

It's Alive: Adapting *Frankenstein* for Performance

Daniela Melgar

Unit description:

Each year, my sophomore English class reads Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Through the course of the unit, students spend time discussing and debating the different issues and themes in the novel (nature vs. nurture, science vs. nature, monster vs. victim). Students also look at point of view, discussing how the reader's understanding of Victor and the Creature changes based on who is telling the story.

The lessons included below would come at the end of the unit. The assignment would serve as a final, culminating project.

Some scaffolding is required through the course of the unit. Students will view different versions and adaptations of *Frankenstein* (graphic novels, cartoons, films), so that they can have an understanding of interpretation and adaptation in classics such as *Frankenstein*.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to identify point of view and character in a performance piece.
- Students will be able to collaborate with peers to write an adaptation of a text.
- Students will be able to create an adaptation of a written text, using different methods of adaptation as a framework.
- Students will be able to perform a section of text.

Student grade level: Sophomores, English 10

Time needed: The entire unit and reading of the novel would take four weeks. These lessons would come at the end of the unit, over the course of three 50-minute periods.

Materials needed: *Frankenstein*, iPad/notebook, assignment sheet, handout with methods for adaptation

Lesson description:

DAY 1 (50 minutes)—

Opening activity (20 minutes): Distribute four line “scenes” with text from *Frankenstein*. Group students together randomly, and have them create a tableau for the text they have been given. As each tableau is shared with the larger group, the rest of the class can say what they see and notice about the characters and the story. How does interpretation vary from group to group?

Discussion (15 minutes): Methods of adapting a text for performance (drawing from Matthew Spangler’s handout provided during institute). Use references from earlier examples of adaptations for each method.

Assignment (15 minutes): The assignment will be distributed and explained-- Students will be grouped randomly, in groups of 3-4. Students will be provided a list of chapters they can use to adapt into a 5-10 minute theatre piece. They must draw from the methods of adaptation discussed earlier in class. Each student must be involved in the scene presentation.

They will then break up into groups and use the remaining time to start creating and crafting their scripts.

DAY 2 (50 minutes)—

Activity: Students will use class time to finish creating/composing/adapting their scripts. They should also be rehearsing their pieces in preparation for tomorrow’s presentations.

DAY 3 (50 minutes)—

Activity: Student groups will be sharing their adaptations with their classmates. After sharing, there will be a reflection piece in the large group—things they noticed, challenges, obstacles, A-Ha moments, and then an individual reflection piece to be used as checkout from the unit.

Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction

Matthew Spangler, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Performance Studies
San José State University

Six adaptation strategies:

1) **For third person narration: fuse the narration with the point(s) of view of the character(s).** The stage play of T.C Boyle's novel *The Tortilla Curtain* does this. Candido, América, and Delaney perform narration that applies to their respective points of view with the emotional attitude of their characters at that particular moment in the story. The narration serves as a kind of internal monologue. A decision to make it whether to leave the third person tense or change it to first person (as *Tortilla Curtain* does).

2) **For third person narration (another strategy): create a single character for the narrator, a character outside the story itself.** Start by asking the following questions of the story's narrator: (a) Who would know this information? (b) Who would want to tell this story and why? (c) What is the narrator's attitude toward the story's characters and events? Some common choices: a nosy neighbor; an older version of one of the characters in the story; a sympathetic, or not, outsider. Think of the narrator in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

3) **For first person narration: split the narration into two or more "I" voices.** Start by identifying the contradictions in the narrator's voice and create separate characters from these contradictions. A common strategy is the creation an older and younger self (Act I of my adaptation of *The Kite Runner* does this). But the split doesn't have to be based on age; it could be based on any division within the character.

4) **For first person narration: no split.** The narrator moves between speaking to the audience and playing moments of dialogue with other characters on stage (Act II of my adaptation of *The Kite Runner*). Think of the relationship between soliloquy and dialogue in Shakespeare's plays.

5) **For first or third person narrator: choral scripting.** This is different from the other strategies discussed here in that there is relatively little, or maybe even no consideration of character. Instead of a focus on character, the script is written based on the musicality and rhythm of language, like a piece of music, with the actors' voices being the musical instruments. Repetition can be very effective. See the enclosed adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (opening of Part I and Part III).

6) **For first or third person narrator: images.** Tell the story through a series of three visual images created with your bodies. You should give each image a title, which will serve to distinguish it from the others and tie it back to the story. For example: in image number one, two actors hug while a third actor stands off to the side. One of the actors in the embrace says, "Home." In image two, one actor leaves the embrace and hugs the third actor, and says, "Away." In image three, the first actor (the one left alone) crawls into a ball on the floor and tires to make himself as small as possible, while the other two actors face out, and hold hands, as is preparing for a new life together. Together, they say, "Together." The actor on the floor says, "Forgotten."

