

## Media Reviews

### Recreating Mary Shelley's Canon: *Creature* as the Authentic Turkish

#### *Frankenstein*

Cenk Tan

Released in October 2023 on Netflix, Çağan Irmak's *Creature* is a miniseries that presents an unusual Turkish adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Set in late-nineteenth-century Istanbul, in the Ottoman Empire, the story follows Ziya, a young medical student driven to push the boundaries of science to revive the dead. After witnessing the death of his professor İhsan, Ziya becomes obsessed with bringing him back to life. He ultimately succeeds, but not in the way he anticipates. The resurrection of İhsan leads to the creation of a monster, marking a new and unexpected beginning.

Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as "An announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging and an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (7-8). Additionally, she suggests the "process of 'transcoding' requires a transfer of medium or genre and thus context to generate a completely distinct interpretation" (8). Hence, each adaptation is a creative reinterpretation of the adapted literary work. As an adaptation, *Creature* embodies a unique amalgamation of Shelley's original masterpiece and Irmak's script.

First and foremost, the series introduces a completely original setting and cast of characters. The setting is late-nineteenth-century Istanbul in the Ottoman Empire (currently Türkiye), and the protagonist is a medical student named Ziya who is an inquisitive and ambitious young man determined to make a difference in this world of limited opportunities. The story mostly takes place around Ziya and his close circle. *Creature* integrates Turkish heritage, history, and folklore,

offering a fresh perspective that blends Western literary tradition with Eastern cultural motifs. This distinct setting not only provides a rich backdrop for the narrative but also influences the characters' motivations and the story's direction, adding layers of complexity and authenticity that are often absent in other adaptations. One of the key differentiators of *Creature* is its deep exploration of character development and motivation. The series delves into the psychological and emotional complexities of Dr. Ziya, who is symbolically analogous to Victor Frankenstein and Prometheus in Greek mythology. This focus on the inner lives of the characters adds nuance to the traditional narrative, presenting the creature with a significant degree of empathy and humanity. By doing so, *Creature* challenges viewers to reconsider the nature of monstrosity and the ethical implications of creation, making the story as much about the creator's moral and ethical dilemmas as about the creature's plight.

Visually, *Creature* boasts high production values with impressive cinematography, set design, and special effects that create a visually stunning representation of the *Frankenstein* mythos. The show maintains a dark, atmospheric tone with gothic aesthetics while incorporating Turkish architecture and landscapes, enhancing its unique visual identity. Additionally, the integration of Turkish folklore and myth adds layers of cultural specificity, enriching the narrative and providing a fresh take on familiar themes. In particular, the clothing provides an extremely realistic outlook of the era, and the Turkish spoken by all the characters accurately conforms to the standards of the period. These details are complemented by the local (Ottoman) architecture, gloomy ambience, depiction of traditional arts/crafts, and superstitious beliefs of this era. By these means, the show's creator and director, Çağan Irmak, has not only adapted *Frankenstein*, but also recreated it. Specifically, Irmak has integrated some authentic Turkish touches to this creative adaptation, embedding symbolic references into the subtext of *Creature*'s storyline. İhsan's death

is a covert reference to the gradual collapse of the so-called “sick man of Europe,” the crumbling Ottoman Empire. As a consequence, the revival of İhsan represents the birth of a new republic from the ashes of the old empire. Its coming back to life with a new and original identity and its seeking acceptance are characteristics peculiar to the foundation of the new Turkish Republic.

Additionally, *Creature* captures the core existential and ethical dilemmas present in Shelley’s novel. Themes such as the quest for immortality, the nature of the soul, and the consequences of playing God are explored in depth, maintaining fidelity to the philosophical underpinnings of the source material. The series preserves the novel’s exploration of what it means to be a monster, presenting the creature with empathy and highlighting the consequences of societal rejection. This nuanced portrayal remains true to Shelley’s examination of monstrosity and humanity. Dr. Ziya retains many characteristics of the original scientist—ambition, hubris, and a blind pursuit of scientific achievement without considering the moral implications. The creature, similarly, is depicted with a mix of innocence and tragic awareness, echoing Shelley’s complex portrayal of the monster.

