National Theatre

Frankenstein – Learning Resources

Adapting Victorian language (up to 60 mins)

This learning resource is designed to help students understand the process of adapting Victorian prose into dialogue for a contemporary audience, and to give them the opportunity to try adapting a section of text themselves.

Who is it for?

This resource is designed for GCSE and A-Level students of English Literature, English Language and Drama, interested in how playwrights craft dialogue for performance. It is not necessary for students to be familiar with the story of *Frankenstein*.

Students of Language and Literature at all levels will be able to analyse the effects of language choices, and also familiarise themselves with the language of classic texts –particularly crucial under new examination frameworks. Drama and Theatre students will consider issues related to dialogue within the theatre-making process

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- Closely examine a passage from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the role her linguistic choices play in it.
- Observe and discuss how this language has been adapted by the playwright Nick Dear for the National Theatre's production.
- Observe the differences and similarities between Mary Shelley's prose, and a modern interpretation of it which seeks to maintain a flavour of the original while still being comprehensible to a modern audience.
- Write an adaptation of a scene from the novel.

You will need

- Copies of the novel Frankenstein
- Access to the clip 'Victor confronts the Creature' in the 'On Demand' player.
- Access to the film Adapting novels for the stage in the 'On Demand' player.

Activities

1

Show the film Adapting novels for the stage using the 'On Demand' player. The film features a number of dramatists talking about the adaptation process, including Nick Dear explaining some of the particular challenges of adapting Frankenstein for the stage.

National Theatre

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2.

Hand out copies of the extract (below) in which Victor meets the Creature in the Alps.

3.

Read through the extract as a class, taking turns to read each paragraph aloud. As they read, ask each student to mark any words or phrases that leap out at them.

4.

Lead a discussion about the differences between the language of the characters in the novel and the way we speak today. Which words are no longer used? Does it seem like natural dialogue? Would Mary Shelley have spoken like this at the time?

5.

Ask the class to share the words and phrases that most struck them, and shift the discussion towards the effects this language has on the reader: what makes these lines interesting? What impact does any imagery have? What connotations are there to the language? Even though we might not speak like this today, what effect is Mary Shelley seeking to achieve using this language? How might we communicate a similar feeling today?

6.

Show the clip 'Victor confronts the Creature' using the 'On Demand' player. This is the equivalent scene from the National Theatre's production of *Frankenstein*. While they watch, ask the class to make notes on the differences and similarities between the dialogue in the film and the dialogue they have just read.

7.

Lead a discussion about the extent to which the dialogue of the play is modern, or Victorian. Can the class imagine themselves speaking like this? Do they think this is how Mary Shelley would have spoken?

8.

Split the class into pairs, and invite each of them to choose a small section of dialogue from anywhere in the novel.

9.

Ask each pair to turn their chosen dialogue into a script suitable for a modern audience. What they write should be easily understood by everyone in the classroom, but still sound authentically Victorian.

10.

Invite each pair to read their dialogue aloud to the class, and discuss as a group the choices they made in writing it.



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Extract from Frankenstein: Volume Two, Chapter II

Victor Frankenstein has journeyed into the Alps to hunt down the Creature. As he approaches over the snow and ice, Victor speaks to his creation for the first time:

'Devil,' I exclaimed, 'do you dare approach me? And do not you fear the fierce vengeance of my arm wreaked on your miserable head? Begone, vile insect! Or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust! And, oh, that I could, with the extinction of your miserable existence, restore those victims whom you have so diabolically murdered!'

'I expected this reception,' said the daemon. 'All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends.'

'Abhorred monster! Fiend that thou art! The tortures of hell are too mild a vengeance for thy crimes. Wretched devil! You reproach me with your creation; come on, then, that I may extinguish the spark which I so negligently bestowed.'

My rage was without bounds; I sprang on him, impelled by all the feelings which can arm one being against the existence of another. He easily eluded me, and said –

'Be calm! I intreat you to hear me, before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head. Have I not suffered enough, that you seek to increase my misery? Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom they justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.'

'Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies. Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight in which one must fall.'

'How can I move thee? Will no intreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and thy compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone?'