

INTERSEMIOTIC AND INTRALINGUAL TRANSLATION IN *FRANKENSTEIN: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL*

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ABSTRACT

This paper reads *Frankenstein: The Graphic Novel* by Jason Cobley and Brigit Viney as an exercise in two modes of translation working simultaneously: Intersemiotic, where Shelley's prose becomes visual sign, and intralingual, where her language is reworded for a new medium and a new audience. While *Frankenstein* has generated extensive scholarship on adaptation across film and visual media, the combined operation of these two translation modes within graphic novel adaptations has received comparatively little sustained attention. Three scenes serve as the ground of analysis: Victor's confrontation with the creature, his dream following the act of creation, and the creature's education in the De Lacey household. Read through Charles Peirce's semiotic framework, the visual choices of the adaptation (iconic, indexical, and symbolic) do more than illustrate Shelley's narrative; they press on its emotional and thematic pressure points in ways the prose expresses through different semiotic resources. Umberto Eco's attention to cultural codes anchors the visual language in the interpretive expectations of contemporary readers, while Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject serves as a supplementary lens in the nightmare sequence, where the horror of bodily dissolution is most acute. Across all three scenes, visual sign-making and verbal rewording work together to reshape Shelley's representations of power, horror, and isolation for a new readership.

KEYWORDS: Graphic novel; Frankenstein; Intersmiotic; Intralingual

INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) sits at the heart of Gothic literature, its concerns with creation, monstrosity, and the human condition carried in a prose of unusual density and psychological depth. The novel's long afterlife in adaptation reflects the restlessness of those concerns: each new version must decide what to keep, what to shed, and what can only be said in the new medium's own terms. *Frankenstein: The Graphic Novel* by Jason Cobley and Brigit Viney (2010) occupies a particular position in this history. Working with dialogue, caption, and illustration, the visual narrative does not simply repackaging Shelley for a modern audience; it rewrites her story through a visual-verbal medium with its own expressive logic. This paper approaches that rewriting as a form of

translation, attending to two modes Jakobson identifies: Intersemiotic translation, which converts text into visual signs, and intralingual translation, which rephrases text within the same language (114). Analysed across three pivotal scenes, these translation practices reveal how Cobley and Viney extend Shelley's exploration of power, horror, and isolation into a new expressive register.

Scholarship on *Frankenstein* adaptations has focused extensively on film and theatrical versions. Film studies scholarship, represented by work such as that of Forry and Young, tracks how successive cinematic versions negotiate between Shelley's novel and popular horror conventions, often at the cost of the philosophical and psychological dimensions of the original. Hutcheon's theory of adaptation foregrounds the

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reader's or viewer's awareness of the source text as a defining feature of the adaptive experience (Hutcheon 14), while Jakobson's translation framework has been used to theorise the shift from verbal to visual sign systems in screen adaptations (Zanettin 16). Each of these studies focuses on a single medium and a single mode of transformation: the visual rendering of Shelley's imagery or the rewording of her language, but rarely both at once. The graphic novel, which operates through the continuous interaction of image and abbreviated verbal text, demands a framework that can account for both operations together. Groensteen, Chute, and Postema have each shown that the comics page produces meaning through spatial and sequential logics that prose cannot replicate, yet this formal distinctiveness has not been brought to bear on *Frankenstein* adaptation studies. This paper addresses that gap by reading *Frankenstein: The Graphic Novel* as a site where image-making and verbal rewording press on Shelley's text together, each gaining force from the other.

Jakobson's three-part model of Intralingual, interlingual, and Intersemiotic translation establishes the theoretical ground (114); the third category is especially productive given what is at stake when narrative and emotion must travel from the verbal sign into the visual one (Zanettin 16). Peirce's semiotic categories of icon, index, and symbol give the analysis instruments for tracking how individual images work (Peirce 102-103). Eco's theory of cultural codes adds a further dimension, explaining how the visual text draws on culturally shared iconographies to produce legible meaning in a contemporary readership (Eco 130). Kristeva's account of the abject is brought in as a supplementary lens where the horror of bodily dissolution is most acute, particularly in the nightmare sequence of Figure 2 (Kristeva 1-2). The analysis moves across Figure 1, Victor's confrontation with the creature (pp. 98-99); Figure 2, Victor's nightmare following the creature's birth (pp. 26-27); and Figure 3, the creature's education beside the De Lacey family (pp. 64-65). Across these three moments, the paper argues that the two translation modes do not operate in sequence but simultaneously: each panel both rewrites Shelley's language and converts her verbal imagery into visual sign, and it is the interaction of

these two processes that adapts distinctive meanings.

