

Adapting Responsibility: Ethical Transformation in Frankenstein and Its Netflix Reimagining

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ethical transformation of responsibility across literary and mass-mediated contexts through a comparative analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its contemporary streaming reinterpretation on Netflix, with particular reference to *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. Shelley's novel foregrounds moral accountability through individual agency, scientific ambition, and creator-creation relationships, whereas the Netflix-era adaptation reframes responsibility within institutional power, surveillance, and collective ethics. Drawing on narratology, adaptation theory, and mass communication perspectives, the study develops an integrative framework linking text, medium, audience, and institution. Using qualitative comparative analysis, the paper explores how ethical meaning is reshaped through audiovisual storytelling, seriality, and platform-driven narrative economies. Findings suggest that responsibility evolves from a personal moral burden in Shelley's Romantic context to a distributed, systemic concern in contemporary streaming culture. The study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating how classic literary ethics are reconfigured within mass-mediated environments, highlighting implications for media literacy, cultural memory, and technological governance.

Keywords: Literary adaptation, Ethical responsibility, Frankenstein, Streaming culture and Narrative transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its first publication in 1818, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley has remained one of the most influential literary explorations of scientific ambition, moral responsibility, and the consequences of human creation. Far beyond its Gothic surface, the novel articulates a profound ethical inquiry into the obligations of creators toward their creations and, more broadly, toward society. Shelley situates responsibility as a deeply personal moral burden, embodied in Victor Frankenstein's failure to nurture or guide the being he animates. This abandonment produces suffering, alienation, and violence, suggesting that ethical accountability does not end with invention but extends to care, recognition, and social integration (Shelley, 1818/2003; Mellor, 1988).

Over the past two centuries, *Frankenstein* has generated sustained scholarly attention across literary studies, philosophy, and science ethics. Critics have emphasized the novel's engagement with Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic humanism, arguing that Shelley critiques instrumental science divorced from empathy and moral foresight (Poovey, 1984; Baldick, 1987). More recent interdisciplinary scholarship connects *Frankenstein* to contemporary debates in bioethics, artificial intelligence, and technological governance, positioning the Creature as an enduring metaphor for unintended consequences of innovation (Haraway, 2016; Haynes, 2020). Within this body of research, responsibility is understood not merely as individual guilt but as a complex ethical relation involving power, care, and social obligation. At the same time, the cultural afterlife of *Frankenstein* has increasingly unfolded through mass-mediated forms, particularly film, television, and streaming platforms. Adaptation scholars argue that literary

narratives are not simply transferred across media but are actively transformed through audiovisual aesthetics, serial storytelling, and institutional production logics (Hutcheon, 2006; Stam, 2005). In contemporary streaming culture, platforms such as Netflix play a central role in reshaping classic texts for global audiences. Series such as *The Frankenstein Chronicles* exemplify how Shelley's ethical concerns are reframed within narratives of policing, medical experimentation, and social control, relocating responsibility from an isolated scientific figure to broader institutional systems.

This shift reflects wider transformations in mass communication. Scholars of media convergence note that digital platforms promote serialized narratives, algorithmic circulation, and participatory reception, altering how audiences encounter and interpret adapted literature (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Whereas Shelley's original novel foregrounds interior moral struggle and personal accountability, streaming adaptations increasingly emphasize collective structures state power, biomedical institutions, and urban surveillance thereby recasting responsibility as distributed and systemic. From a mass communication perspective, this evolution aligns with Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model, which highlights how meaning is co-produced by texts, media institutions, and audiences within specific cultural contexts.

Recent studies further underscore the relevance of *Frankenstein* for understanding ethical responsibility in technologically mediated societies. Studies in digital humanities and science communication argue that contemporary adaptations mobilize Shelley's narrative to address anxieties surrounding automation, data governance, and posthuman identity (Hayles, 2017; Cave & Dihal, 2020). Meanwhile, cultural industry research demonstrates how streaming platforms shape narrative priorities through market-driven strategies, privileging familiar literary properties while embedding them within modern socio-political frameworks (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Croteau & Hoynes, 2013). These developments suggest that responsibility is no longer represented solely as an individual moral failing but as a structural condition produced through networks of technology, media, and power.

