

# Fostering children's Enthusiasm, Engagement and Creativity with Classic Texts: Adapting Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" (1833) into a Graphic Novel

## Introduction

Graphic novels have risen in popularity, sales, and prestige in recent decades. Once considered the disposable and dumbed-down stepsister of 'literary' texts, the graphic novel is increasingly recognised as having artistic, educational, and cultural value for readers of all ages. Graphic novels, sometimes referred to as comics, are a form of multimodal production that Will Eisner defines as 'sequential art' and Scott McCloud terms 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence' (1993, p. 9). Not unlike picture books, the narrative in graphic novels 'is created through a process of "interanimation" in which "language and image [work] productively upon each other"' (Lewis, 2001, p. 37, qtd in Alder, 2018, p. 214). Because of their mixture of verbal and visual text, graphic novels are often seen as particularly well suited both to appeal to and strengthen the cognitive skills of today's younger readers (Tabachnik and Saltzman, 2015) who are living in a new media age in which the screen and image are increasingly vying for dominance with the book and the word (Kress, 2003). At a time when, according to the results of the 2023 Annual Literacy Survey, only 43% of young people aged 8 to 18 enjoy reading in their free time, a significant 41% of young people reported that they read graphic novels for pleasure at least once a month (Clark et al., 2024). For many younger readers, graphic novels pose a welcome alternative to traditional texts that can be seen as tedious or inaccessible. They retain a foothold with young people, which many other kinds of reading material have lost.

Research also suggests that using graphic novels in educational settings can bring a number of benefits to learning. The incorporation of graphic novels in school curricula can improve student enjoyment, engagement, interest, and motivation (Cop and Large, 2023; Bosma et al., 2013; Cullerton; Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Pantaleo, 2018; Gavigan, 2010). Graphic novels can entice reluctant readers and have positive effects on students' literacy (Boerman-Cornell, 2016) and support reading comprehension (Cook, 2017). They can be particularly helpful in supporting the study of classic texts, including those of earlier periods, making them both more accessible and appealing to young readers (Boerman-Cornell, 2020; Bucher, 2004; Cook, 2017). Graphic novels also aid in the development of multiple literacies, including visual competencies and multimodal reading strategies (Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Boerman-Cornell, 2020; Schwarz, 2002) because, as Sylvia Pantaleo has demonstrated, 'reading a graphic novel is a synthesizing activity that requires the dynamic integration and comprehension of word, image, and layout' (Pantaleo, 2018, p. 43).

Moreover, the range of graphic novels now on offer means that they can be used not only in the language arts classroom but also in conjunction with other subjects like science, history, and religious education. Graphic novels can support the development of critical reading and thinking skills (Jimenez et al., 2017) and can provide crucial opportunities for students to make links between subjects and to appreciate different perspectives on a text or topic (Cook, 2017). Graphic novels are also beneficial for inclusivity.

However, despite excellent recent studies by scholars such as Pantaleo (2011; 2012; 2015; 2018), Brenna (2013), and Boerman-Cornell (2016; 2020), there is still relatively little research

on the use of graphic novels in primary education. Moreover, there is even less attention devoted to the creation—rather than the reading—of graphic novels.

This study begins to address these gaps in scholarship. Building on the methodology of Cop and Large (2023), who explored the benefits of adapting *Hamlet* into a comic with their university students, we asked primary school students to work collaboratively in adapting a Mary Shelley short story from a standard alphabetic text into a graphic novel. Our project looked at the ways in which—and the extent to which—the production of graphic novels could act as a driver for the understanding, interpretation, and enjoyment of classic literature—texts that might otherwise be seen as off-putting, difficult, or boring. Our Mary Shelley Graphic Novel Workshop not only confirmed that this activity could foster critical reading strategies, creativity, and a sense of ownership (both original and adapted texts). It also showed that graphic novel adaptation can offer a way of engaging reluctant readers, incorporating classic texts in the curriculum, and developing opportunities for families to enjoy shared reading experiences.

Our study focuses on a ‘Mary Shelley Graphic Novel Workshop’ that took place as an extra-curricular event on a Saturday morning at an English primary school in November 2023. The school is in an area of significant economic deprivation and was purposefully chosen for this project. The workshop was free and open to local families with children of all ages. It commenced with guidance from a graphic novelist who modelled how to transform alphabetic text into graphic novel format. Participants were assigned a section of the text to adapt, using a range of art materials provided. The aim was for the adaptations of each section to be collated and printed together as a collaborative graphic novel final product. This would be printed after the workshop and then distributed to participants. Parents, grandparents, and carers supported individual children, and Key stage 2 participants (our target audience) were accompanied by both younger and older siblings. Family groups varied in composition, but all tended to work together collaboratively.

We wanted to engage young readers with a classic text that they would otherwise have found daunting or inaccessible. We chose a Mary Shelley short story—rather than *Frankenstein*—as a unique opportunity for them to read a historical female author’s work which has not previously been adapted. We selected the lesser known 1833 tale “The Mortal Immortal” which tells the story of Winzy, a poor young man who is apprenticed to a mad scientist and unwittingly drinks a potion of eternal life. The original story was written for an adult audience of the early nineteenth century, so we adapted and condensed it to make it accessible for Key Stage 2 readers. Professionally printed copies of our adapted version of the story were distributed to participants as part of the workshop.