The creature follows *Frankenstein*’s monster’s course of action, fleeing from its original setting to different locations and experiencing various events until eventually returning to its creator. After fleeing, the creature wanders aimlessly through the streets of Istanbul. As it tries to explore and survive in this new world, it grapples with both the reactions of society and its own internal turmoil. Amidst the atmosphere of late-nineteenth-century Istanbul, the creature begins to gain self-awareness and confront its sense of being an outcast. This figure, who is not accepted by society, struggles with both its loneliness and the responsibilities that come with its creation. After its escape, the creature seeks refuge in a circus, assuming it might accommodate its physical deviations from societal norms. The circus, typically hosting marginalized individuals, appears to

be a venue where the creature might find some semblance of safety. Despite how its distinctive appearance attracts attention, the circus primarily views the creature as an object of spectacle rather than a fully accepted entity. This treatment reinforces themes of exclusion, otherness, and societal fear of the unfamiliar. Its exclusion and public treatment as a freak causes it to abandon the circus in a quest to find its own identity and freedom.

Before returning to its creator, the creature then retreats into solitude, isolating itself in nature. This retreat represents not only a physical but also a spiritual journey in search for its true self-identity. Similar to the source novel, *Creature* maintains the intricate dynamics between the creator and the creation, while focusing on themes of responsibility, guilt, and the quest for understanding. By delving into the psychological and emotional aspects of these relationships, the series stays true to the novel's character-driven narrative.

Thematically, *Creature* transcends the typical horror and gothic elements associated with *Frankenstein* adaptations. It places a strong emphasis on existential and philosophical questions, exploring the quest for immortality, the nature of the soul, and the consequences of playing God. These themes are presented in a contemporary light, making them relevant to modern audiences and prompting reflection on the boundaries of scientific experimentation and the ethical responsibilities that come with it. As Ziya says, "A person is defeated not by science but by arrogance. The human search will never end, nor should it, because if it does, what you call hope will also end." He also says, "Truth is the ugliness of a person's heart. The world is a lie to us. Those who are tossed around find the truth in each other." Finally, he adds, "I will have two hells at once. I will burn with both of their flames." Such lines capture the demanding and difficult existence that Ziya and other outcasts endure.

Where *Creature* introduces new cultural and historical contexts, the core narrative elements of creation, abandonment, and the subsequent quest for acceptance and revenge are preserved. This adherence to the essential plot structure ensures that the adaptation remains recognizably based on Shelley's work. The series takes creative liberties, such as setting the story in late-nineteenth-century Turkey and integrating Turkish folklore. These changes provide a fresh perspective and maintain the essence of the original story, effectively balancing fidelity and innovation. *Creature* retains the dark, atmospheric tone and gothic aesthetics that are central to *Frankenstein*. The visual and thematic elements also create a haunting ambiance that reflects the novel's mood and setting. The series continues Shelley's tradition of prompting viewers to reflect on the moral and philosophical implications of scientific advancement and human ambition, while honoring the intellectual spirit of the original work. In addition, the acting performances are overall satisfying and impressive. Taner Ölmez (Ziya) does a good job in depicting an ambitious but obsessive medical student while Erkan Kolçak Köstendil (İhsan) displays an outstanding performance of Gothic doubling, portraying both professor İhsan and the creature. Engin Benli, Şifanur Gül, Bülent Şakrak, Sema Çeyrekbaşı, and Devrim Yakut also add their original touches to Çağan Irmak's authentic production.

*Creature* has met a wide and mostly positive reception online. In the review posted on [leisurebyte.com](http://leisurebyte.com), Taniya CJ writes that

overall the Turkish series is a big win because they made use of a famous story and added their spice to it. It is a joy to watch different ethnicities through the series and this one gave us the bliss. Looking at the Ottoman Empire and the people living back in that time is educational (with regards to knowing another country's history) and creative."

Furthermore, Blair Marnell (digitaltrends.com) describes *Creature* as “a fresh coat of paint on a classic tale” and argues that “surprisingly, it doesn’t stray that far from the novel, although at times it seems to be taking more influences from the *Frankenstein* movies than the original book.” Lastly, Ruchika Bhat on fugitives.com points out that “the world-building of *Creature* is what makes it entertaining. Perhaps what fails *Creature* is the fact that it is a story that has been adapted so many times.” On the whole, *Creature* proves to be not only a successful work of adaptation, but also an unpredictable, genuine, and unconventional tale that blends Shelley’s original story with local motives and philosophical nuances.

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**Cenk Tan** works as an Associate Professor at Pamukkale University in Denizli, Turkey and specializes in topics such as science fiction, ecocriticism, film criticism, gothic fiction, and continental philosophy. He is also the editor of many published and upcoming books including *Science Fantasy: Critical Explorations in Fiction and Film* and *Eco-Concepts: Critical Reflections in Emerging Ecocritical Theory and Ecological Thought* published by Lexington Books (Bloomsbury) in 2024.