Despite extensive work on *Frankenstein* and on adaptation studies, existing research often treats literary ethics and mass communication as separate analytical domains. Literary criticism tends to focus on textual meaning and philosophical themes, while media studies emphasize production contexts and audience effects. This disciplinary separation limits a comprehensive understanding of how ethical responsibility evolves when canonical literature enters streaming ecosystems. There remains a need for integrative frameworks that connect narrative ethics, media form, audience interpretation, and institutional influence. The present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining literary theory, narratology, adaptation studies, and mass communication perspectives to examine how responsibility is transformed from Shelley's Romantic novel to its Netflix-era reimagining. By comparatively analysing *Frankenstein* and contemporary screen adaptation, the paper argues that ethical meaning shifts from individualized creator accountability to distributed institutional responsibility, reflecting broader cultural changes in how societies negotiate science, power, and morality.

The present study aims to critically examine how ethical responsibility is adapted and transformed from *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley to its contemporary streaming reinterpretation on Netflix (with reference to *The Frankenstein Chronicles*).

1. To analyse the conceptualization of responsibility in Shelley's original novel, with particular focus on creator-creation ethics, individual moral agency, and emotional accountability.
2. To examine how Netflix-era adaptation reconfigures responsibility, shifting it from personal guilt to collective, institutional, and systemic frameworks involving science, governance, and social control.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The present study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together literary ethics, narratology, adaptation theory, and mass communication. This integration is necessary to understand how responsibility is reconfigured when a canonical literary text such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley migrates into contemporary streaming culture through platforms like Netflix, particularly in adaptations such as *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. Rather than treating literature and screen media as separate domains, this section conceptualizes them as interconnected narrative systems shaped by ethical discourse, technological form, and institutional power.

2.1 Literary Ethics and Responsibility in *Frankenstein*

Shelley's *Frankenstein* occupies a foundational position in literary ethics due to its sustained interrogation of scientific ambition and moral accountability. At the centre of the novel lies Victor Frankenstein's failure to assume responsibility for the being he creates. Responsibility is framed not merely as causality but as an ethical relationship involving care, recognition, and social belonging. Victor's abandonment of the creature establishes a moral vacuum that precipitates violence, alienation, and tragedy, suggesting that creation without responsibility constitutes an ethical breach.

From a Romantic perspective, Shelley critiques Enlightenment rationalism detached from emotional and social obligation. The novel positions empathy as a moral necessity and portrays scientific progress without ethical reflection as inherently dangerous. Literary scholars have long emphasized that the creature's monstrosity is socially produced rather than biologically determined, underscoring Shelley's argument that responsibility extends beyond invention to include sustained moral engagement. This framing aligns with broader traditions in literary ethics that view narrative as a space for moral reflection, where characters' choices illuminate the consequences of ethical failure.

Importantly, *Frankenstein* constructs responsibility as individualized and interiorized. Through epistolary narration and layered storytelling, Shelley invites readers into Victor's conscience, encouraging introspection and moral judgment. Ethical meaning emerges through psychological depth and personal accountability, situating responsibility within the realm of human agency rather than institutional systems.

2.2 Narratology and the Transformation of Ethical Meaning

Narratology provides essential tools for examining how ethical responsibility is structured within narrative form. Core concepts such as focalization, narrative voice, and temporality shape how audiences perceive moral agency. In Shelley's novel, responsibility is conveyed through shifting perspectives Victor, the Creature, and Walton creating a dialogic structure that complicates blame and invites ethical ambiguity. When *Frankenstein* is adapted for screen media, these narratological elements undergo significant transformation. Audiovisual storytelling externalizes interior conflict through visual symbolism, performance, and spatial design. Serial formats further redistribute ethical emphasis by extending narrative arcs and introducing multiple institutional actors. As a result, responsibility becomes less centred on a single protagonist and more dispersed across social environments.

This shift reflects a broader narratological movement from psychological interiority to environmental storytelling. While the novel privileges confession and reflection, streaming adaptations foreground systems medical establishments, policing structures, and urban spaces repositioning ethical accountability within collective frameworks. Narrative meaning thus evolves from personal tragedy to systemic critique.

2.3 Adaptation Theory and Ethical Recontextualization

Adaptation theory conceptualizes reinterpretation as a creative and culturally situated process rather than a secondary reproduction of an original text. Adaptations respond to new audiences, media affordances, and ideological contexts, often reshaping thematic priorities in the process. In the case of *Frankenstein*,

adaptation involves more than translating Gothic atmosphere into visual form; it entails reconfiguring Shelley's ethical concerns for contemporary sensibilities.

Streaming-era adaptations emphasize realism, social inequality, and institutional power, reframing Shelley's moral philosophy within modern discourses of surveillance, biomedical authority, and governance. *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, for instance, situates ethical responsibility within nineteenth-century bureaucratic systems, presenting monstrosity as an outcome of structural neglect rather than individual hubris alone.