(Finding 1)

First, the workshop was effective in engaging reluctant readers because reading the Mary Shelley story was central without being the endpoint. Children had to meticulously analyse the story to discern the elements suitable for visual representation and those best conveyed through verbal captions. This approach diverged from conventional methods, where graphic novels typically serve as instructional aids for writing or reading comprehension with a focus on textual features. Instead, utilising the adapted text as the basis for graphic novel creation helped to sustain the children’s focus on accurately representing the narrative through their illustrations and captions.

Throughout the activity, the text remained a central and consistent reference point, as is evidenced by the photographs taken during the workshop. The text is always close at hand and is the focal point of collaboration among family groups.

Finding two. The discussions of the text contributed to enjoyment *and* understanding of it. Throughout the morning, children and adults were clearly engaged with the task content, working contentedly and purposefully alongside one another. There was a shared goal in creating an adaptation of the story for the graphic novel publication, with each participant's work being valued and given a 'place' in the final output. Intergenerational groups discussed the text together to ensure that the panels and captions accurately conveyed the story. This intergenerational collaboration bears out the work of Clark and Rumbold (2006) on the importance of community participation. Reading and talking are, as Warner (2013) suggests, interdependent and have long been acknowledged as a successful partnership in developing children's (and adults') understanding of their reading.

Indeed, participants focused so intensely on the story's adaptation into the graphic novel format that they began to read for pleasure. Children were so engrossed in the activity that they may not have realised how intensely—and pleasurably—they were reading. The participants' qualitative feedback mentioned above suggests that they saw the workshop as artistic in nature, but they were, however unwittingly, also applying high-level comprehension skills and undertaking an almost forensic analysis of the text. In the exit survey, 100% of the participants said they enjoyed the workshop, and 95% said they would be interested in attending a similar event. What is more, 95% of the children attending the workshop said that they would be interested in reading another Mary Shelley short story. It seems clear from this data that the enjoyment of the workshop was linked not only to the artistic adaptation but to the reading itself.

This multi-faceted process proved not only enjoyable—as is shown in the exit survey data and photographs—but also highly effective in exercising participants' reading comprehension skills – our third finding. For example,

The adaptations produced by the participants demonstrate efficient and effective communication of setting and plot. As you can see here in the slide, the children have made links to their own experiences of travel to convey how the setting has shifted from England to France. They have included backpacks and vehicles featuring French flags, and sketches of the Eiffel Tower. They have drawn on stereotypical images, such as the use of berets, as visual shortcuts to make the reader understand the characters' relocation to France.

At a certain point in the story, Winzy's wife Bertha is trying to make him look older because she is ageing, and he isn't. These attempts are represented variously and clearly by the children. As you can see in the slide one child offers a split frame showing Bertha at different shops buying makeup and wigs for Winzy with captions to clarify what kind of shop is shown in each.

Here you can see how another child has a frame showing Bertha putting a wig on Winzy as she yells at him: "You need to look OLD!". Again, here, the participant adds his twist to Bertha's efforts to make Winzy look older by showing him frowning as he uses a walking stick alongside his smiling wife. To capture the sense of the story in the new format, the children have drawn on their personal experiences and their discussion of the text.

The children's adaptation also shows their interpretive skills. The drawings reveal participants' visualisation of the power imbalance in the marriage of Winzy and Bertha. In both participants'

work, Bertha looms large on the page. In the third split frame here, Bertha looks both taller and bigger than Winzy. Even more extreme in this respect is the work of another child, where Bertha resembles a parent leaning over a small child (who is actually Winzy) in the chair before her. Both participants use the size of the characters to suggest their relative power in the moment. These adaptations suggest a view of Bertha as domineering and controlling, with Winzy being subject to and even infantilised by her whims. Nowhere in the narrative does it state that Bertha has these qualities, but the participants have interpreted her in this way. The detail in the drawings suggests meaningful analysis and reflection on the text.

So, to conclude, in our 'Mary Shelley Graphic Novel Workshop,' we staged a live and collaborative adaptation exercise where participants and their families were guided in reworking an alphabetic text into a graphic novel format. Though participants had to draw on the multiple literacies involved in *reading* graphic novels, the ostensible focus of the workshop was not reading but artistic creation. By flipping the focus this way, participants became enthusiastic to engage with an unfamiliar and potentially challenging text. The workshop organically fostered a process of 'slow reading' integral to deeper comprehension skills and gave participants an experience of reading for pleasure. The results of the workshop suggest that adaptation of alphabetic texts into the graphic novel format can offer a way of engaging reluctant readers and developing stronger reading comprehension skills.

The workshop also showed that the production of a graphic novel adaptation can be an effective way of incorporating classic texts in the primary-school classroom. These texts are often left out of the curriculum because they are seen as too difficult or too alien for primary school students to manage. However, classic texts like Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" offer depth, giving students a chance to engage not only in reading comprehension but also in interpretation. By working closely with a Mary Shelley story, students can develop an awareness of classical historical authors, and this may even offer a bridge to adult literature.

Finally, the workshop revealed the value of creating opportunities for children to socialise around a text, opportunities that are often missing both inside the classroom and out. Shared reading is often enjoyable and is also effective in developing reading abilities and building interpersonal relationships. By bringing parents and carers into the activity, it encouraged a family practice of reading. Fittingly, Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" would likely have been enjoyed in a similar fashion when it was published in 1833. The story first appeared in an expensive volume called a 'gift book', a luxury item that would have been shared with family and friends and may even have been read and discussed aloud.

Overall, our workshop offered a model for expanding access to and enjoyment of classic literature through graphic novel adaptation, even in a school community where reading for pleasure is rare and shared reading experiences are unfamiliar.

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## **Appendices**

Conference PowerPoint Slides including the images referred to in the script.