



SHIFTING NARRATIVE AUTHORITY IN DIGITAL ADAPTATIONS: SHERLOCK HOLMES AND FRANKENSTEIN

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Abstract

Narrative authority often shifts when literary texts are adapted into visual media, as storytelling moves from the controlled structure of written narration to the interpretive possibilities of film and television. This shift typically occurs because visual media rely less on verbal narration and more on images, performance, and cinematic perspective to convey meaning. As a result, authority that once belonged to a narrator or narrative structure in the text may be redistributed among characters, directors, and visual framing. This paper examines this transformation through the digital and visual adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

In the original Sherlock Holmes stories, narrative authority is largely mediated through Dr. Watson, whose role as narrator shapes the reader's understanding of Holmes's actions and maintains a certain narrative distance. Similarly, Frankenstein employs a layered narrative structure composed of letters and personal testimonies, distributing narrative authority across multiple voices and limiting direct access to events. However, when these works are adapted for film and television, their narrative frameworks are reconfigured to meet the demands of visual storytelling.

Using a comparative approach, this study explores how narrative authority is redistributed in these adaptations. Many screen versions of Sherlock Holmes reduce Watson's narrative role and present Holmes directly through visual action and reasoning. Likewise, adaptations of Frankenstein often emphasize the creature's emotional presence, altering the moral focus of the narrative. The paper argues that visual adaptations do not merely reproduce literary texts but actively reinterpret them by shifting narrative authority within the storytelling process.

Introduction

The relationship between literature and visual media has long been a subject of scholarly interest, particularly within the field of adaptation studies. When literary texts are translated into film or television, the narrative structures that govern meaning in the original work often undergo significant transformation. One of the most important aspects affected by this transition is narrative authority—the mechanism through which a story controls perspective, interpretation, and the reader's understanding of events. In literary narratives, authority is typically established through narrators, narrative framing, and carefully structured points of view. However, when stories are adapted into visual media, these mechanisms are frequently reconfigured in response to the formal demands of cinematic storytelling.

This study examines the shift of narrative authority in the visual adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Both texts employ distinctive narrative frameworks that guide interpretation and regulate access to information. In Doyle's works, narrative authority is largely mediated through Dr. Watson, whose role as narrator shapes the reader's perception of Holmes and his investigative process. Similarly, Frankenstein employs a complex, layered narrative composed of letters and personal testimonies that distribute authority across multiple voices. When adapted into film and television, however, these narrative structures are transformed through visual techniques such as performance, framing, and editing. This paper therefore investigates how narrative authority is redistributed in these adaptations and how such shifts influence character representation and thematic interpretation.

Literature Review

The study of literary adaptations has generated substantial scholarly attention within the fields of literary criticism and film studies. Scholars of adaptation theory have frequently examined how narratives transform when they move from written texts to visual media. One of the most influential contributions to this field is made by Linda Hutcheon, who argues that adaptation is not merely a process of reproduction but a form of reinterpretation that reshapes the source text according to the conventions and possibilities of a new medium. According to Hutcheon, adaptations inevitably involve shifts in perspective, emphasis, and narrative technique as stories are reimagined for different audiences and modes of representation.

Similarly, Robert Stam emphasizes that film adaptations should not be evaluated solely on the basis of fidelity to the original text. Instead, Stam suggests that adaptations should be understood as dialogic works that engage with the source material while also responding to the cultural and aesthetic demands of the cinematic medium. This perspective highlights the ways in which narrative authority may be redistributed when literary texts are translated into visual narratives.

Narrative theory also provides important insights into the concept of narrative authority. Scholars such as Gérard Genette have examined how narrative perspective, voice, and focalization structure the reader's interpretation of a text. In literary narratives, authority is often exercised through narrators who control the flow of information and shape the reader's understanding of events. However, when stories are adapted into film or television, these narratorial functions may be transformed or displaced by visual and performative elements.