MASTER AND MAKER

The confrontation between Victor Frankenstein and his creature ranks among the most charged scenes in Shelley's novel. The monster has demanded a companion; Victor has refused; and the conversation closes on a threat that shadows everything that follows: "I shall be with you on your wedding-night" (Shelley 182-183). Cobley and Viney adapt this confrontation across pages 98-99. The choices they make in the silhouettes, the sea, and the tightened dialogue are where the adaptation's argument about power, revenge, and isolation becomes visible.

Shelley renders the encounter through the accumulated weight of dialogue and interiority: Victor's love for Elizabeth, his horror at the creature's rhetoric, his resolve to fight. The monster's speeches sprawl not from carelessness but because his anguish overflows its boundaries. The comics adaptation cannot accommodate that sprawl, and its intralingual rewording strips the monster's language back to its emotional skeleton. Where Shelley writes: "Are you to be happy while I grovel in the intensity of my wretchedness? you can blast my other passions, but revenge remains, revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food!" (Shelley 182), the adaptation reads: "Are you going to be happy, while I am miserable? I will have my revenge! You will be sorry for the injuries you have given me" (Cobley and Viney 98). The poetic flourishes are gone, but the anguish and the threat remain. The significance of this rewording lies in what it removes and in what it makes room for: by condensing the monster's speech, the verbal text cedes expressive territory to the image, and it is in that ceded space that Intersemiotic translation does its work. The spatial constraint of the speech bubble makes brevity obligatory, as Hutcheon observes when she notes that adaptations often prioritise accessibility for new audiences, balancing fidelity to the source with the demands of the new medium (16-17).

The Intersemiotic dimension of Figure 1 takes what the words cannot carry and gives it to the image. In the second panel, the monster towers over Victor, his scarred face and glowing eyes placed above the smaller man in a composition that makes

dominance immediately legible. The creature's physical positioning above Victor enacts Peircean iconicity: a direct visual resemblance to the power relation the text describes (Peirce 102). His extended arm and Victor's defensive posture are indexical; they point to the hostility between the two figures as directly as a footprint points to the walker who left it. In Shelley, the creature declares "You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!" (Shelley 182); in the adaptation, the line sharpens into a blunter threat: "Before you kill me, be sure of your own safety!" (Cobley and Viney 98). That abbreviated dialogue is set inside a visual field where the power dynamic is already established before the reader parses a word, which is precisely the point: the intralingual compression and the

Intersemiotic composition are not separate choices but two aspects of a single act of translation. Behind both figures, a desolate beach and a turbulent sea work symbolically: the sea here carries the weight of isolation and the uncontrollable that Shelley's extended prose distributes across several paragraphs, and its presence in a single background panel signals how the graphic medium concentrates what the novel disperses. The sea acts as a visual metaphor for the uncontrollable forces of nature and fate, echoing Shelley's Romantic themes of humanity's fraught relationship with the sublime, as Abrams discusses in his analysis of Romantic literature (Abrams 97).



Figure 1. Pages 98-99

A comparison between Shelley's prose and the graphic panel makes the compression of Intersemiotic conversion visible at its most precise. Shelley describes Victor's departure: "Between two and three in the morning the moon rose; and I then, putting my basket aboard a little skiff, sailed out about four miles from the shore" (Shelley 183). The adaptation converts this sentence into a single image: Victor on the water at

night, throwing the unfinished body of the creature overboard. Time, direction, solitude, and the act of disposal are all held in that one panel without a word of exposition (Cobley and Viney 99). The sixth panel closes in on Victor's face as he reflects: "I thought again of his words. That was going to be the day of my death" (Cobley and Viney 99). Shelley's equivalent reads: "I shuddered to think who might be the next victim sacrificed to his

insatiate revenge” (Shelley 183). The contemplating face coupled with his loneliness against darkness in the rest of the panel externalises that inward thought and makes the reader a direct witness to Victor’s dread. The use of shadow and light in this panel enhances the mood of dread, a technique that aligns with Gothic visual traditions, as Botting observes in his study of the Gothic (Botting 5).