This transformation illustrates how adaptation operates as ethical reinterpretation. Responsibility shifts from Victor's isolated failure to a network of social actors, reflecting contemporary anxieties about distributed agency in technologically complex societies. Adaptation theory thus helps explain how Shelley's Romantic ethics are recalibrated for audiences shaped by digital media and institutional distrust.

2.4 Mass Communication, Streaming Culture, and Distributed Responsibility

Mass communication theory further illuminates how ethical narratives function within streaming ecosystems. Digital platforms reorganize storytelling through seriality, algorithmic circulation, and global reach, altering how audiences engage with adapted literature. Unlike the solitary reader of Shelley's novel, streaming audiences participate in collective meaning-making through episodic consumption, online discourse, and recommendation systems.

This environment fosters what may be termed *distributed responsibility*. Ethical meaning is no longer produced solely within the text but emerges through interaction among platform economics, production practices, and audience interpretation. Streaming platforms prioritize recognizable literary properties while embedding them in narratives that address contemporary social issues, thereby institutionalizing ethical storytelling.

From this perspective, responsibility becomes a mass-mediated construct shaped by cultural industries. The platform not only delivers content but actively structures moral interpretation through pacing, visual framing, and narrative emphasis. Shelley's intimate ethical drama is thus transformed into a broader critique of systemic power, aligning literary heritage with modern concerns about technology, control, and collective accountability.

2.5 Integrating Literary and Media Perspectives

Bringing together literary ethics, narratology, adaptation theory, and mass communication reveals that *Frankenstein's* ethical core is neither static nor universally fixed. Instead, responsibility is continuously renegotiated across media forms. Shelley's novel articulates responsibility as personal moral failure rooted in creator-creation relations, while Netflix-era adaptation reconceptualizes it as an institutional condition produced through social systems.

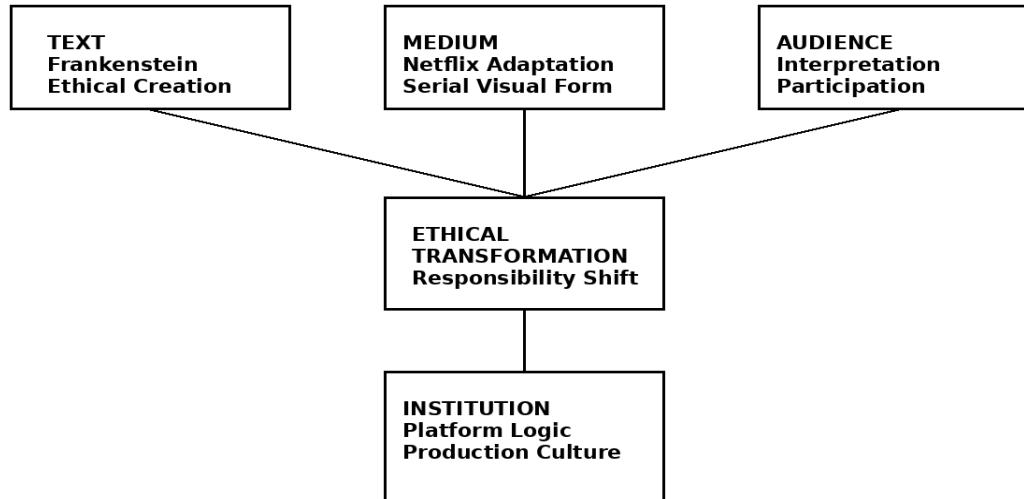
This interdisciplinary framework enables a deeper understanding of how classic literature functions within contemporary media culture. It demonstrates that ethical transformation is not merely thematic but structural, shaped by narrative form, technological mediation, audience participation, and platform governance. By integrating these perspectives, the study positions adaptation as a critical site where literary morality is reconstructed for the digital age.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study is designed to explain how ethical responsibility is transformed when *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley is adapted into contemporary streaming culture through Netflix, with reference to *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. The framework integrates four interdependent components

Text, Medium, Audience, and Institution with *Ethical Transformation* positioned at the centre as the primary analytical outcome.

Rather than treating literary works and screen adaptations as isolated artifacts, this model conceptualizes meaning as a dynamic process produced through continuous interaction among narrative structure, media form, audience interpretation, and institutional power.



Text (Literary Ethics and Narrative Core)

The *Text* component represents Shelley’s original novel as the ethical foundation of the framework. In *Frankenstein*, responsibility is constructed through creator-creation relations, emotional accountability, and individual moral agency. Victor Frankenstein’s abandonment of his creation exemplifies personal ethical failure, while the creature’s suffering foregrounds the social consequences of neglect and rejection. Narratively, Shelley employs layered storytelling and shifting perspectives to emphasize introspection and moral ambiguity. Responsibility is individualized and internalized, inviting readers to engage in ethical reflection. This literary construction of responsibility forms the conceptual baseline from which all adaptations diverge.