Previous studies on adaptations of Sherlock Holmes and Frankenstein have largely focused on themes of characterization, genre transformation, and cultural reinterpretation. However, relatively less attention has been given to the ways in which narrative authority shifts in these adaptations. By examining how narrative

perspective and control are reconfigured in visual representations of these texts, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of how adaptation reshapes narrative structures across media forms.

Research Findings

The analysis of selected adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein demonstrates that narrative authority undergoes a significant transformation when literary texts are translated into visual media. While the original texts rely on carefully constructed narrative frameworks to regulate access to information and shape the reader's interpretation, film and television adaptations frequently redistribute this authority through visual representation, character focus, and cinematic techniques. The findings of this study suggest that the shift from textual narration to visual storytelling alters the dynamics of perspective, character centrality, and moral interpretation within these narratives.

One of the most evident shifts occurs in the representation of narrative perspective in Sherlock Holmes adaptations. In Doyle's original stories, narrative authority is largely mediated through the character of Dr. Watson. As the narrator and chronicler of Holmes's investigations, Watson functions as an interpretive lens through which readers encounter Holmes's intellectual processes and deductive reasoning. His position as an observer creates a narrative distance that preserves Holmes's enigmatic nature while also guiding the reader's understanding of events. The reader's knowledge is therefore limited by Watson's perception, and Holmes's analytical brilliance often appears almost extraordinary because it is filtered through Watson's admiration and occasional confusion.

However, the analysis of visual adaptations reveals that this narrative arrangement is frequently altered. In many film and television versions of Sherlock Holmes, Watson's narratorial function is substantially reduced or entirely removed. Instead of serving as the primary mediator of narrative authority, Watson often assumes the role of a companion or supporting character whose perspective no longer controls the story's structure. The camera, rather than Watson's narration, becomes the principal mechanism through which the audience gains access to Holmes's investigative process. Cinematic techniques such as close-up shots, montage sequences, and visual reconstructions of Holmes's deductions allow viewers to witness his reasoning directly. Consequently, Holmes himself becomes the central narrative presence, and the audience experiences the investigation through immediate visual engagement rather than mediated narration.

This transformation significantly alters the narrative dynamics of the story. The reduction of Watson's narrative authority diminishes the interpretive distance that characterizes Doyle's texts. Instead of discovering Holmes's reasoning retrospectively through Watson's account, viewers are often presented with the detective's analytical processes as they unfold on screen. This shift not only foregrounds Holmes as the dominant narrative figure but also transforms the relationship between the audience and the narrative. The viewer is positioned less as a reader interpreting Watson's narrative and more as a direct witness to Holmes's intellectual performance. A similar transformation can be observed in the visual adaptations of Frankenstein. In Mary Shelley's novel, narrative authority is distributed through a complex layered structure involving multiple narrators. The narrative begins with the letters of Robert Walton, which frame Victor Frankenstein's personal account of his scientific ambition and its consequences. Victor's narrative is further interrupted by the creature's own testimony, which offers an alternative perspective on the events that unfold. This epistolary and multi-voiced structure creates a narrative environment in which authority is shared among several perspectives. As a result, readers are encouraged to evaluate the moral and emotional dimensions of the story through a series of mediated voices.

The analysis of film adaptations, however, reveals a notable reconfiguration of this narrative structure. Most visual versions of *Frankenstein* significantly simplify or eliminate the layered narrative framework of the novel. Instead of presenting the story through letters and retrospective testimonies, filmmakers often adopt a more linear narrative structure that privileges visual immediacy over narrative complexity. The absence of Walton's framing narrative and the reduction of Victor's reflective narration result in a story that unfolds primarily through direct visual action rather than mediated recollection.