DREAM, DESIRE, AND DEATH

Shelley’s account of Victor waking in horror after completing the creature is among the most psychologically compressed passages in the novel. The dream begins in pleasure: Elizabeth walks toward him in Ingolstadt. Without warning, it tips into decay as her living face becomes his dead mother’s, worm-riddled and shrouded (Shelley 57-58). The sequence is one of the clearest moments in the novel where creation, sexuality, guilt, and death converge, and it is precisely the kind of passage where the visual medium has something to contribute that prose expresses through different means.

Cobley and Viney’s intralingual rewording of the dream condenses Shelley’s introspective prose into a caption sequence that tracks the transformation step by step. Shelley writes: “I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death” (Shelley 57). The comics adaptation renders this as: “I dreamed about Elizabeth. She was walking in Ingolstadt. Pleased and surprised, I embraced her. But as I kissed her lips, they turned deathly white. And she became my dead mother!” (Cobley and Viney 26-27). Shelley’s language in that passage carries its own terrible beauty: “bloom of health,” “livid with the hue of death.” The adaptation does not attempt to match it; instead, the language steps back to let the image do the affective work that Shelley’s prose achieves verbally. This redistribution of expressive labour between word and image is what distinguishes the graphic medium from other adaptive forms: Intralingual condensation and Intersemiotic conversion are not sequential operations but a single gesture in which the verbal recedes precisely so that the visual can advance. The

rewording aligns with the graphic medium’s need for brevity, ensuring that text complements the visual narrative without overwhelming it, as McCloud notes in his analysis of comic structure (McCloud 45).

The panels of Figure 2 work sequentially through the dream and build their effect through contrast and rupture. The first panel presents Elizabeth bathed in soft warm light, a Peircean icon of the vitality Shelley attributes to her (Cobley and Viney 26). The inset panels showing Victor and Elizabeth in close embrace are a rare moment of visual tenderness in the comics adaptation; Victor appears almost at ease, his face open in a way the illustrations rarely allow. Then the colour shifts, the warmth cools, and the final panel reveals the corpse: skeletal face, hollow eyes, grave-worms folding through the shroud (Cobley and Viney 27). Shelley’s line becomes image: “a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel” (Shelley 57). The worms, which in Shelley’s text arrive in a subordinate clause, occupy the panel with a different weight; they are unavoidable, filling the visual field the reader’s eye must traverse. The visual medium makes simultaneous what the prose can only make sequential, placing the worms and the shrouded figure in the same instant of perception rather than in successive clauses: this is a difference of kind, not degree. The transformation from Elizabeth to the dead mother functions as a visual metaphor, drawing on Gothic associations between desire and death (Botting 60). Within the adaptation, the image also suggests the destructive consequences of Victor’s hubristic attempt to transgress natural boundaries. The abject quality of the image is amplified by the cultural codes through which contemporary readers interpret it, as Eco’s theory of semiotics suggests (Eco 132). Kristeva’s account of the abject names what this image enacts: the horror that erupts when the boundary between the living body and its dissolution collapses (Kristeva 1-2). The transformation from lover to corpse enacts exactly that collapse: desire and death occupy the same figure, and the visual medium renders this simultaneity in a way prose can only describe sequentially.