Medium (Streaming Adaptation and Narrative Reconfiguration)

The *Medium* refers to audiovisual streaming form, characterized by seriality, visual realism, and episodic expansion. When *Frankenstein* enters the Netflix environment, narrative ethics are reshaped through performance, cinematography, and long-form storytelling. Interior psychological conflict is externalized into social environments, institutional settings, and visual symbolism.

Serial structure allows responsibility to be distributed across multiple characters and narrative arcs. Instead of a single culpable creator, adaptation foregrounds networks of doctors, police, and governing bodies. Thus, the medium actively transforms ethical meaning by privileging systemic causality over individual guilt.

Audience (Interpretation and Participatory Meaning-Making)

The *Audience* dimension recognizes viewers as active interpreters rather than passive recipients. In Shelley’s literary context, responsibility is processed through solitary reading and moral contemplation. In streaming culture, audiences engage collectively through episodic consumption, online discussion, and algorithmic recommendation systems.

Meaning becomes socially negotiated. Viewers interpret ethical themes through contemporary lenses shaped by technological anxiety, institutional distrust, and digital literacy. Responsibility therefore

emerges not solely from narrative content but from participatory decoding practices embedded in mass communication environments.

Institution (Platform Logic and Cultural Production)

The *Institution* component represents Netflix as a cultural industry actor shaping narrative priorities through production values, market strategies, and global distribution. Institutional frameworks influence which aspects of *Frankenstein* are emphasized social injustice, medical authority, or surveillance while marginalizing others.

Platform economics favour recognizable literary properties but reframe them within modern concerns. Ethical storytelling becomes embedded within professional norms, commercial imperatives, and technological infrastructures, transforming responsibility into a systemic condition rather than a purely moral one.

Ethical Transformation (Central Outcome)

At the centre of the framework lies Ethical Transformation, representing the shift from Romantic individual responsibility to contemporary distributed accountability.

In Shelley's novel, responsibility is personal, emotional, and irrevocable. In the Netflix adaptation, responsibility becomes collective, institutionalized, and technologically mediated. The framework demonstrates how:

- literary ethics evolve through media form
- moral agency disperses across social systems
- audiences co-produce ethical meaning
- institutions reshape narrative morality

Thus, adaptation is understood not merely as aesthetic reinterpretation but as ethical reconstruction.

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative comparative design is employed, combining close textual reading with media narrative analysis. Primary material includes Shelley's novel and *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. Analytical procedures involve:

- close reading of ethical motifs and character construction
- media text mapping of narrative restructuring
- interpretive synthesis of audience reception trends reported in existing scholarship

This approach enables systematic comparison of how responsibility is reconfigured across literary and streaming formats.

5. ANALYSIS

This section applies the proposed conceptual framework to examine how ethical responsibility is rearticulated across literary and streaming contexts, focusing on *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and its contemporary screen reinterpretation on Netflix, with particular reference to *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. The analysis proceeds across three interrelated dimensions: narrative ethics, media form, and institutional framing.

5.1 Literary Construction of Responsibility in Shelley's Frankenstein

In Shelley's novel, responsibility is articulated primarily through individual moral agency. Victor Frankenstein's scientific ambition is not condemned in itself rather, ethical failure arises from his refusal to care for, educate, or socially integrate the being he creates. The creature's suffering is repeatedly traced back to abandonment and emotional neglect, positioning responsibility as a relational obligation rather than a purely causal one.

Shelley's narrative architecture reinforces this ethical emphasis. The layered epistolary structure moving between Walton, Victor, and the creature creates a dialogic moral space in which blame is distributed yet

anchored in Victor's choices. Readers are drawn into Victor's psychological struggle, experiencing responsibility as an interior burden shaped by guilt, fear, and denial. The creature's eloquent self-narration further complicates moral judgment by foregrounding social exclusion as a catalyst for violence. Importantly, Shelley situates responsibility within a Romantic framework of empathy and human connection. Scientific creation is shown to demand emotional accountability; without compassion, knowledge becomes destructive. Thus, the novel constructs responsibility as deeply personal, ethically intimate, and irrevocable.

5.2 Streaming Adaptation and the Redistribution of Ethical Agency

The Netflix-era adaptation reconfigures this ethical model by embedding responsibility within broader institutional environments. Rather than centering moral failure on a single creator figure, *The Frankenstein Chronicles* disperses accountability across medical establishments, policing systems, and bureaucratic authority.