At the same time, visual adaptations frequently reorient narrative authority toward the creature itself. In Shelley's novel, the creature's narrative appears only within Victor's larger account, and its emotional appeal emerges through the creature's eloquent speech and philosophical reflections. In many film adaptations, however, the creature's presence is emphasized through visual and performative elements that heighten its emotional impact. Cinematic techniques such as expressive close-ups, dramatic lighting, and physical performance contribute to a portrayal that foregrounds the creature's suffering and vulnerability. This shift has important implications for the moral structure of the narrative. In the novel, the distribution of narrative authority across multiple voices encourages readers to consider the ethical responsibilities of both Victor and the creature. The creature's testimony complicates the reader's moral judgment by revealing the social rejection and isolation that shape its actions. In visual adaptations, however, the emotional emphasis placed on the creature often intensifies audience sympathy toward it. By highlighting the creature's physical presence and emotional expression, filmmakers frequently reinterpret the narrative as a tragedy centered on the consequences of scientific ambition and social exclusion.

The findings therefore suggest that the shift of narrative authority in visual adaptations is not merely a technical adjustment but also a process that reshapes thematic interpretation. The transition from written narration to visual storytelling alters the mechanisms through which audiences engage with characters and evaluate their motivations. In *Sherlock Holmes* adaptations, the centralization of Holmes's perspective transforms the detective from an enigmatic figure interpreted through Watson's narrative into a visually dominant protagonist whose reasoning becomes a spectacle of intellectual performance. In *Frankenstein* adaptations, the increased emphasis on the creature's visual presence often reframes the narrative as a story of emotional suffering and social alienation. Another important aspect identified in this study is the role of cinematic perspective in constructing narrative authority. Unlike literary narration, which relies on linguistic description and controlled narrative voice, visual media employ camera angles, editing patterns, and visual composition to guide the viewer's interpretation. These techniques effectively replace the narratorial functions that structure the literary text. For instance, point-of-view shots can simulate a character's perspective, while montage sequences can reveal connections between events that might otherwise require narrative explanation in written form.

Through these visual strategies, filmmakers assume a form of narrative authority that is distinct from that of the literary narrator. The director's interpretive choices—such as which scenes to emphasize, how characters are framed, and how narrative pacing is structured—play a decisive role in shaping the audience's understanding of the story. Consequently, narrative authority in visual adaptations becomes a collaborative product of cinematic techniques, performance, and directorial vision.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the process of adaptation inevitably transforms narrative authority as stories move from page to screen. The original literary frameworks of *Sherlock Holmes* and *Frankenstein* rely heavily on narratorial mediation and layered perspectives to shape interpretation. In visual adaptations, however, narrative authority is redistributed through the mechanisms of visual storytelling. Characters gain or lose narrative prominence depending on how the camera frames their actions and emotions,

while cinematic techniques replace traditional narrators as the primary guides of audience interpretation. These observations highlight the broader implications of adaptation as a creative and interpretive practice. Rather than functioning as straightforward reproductions of literary texts, visual adaptations actively reinterpret their sources by reshaping narrative structures and shifting the locus of narrative authority. The transformation of perspective in adaptations of Sherlock Holmes and Frankenstein therefore illustrates how the movement from text to screen generates new narrative possibilities while simultaneously altering the way audiences experience familiar stories.

Conclusion

The analysis of visual adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein demonstrates that narrative authority undergoes a notable transformation when literary texts are translated into film and television. While the original works rely on structured narration and mediated perspectives to guide interpretation, visual adaptations redistribute narrative authority through cinematic techniques such as visual framing, performance, and editing. In Sherlock Holmes adaptations, the reduction of Watson's narratorial role allows Holmes to emerge as the primary narrative presence through direct visual representation. Similarly, adaptations of Frankenstein often foreground the creature's emotional and physical presence, thereby altering the moral and thematic balance established in the novel. These shifts illustrate how visual media reshape narrative structures in order to accommodate the demands of cinematic storytelling. Ultimately, the study highlights that adaptations function not as simple reproductions of literary texts but as interpretive works that reconstruct narrative authority within the conventions of visual media.

References

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