—without hope of reconciliation with his wife in heaven he loses himself. In the last scene of the series, he murders Lloris in order to escape Hervey's house and runs away into the woods—a scene recreating Frankenstein's Creature's venturing into the world.

## Conclusion: The Frankenstein Meme—What It Means Now?

Adaptation may be perceived as the Frankenstein Creature: it offers a rebirth of texts which may inspire one to exclaim: "it's alive!" Like the Creature, a poor and imperfect adaptation of a human being (Perry 139), cultural texts are sutured together from sourcetexts and subsequent appropriations, "gathered and recombined" (Perry 140). The purpose of that is, as it has been mentioned at the beginning, to present new perspectives which speak to current audiences; adaptations constitute palimpsestic combinations of memories of text, offering new insights into previously hidden or marginalised stories (Perry 141). Thus the cultural memes travel through space and time.

What is perhaps interesting, however, is the ubiquitous use of the nineteenth-century texts for such re-animations of cultural memes in contemporary popular culture, as selected examples also illustrate. In her book *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick named the nineteenth century "The Age of Frankenstein" (x). Although she mentioned this phrase in the context of gender politics in the nineteenth-century gothic fiction, it is a useful shorthand for a period in history which has become, from the twenty-first-century perspective, "an extension of modernity's mythos because [it] represent[s] the beginnings of modern western culture, the age of industrialization and the birth of consumer culture" (Lee and King para. 18). Frankenstein's Creature, is, therefore, "modernity personified" (*Penny Dreadful*, S01E03), "a spectacle, monstrous and self-destructive" (Lee and King para. 18). The new mankind and the new age Victor Frankenstein is so proud to introduce is the metaphor of contemporary humanity: children of industry and technology, commodifying and commodified, protean, conflicted, brutal yet poetic, and traumatized.

Nevertheless, a meme as a single unit is difficult to grasp, as it has been noted by Susan Blackmore (53), and just as the first four notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and not the whole work, seem to be the meme (Blackmore 53), only certain aspects or themes of *Frankenstein* retain their power to travel through centuries of culture as "the smallest elements that replicate themselves with reliability and fecundity" (Dennet, qtd in Blackmore 54). This is obviously Boris Karloff's iconic rendition of the Creature from Whale's 1931 film, which merges in the popular imagination with the name of its creator; or, in its essence, the key meme replicated through appropriation is the theme of the artificial creation of non-human and non-natural life. The rest of the original sourcetext is subject to selection pressures (Blackmore 54), submerged in new contexts and stories, depending on the cultural demands of the period. In this sense, the nineteenth-century replicated and appropriated in contemporary culture is also a meme, or, as Frederic Jameson noted, a simulacrum, "a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and 'spectacles'" (18)—reduced to key images and motifs that contemporary audience decodes as "Victorian," evident both in the trends of neo-Victorianism and biofiction. It is arguable, however, whether cultural nostalgia is "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (Jameson 18); perhaps the evolutionary logic of the memetics is more apt here, as it pinpoints that the preservation of certain memes in new contexts is not a cultural whim, but rather a fulfillment of certain cultural pressures of the time.

The twenty-first-century embodiments of the Frankenstein Meme are, therefore, a reflection of those concerns which speak most profoundly to contemporary audiences. Although a potent theme of contemporary times, present in Shelley's text, seems to be the dangers of new technologies and scientific discoveries (and perhaps, such themes are central in other current renditions), the key issue present in the discussed television series is the perspective of the Creature, that is, the one who is objectified, then manipulated and re-animated against their will, victimised and traumatised. By extension, these shows also represent the perspective of other underprivileged characters: sexually abused women, murdered children, and the exploited poor. What is also significant is the fact that the two Frankenstein creatures on

whom this analysis has focused identify themselves and find motivation in the traumas they have survived in their lives before re-animation. This perhaps speaks to the centrality of trauma in the “world culture” of the current milieu.

The self-identification of the audiences with Marlott the Creature of *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, or with the abandoned, traumatised and conflicted creatures in *Penny Dreadful* is the same empathy for the Other that accompanied the readers of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* since its creation in 1818. Yet, a realisation that the contemporaries are the ‘new humanity’ created by the Victorian “Frankensteins” shows our own conflicted position towards our nineteenth-century ancestors and their legacy of technology, science, urbanisation and consumerism.