The panel where Victor screams “AAAAH!” ties the internal to the external in a way Shelley’s prose

manages through different means. Shelley writes: "I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead" (Shelley 57). The cold dew is a physical symptom described from within. The comics sequence externalises it through the scream, the face contorted in terror, and the dark reddish-brown palette pressing in from all sides (Cobley and Viney 27). This visual choice exemplifies how Intersemiotic conversion can heighten emotional intensity, rendering Victor's psychological state through facial expression and colour palette rather than relying solely on textual description (Zanettin 20). The final panel on page 27 closes the sequence by bringing the dream and the waking world together: the creature's shadowy

silhouette fills the window, made visible by the moonlight, before the glass shatters with a dramatic "CRACK!!" (Cobley and Viney 27). The creature has always been outside; the broken glass marks the point at which Victor's psychological boundary also fractures. Shelley's "dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters" (Shelley 57) is present in the illustration, but the shattered window is the adaptation's own addition. The cold light casts harsh shadows that intensify the Gothic atmosphere of dread (Botting 21), while the broken window functions as a visual motif for the fragility of Victor's mental state.



Figure 2: pages 26-27

KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT BELONGING

The De Lacey sequence in Shelley's novel charts the creature's education in language, history, and the social world. Its affective centre is the gap between what he learns and what he can never

have. Felix teaches Safie, the creature listens from outside, and through Volney's *Ruins of Empires* he acquires a knowledge of human history that deepens rather than relieves his isolation (Shelley 125-127). The sequence ends on the question that condenses everything: "Was I, then, a monster, a

blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?" (Shelley 127). Cobley and Viney's adaptation of this passage across pages 64-65 tests what the visual medium can do with a scene that is, in Shelley, entirely interior. It also poses the problem Kristeva names in a different register: the creature's growing awareness of his own abjection, his sense of being expelled from a human community that defines itself partly by excluding him.

The intralingual rewording here performs its characteristic compression on a passage of extraordinary richness. Shelley's account of the creature's engagement with world history runs across several paragraphs: "I heard of the slothful Asiatics, of the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Grecians, of the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans ... I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants" (Shelley 126). The adaptation distils this to: "Through this wonderful book I gained knowledge of history. I heard the terrible things people had done, I turned away in horror" (Cobley and Viney 65). Shelley's creature learns specifics: names, empires, peoples. His response is textured accordingly. The comics version of the creature responds to history as undifferentiated violence, and this reframing matters because it aligns the verbal condensation with the visual register that follows: the fiery backdrop of warriors and ruins is only legible as the visual equivalent of that compressed horror. The adaptation condenses Shelley's detailed account of history into a broader narrative of human violence, an example of intralingual translation shaped by the demands of the comics medium (Jakobson 114; McCloud 47). Here, Intralingual and Intersemiotic translation converge on the same interpretive point: history, for this creature, is not knowledge that liberates but weight that confirms his exclusion

The Intersemiotic dimension of Figure 3 builds its visual argument around two contrasting registers. The opening panel shows Safie and Felix in the cottage with Felix calling out to her warmly, the domestic space lit with a quality that signals safety and attachment (Cobley and Viney 64). The panel stands as an icon of everything the creature wants and cannot enter: the harmony of the De Lacey household rendered spatially and visually

immediate. Against it sits the flash page: a large close-up of the creature's face with glowing yellow eyes dominating the panel and a backdrop of fire, warriors, and ruined landscape behind him (Cobley and Viney 65). This image indexes his inner condition, fascination curdling into sorrow, the knowledge he has gained fusing with the exclusion he cannot escape. The fiery background symbolises the violent history he learns about, a visual metaphor for the destructive nature of humanity he comes to understand through Felix's lessons. This symbolic element directly translates Shelley's textual reference to the "wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans" and the "hapless fate" of indigenous peoples (Shelley 126), and the critical point is that it does so not as an illustration of the verbal text but as a replacement for it: where Shelley's creature narrates at length, the adapted creature falls almost silent and the image speaks instead (Cobley and Viney 65). Eco's framework of cultural codes explains how that image carries the requisite meaning: the shared visual vocabulary of historical violence makes the creature's disillusionment legible to a modern reader without the verbal scaffolding Shelley requires (Eco 132).