Serial storytelling plays a decisive role in this transformation. Extended narrative arcs introduce multiple agent's surgeons, investigators, administrators each contributing incrementally to suffering and injustice. Ethical responsibility becomes fragmented, distributed across networks of power rather than concentrated in one individual. Visual realism and forensic aesthetics further externalize moral conflict, shifting emphasis from internal conscience to systemic violence.

This reorientation reflects contemporary anxieties surrounding technological governance and institutional control. The adaptation portrays monstrosity not as the outcome of isolated hubris but as an emergent property of social systems that normalize experimentation, surveillance, and marginalization. Responsibility is thus reframed as collective and structural, aligning the narrative with modern critiques of biomedical authority and state power.

5.3 Audience Engagement and Platform-Mediated Meaning

The transition from novel to streaming series also alters how audiences engage with ethical themes. Shelley's readers encounter responsibility through solitary reflection and interpretive immersion. Streaming audiences, by contrast, experience ethical narratives through episodic consumption, visual immediacy, and digital discourse.

Platform culture encourages participatory meaning-making. Viewers discuss episodes online, interpret character motivations collectively, and encounter the narrative through algorithmic recommendation systems. Responsibility becomes a socially negotiated concept shaped by contemporary concerns such as institutional trust, technological risk, and social inequality.

Moreover, Netflix's global reach positions the adaptation within transnational contexts, broadening ethical interpretation beyond Shelley's Romantic milieu. Responsibility is no longer framed as a philosophical dilemma confined to individual conscience but as a shared cultural problem embedded in modern infrastructures.

6. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates a fundamental ethical shift from individualized responsibility to distributed accountability. Shelley's *Frankenstein* conceptualizes responsibility as a moral obligation rooted in creator-creation relationships and sustained through empathy. The Netflix reimagining, however, situates ethical failure within interconnected systems of medicine, governance, and social control.

This transformation reflects broader changes in how contemporary societies understand agency. In Shelley's context, moral responsibility is anchored in personal choice and emotional connection. In streaming culture, responsibility becomes diffused across institutions and technologies, mirroring real-world concerns about automation, surveillance, and bureaucratic power.

Media form plays a crucial role in this evolution. Audiovisual storytelling externalizes ethical conflict, replacing introspective narration with environmental cues and procedural realism. Serial structure allows

for cumulative ethical complexity, presenting responsibility as emergent rather than singular. The medium thus actively reshapes moral meaning rather than merely conveying it.

Audience agency further complicates this landscape. Digital viewers do not simply consume narratives; they participate in ethical interpretation through online communities and platform ecosystems. Responsibility becomes co-produced by creators, institutions, and audiences, reinforcing the notion that ethical meaning in mass communication is inherently relational.

Institutional dynamics intensify this process. Netflix operates as a cultural intermediary that curates literary heritage for contemporary markets. Its production strategies prioritize recognizable narratives while reframing them to resonate with current social anxieties. As a result, Shelley's intimate moral tragedy is transformed into a systemic critique of power, illustrating how cultural industries mediate ethical discourse.

Collectively, these dynamics suggest that adaptation functions as ethical reconstruction. The shift from Romantic individualism to modern systemic responsibility reflects changing cultural perceptions of agency in technologically complex societies.

7. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how ethical responsibility is transformed when *Frankenstein* moves from literary form into streaming adaptation. Through an integrated framework linking text, medium, audience, and institution, the analysis demonstrates that responsibility evolves from a personal moral burden in Shelley's novel to a distributed, institutionalized condition in Netflix-era reinterpretation.

Shelley presents responsibility as emotional accountability grounded in creator–creation relationships. The Netflix adaptation reframes this ethic within networks of authority, medical practice, and social governance. This shift reveals how classic literary morality is reshaped by contemporary media environments that emphasize systemic causality over individual conscience.

The study contributes theoretically by bridging literary ethics and mass communication, showing that ethical meaning is structurally transformed through media form and platform culture. It highlights adaptation as a critical site where narratives negotiate changing conceptions of agency, power, and morality.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of media literacy in interpreting adapted classics. As streaming platforms increasingly serve as custodians of literary heritage, audiences must critically engage with how ethical narratives are reframed for digital consumption. For scholars and educators, the study advocates interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis with media studies to better understand narrative ethics in the digital age.

Future research may extend this framework through empirical audience studies or comparative analyses across global adaptations, further illuminating how responsibility is continually reimagined within evolving media ecosystems.

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