## Works cited

- Aynsley, E. E., and W. A. Campbell. “Johann Konrad Dippel, 1673–1734.” *Medical History* 6.3 (July 1962): 281–6. *PubMed Central*. Web. 28 August 2017. <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1034731/>>
- Bartoněk, Antonín. “Mycenaean words in Homer.” Clairis, Christos. *Recherches en linguistique grecque*. L’Harmattan, 2002. 91–4. *Google Book Search*. Web. 12 August 2017. <[https://books.google.pl/books?id=KKWlkCFX1ZsC&hl=pl&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.pl/books?id=KKWlkCFX1ZsC&hl=pl&source=gbs_navlinks_s)>
- Blackmore, Susan. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Blake, William. “The Little Girl Lost.” *Blake. The Complete Poems*. Ed. W. H. Stevenson. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Harrow: Pearson Longman, 2007: 75–7. *Google Book Search*. Web. 20 August 2017. <[https://books.google.pl/books?id=JKSOAwAAQBAJ&dq=Blake.+The+Complete+Poems&hl=pl&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.pl/books?id=JKSOAwAAQBAJ&dq=Blake.+The+Complete+Poems&hl=pl&source=gbs_navlinks_s)>
- Branagh, Kenneth. Dir. *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*. TriStar Pictures, 1994. Film.
- Brooks, Mel. Dir. *Young Frankenstein*. Gruskoff/Venture Films, 1974. Film.
- Carroll, Samantha J. “Putting the ‘Neo’ Back into Neo-Victorian: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction.” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3.2 (2010): 172–205. Web. 12 August 2013. <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>>
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminine, Psychoanalysis*. 1993. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- Floresu, Radu. *In Search of Frankenstein: Exploring the Myth Behind Mary Shelley’s Monster*. London: Robson Books, 1996. Print.
- Green, Stephanie. “Lily Frankenstein: The Gothic New Woman in *Penny Dreadful*.” *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media* 28, June 2017. Web. 12 July 2017. <<http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2017/06/14/green/>>
- Grove, Philip B. “Proteus.” *Wester’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*. Cologne: Könnemann, 1993. 1824. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda, with Siobhan O’Flynn. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.
- Kaplan, Cora. *Victoriana—Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. Print.
- Kirchknopf, Andrea. “(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts.” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1.1 (2008): 53–80. Web. 5 April 2009. <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>>
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise. “Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special/Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus*.” *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 18.3 (2013): 4–21. *Sydney Open Journals Online*. Web. 3 May 2017. <<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/AJVS/article/view/9382>>
- Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. New York and London: Methuen, 1980. Print.
- Lackey, Michael. “Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction.” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31.1 (2016): 3–10. *Taylor and Francis Online*. Web. 3 May 2017. <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08989575.2016.1095583>>
- Lee, Alison and Frederick D. King. “From Text, to Myth, to Meme: *Penny Dreadful* and Adaptation.” *Cahiers victoriens et éduardiens* 82 (2015). *Revue.org*. Web. 12 July 2017. <<https://cve.revues.org/2343>>
- Leitch, Thomas. “Adaptation and Intertextuality, or, What isn’t an Adaptation, and What Does it Matter?” *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*. Ed. Deborah Cartmell. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012: 87–104. Print.
- Letissier, Georges. “Dickens and Post-Victorian Fiction.” *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*. Ed. Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004. 111–128. Print.
- Marsden, Jean I. “Introduction.” *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of The Works and the Myth*. Ed. Jean I. Marsden. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991: 1–28. *Google Books Search*. Web. 21 August 2017. <[https://books.google.pl/books/about/The\\_Appropriation\\_of\\_Shakespeare.html?id=VTlaAAAMAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.pl/books/about/The_Appropriation_of_Shakespeare.html?id=VTlaAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y)>
- Milton, John. (1667). *Paradise Lost*. London: Charles Tilt, 1838. Print.
- Moulin, Joanny. “Biofiction.” *The Biography Society*. Web. 3 March 2017. <<http://biographysociety.org/tag/biofiction/>>

- Peake, Richard Brinsley. *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*. [1823] (August 2011). *Romantic Circles*. Web. 11 July 2017 <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/peake/index.html>>
- Penny Dreadful*. Prod. John Logan. New York: Showtime Networks, 2014-2016. Television.
- Perry, Dennis R. "The Recombinant Mystery of Frankenstein: Experiments in Film Adaptation." *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*. Ed. Thomas Leitch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 137-53. Print.
- Poore, Benjamin. "The Transformed Beast: *Penny Dreadful*, Adaptation, and the Gothic." *Victoriographies* 6.1 (2016): 62–81. *Edinburgh University Press*. Web. 27 August 2017. <<http://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/vic.2016.0211>>
- Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Shelley, Mary W. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. 1818, 1831. Boston and Cambridge: Sever, Francis & Co., 1869. Print.
- Sweet, Matthew. *Inventing the Victorians*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print.
- The Frankenstein Chronicles*. Prod. Benjamin Ross. London: ITV, 2015.
- Tropp, Martin. "Re-Creating the Monster. *Frankenstein* and Film." *Nineteenth-Century Women at the Movies: Adapting Classic Women's Fiction to Film*. Ed. Barbara Lupack. Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1999: 23-77. Print.
- Whale, James. Dir. *Bride of Frankenstein*. Universal Pictures, 1935. Film.
- Yousef, Nancy. "The Monster in a Dark Room: *Frankenstein*, Feminism and Philosophy." *Modern Language Quarterly* 63.2 (June 2002): 197-226. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 August 2017. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/22939>>