The third panel places the creature's narration alongside a scene of domestic warmth: Safie and Felix in a tender exchange with the cottage interior lit in soft colours (Cobley and Viney 65). "Felix was extremely happy; the lady didn't seem to understand him but smiled. Days passed peacefully. Joy had taken the place of sadness." The creature reports happiness he does not share. The visual contrast makes this dispossession felt rather than stated; the warm palette of the cottage set against the harsh fiery tones of every panel representing the creature's perspective puts the reader inside the asymmetry without commentary. The flash panel where the creature stands alone against a desolate landscape surrounded by skulls and barren trees externalises Shelley's inward question: "Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth?" (Shelley 127; Cobley and Viney 65). The caption beside it reads: "I thought about myself. I knew nothing about my creation or my creator. I was extremely ugly, and I wasn't the same as men." Skulls and barren trees serve as symbols of death and desolation, reflecting the creature's internal sense of being a "blot" on the earth, while

his towering shadowy figure reinforces his otherness. Where Shelley delivers this moment as introspective inquiry, the comics adaptation gives it back as witnessed isolation, and the shift in angle produces its own affective register.

The panel where Safie reads from Volney's book illustrates the education-exclusion dynamic with particular precision (Cobley and Viney 65). Safie's face is presented as fair and bright as the creature narrates: "I listened too, as Felix taught Safie history, governments, and religions of different countries." In the visual vocabulary of Western painting, enlightenment travels with light; here it travels to Safie and not to the creature. His panels

are darker and more chaotic: imagery of knowledge received as violence rather than gift. Shelley writes that the creature's education was a source of "wonder and delight" (Shelley 126), a phrase his subsequent despair immediately qualifies. The visual narrative makes no such concession to wonder; it shows the creature receiving knowledge that deepens the wound. In doing so, it takes a position on the creature's experience that Shelley renders as internal contradiction, and it renders that position in colour, composition, and symbolic imagery: the vocabulary Zanettin identifies as central to intersemiotic conversion in the graphic medium (Zanettin 22).



Figure 3: pages 64-65

CONCLUSION

Frankenstein: The Graphic Novel demonstrates how Intersemiotic and Intralingual translation, working in concert, produce meanings that neither mode could achieve on its own. The central argument of this paper has been that Cobley and Viney's adaptation is not simply a visual rendering of Shelley's text or a simplified rewording of it, but

a form in which verbal condensation and visual sign-making interact at every level of the page. The confrontation scene, the nightmare sequence, and the De Lacey episode each show this interaction differently: the compression of speech clears space for iconicity and indexicality in the first; the recession of verbal beauty enables the object force of a single panel in the second; the

tightening of historical narration makes the fiery backdrop interpretively legible in the third. These three analyses contribute to translation studies by extending the concept of Intersemiotic translation beyond single-mode conversions, to adaptation studies by showing that graphic novel adaptations of canonical literary texts require a dual-mode analytical framework, and to graphic narrative scholarship by treating the comics page's spatial logic as an interpretive resource that actively reshapes the meanings it carries from its source.

The analysis stays within a single comics adaptation of *Frankenstein*; the question of how different media (film, theatre, illustrated edition) handle the same scenes therefore goes unasked. The theoretical emphasis on Peirce and Eco leaves other productive frameworks largely untouched: psychoanalytic readings of the creature's formation and postcolonial approaches to the De Lacey sequence both offer angles this paper does not pursue. Three scenes, however representative, do not account for the visual narrative as a whole. Each of these gaps points toward work the present paper cannot do.

Those gaps suggest directions for subsequent research. Barthes' theory of narrative codes offers another route into the way the visual text constructs meaning through the interplay of verbal and drawn signs (Barthes 19) and could extend the analysis to panels this paper has not considered. The work of Groensteen, Chute, and Postema on sequential logic, ethical stakes, and narrative fragmentation raises questions about how the adaptation positions its reader in relation to the creature's suffering that translation theory alone cannot fully answer. A comparative study of multiple *Frankenstein* adaptations could examine whether the translation dynamics identified here are specific to the graphic novel form or appear across other media in different configurations. As Hutcheon argues, adaptations are not copies but "deliberate, announced, and extended reworkings" that generate their own interpretations (14). The visual narrative does not close down Shelley's text; it opens a different way of reading it, one in which the visual and the verbal make demands on each other that neither can wholly satisfy alone.

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