

Three Classics with Metamorphosis as a Common Theme

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Abstract

This study examines three canonical literary works in which metamorphosis functions as a central thematic and structural device. Although differing in historical context, genre, and narrative form, the selected texts use transformation to explore fundamental questions of identity, power, and the human condition. Metamorphosis appears not only as a physical change but also as a symbolic process through which social alienation, moral conflict, and existential uncertainty are articulated. By comparing how transformation operates within each work, the study highlights metamorphosis as a timeless literary motif that bridges myth, modernity, and psychological realism, revealing its enduring capacity to reflect cultural anxieties and philosophical concerns.

Keywords

Metamorphosis, Identity, Human Condition, Literary Motif, Cultural Anxieties

1. Introduction: What Is a Classic?

The question of what makes a literary work a classic is as old as it is contested (Eliot, 1944; Calvino, 2009; Cullhed, 2008). Wikipedia offers the definition: “A classic is a literary work that is considered to possess timeless qualities and appeals to readers across different periods.” Such a general definition may be comprehensive, but it must be further discussed to become meaningful. The concept of the classic carries both cultural weight and ideological tensions: a classic is not merely an old book that has survived the passage of time, but a work that has been granted a special status, often as part of a shared cultural heritage. But what does this status entail, and who has the power to decide which texts become classics? Literary theory offers different answers.

According to T. S. Eliot, a classic does not arise spontaneously but is the result

of a long cultural and literary heritage. In the essay *What Is a Classic?*, Eliot emphasizes that a classical work requires maturity in both the author and the culture surrounding the work. This is why he highlights Virgil's *Aeneid* as the exemplary case: it summarizes the experiences of an entire civilization in a form that is both harmonious and complete. For Eliot, the classic becomes a point at which tradition culminates—a work that not only expresses its own time but organizes and reshapes earlier literary expressions into a new, unified form. Such a work assumes a normative role: it becomes a standard for what literature can be. Eliot further argues that the classic is characterized by a “universality”—an ability to speak beyond its historical roots, even though its greatness is precisely grounded in a deep anchoring in history.

Italo Calvino approaches the question from a completely different angle. In the essay collection *Why Read the Classics?*, he offers a series of definitions that all revolve around the reader's experience and the work's continued impact over time. For Calvino, a classic is a work that continues to act upon us even when we are not reading it: a book whose existence lies like a layer in our consciousness and shapes our understanding of the world. One of his most frequently quoted formulations is that a classic is “a book that never finishes saying what it has to say,” meaning that its meaning is never exhausted. Every rereading opens up new meanings and new relationships between the text and the reader's life. Calvino also emphasizes that classics are often texts that survive the shifts of fashion—not because they are old, but because they continue to generate relevance in new historical situations. At the same time, he warns that classics can easily become institutionalized and lost behind their own reputation. Therefore, he insists that they should be read in order to be rediscovered, not to confirm old assumptions.

Cullhed (2008) emphasizes that classics are not eternal. “A classic speaks to you, challenges you, provokes you—*you, right now.*” ... “For you to remember a book, you must feel struck by its subject matter. A prerequisite for this is the right language and style. It must be written in a way that makes it stay in your memory.”

In this essay, I have chosen three texts that share a common theme—metamorphosis: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). All of these works have attained classic status and can be read as three modern variations on Ovid's theme of metamorphosis. However, in contrast to the transformation in Ovid's works, which offers reconciliation, these texts expose human alienation, morality, and identity as mutable constructions. This essay aims to discuss how, in the chosen texts, the “metamorphosis” concept differs from and compares with Ovid's text.

2. Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis, transformation (from the Greek *metamórphōsis*: μετά (*metá*, “after”) + μορφή (*morphé*, “form”)), constitutes one of the most enduring motifs in literary history and functions as a mirror of how different eras have understood

the human relationship to the world, the body, and identity. Metamorphosis refers to a profound and dramatic transformation or change in a character's form, attributes, or life circumstances, often serving as a symbol of personal development, shifts in identity, or the mutable nature of humanity (see definitions in the *Nationalencyklopedin* or *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Metamorphosis is a transhistorical motif (Harrison, 2024), and from antiquity to modernism, transformation recurs as a way of representing what is otherwise difficult to express: transitions, liminal states, and existential crises. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* establishes the motif as a mythological and cosmological structure in which change is both meaningful and ordering, whereas later authors, such as Franz Kafka, radically reinterpret metamorphosis as an absurd and disorienting experience without an explanatory framework. Mikkonen (1996) frames metamorphosis as a meta-trope (a trope about troping) and ties transformation to intertextual rewriting/revision—*i.e.*, metamorphosis as a model for how texts change other texts.

In Shelley's Romantic work *Frankenstein*, metamorphosis becomes a symbol of scientific and creative hubris—an attempt to transcend the limits of nature that leads to catastrophe. In Stevenson's late Victorian context, the motif is transformed into a psychological and moral allegory, in which humanity's inner contradictions take bodily form in the divided existence of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. In Woolf's modernist spirit, metamorphosis becomes a liberating and playful exploration of the fluidity of identity and gender, with Orlando embodying humanity's capacity to transcend all fixed categories of time, gender, and form.

From Ovid to Woolf, there thus runs a literary tradition in which transformation functions as a reflection of humanity's self-image. As mentioned earlier, these works belong to different eras—Romanticism, late Victorianism, and Modernism—but they are united by a common project: to investigate what happens when human beings change, create, or transcend their limits.

2.1. Frankenstein

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus (1818; 2025) has become a classic because it combines timeless themes with powerful symbolism and a narrative that continues to raise questions about science, morality, and humanity (Mousley, 2016). *Frankenstein* has also endured as a modern myth. Frankenstein and his creation have become symbols used far beyond literature—in film, theatre, popular culture, and everyday language. There are, for example, a large number of film adaptations of the Frankenstein motif from 1910 onwards. A classic adaptation is the 1931 version starring Boris Karloff as the Monster. *Frankenstein's* continued relevance as a classic is underscored by, among other things, Guillermo del Toro's 2025 film adaptation, as well as Fredrik Benke Rydman's upcoming stage production of *Frankenstein* at Kulturhuset Stadsteatern in Stockholm in spring 2026.

The novel reflects the conflict of its time between science and religion, reason and emotion. Shelley wrote during a period when science was making great advances, but also arousing fear about what humanity might accomplish. By allow-

ing *Frankenstein* to create life through science, she questions the boundary between research and ethics. For this reason, *Frankenstein* is often regarded as one of the earliest works in the science fiction genre, while also being a powerful moral drama.

Stylistically, the novel combines the dark atmosphere of Gothic literature with the emotional depth of Romanticism. The stormy landscapes, nocturnal experiments, and desolate pursuit across Europe create an intense atmosphere that reinforces the characters' inner conflicts. Victor Frankenstein appears as a typical Romantic hero: driven by passion, yet destroyed by his own hubris.

In *Frankenstein* metamorphosis cannot be reduced to a single transformative event; rather, it functions as a structuring principle that operates simultaneously on ontological, ethical, and social-psychological levels. All three candidates—the creation of life, Victor Frankenstein's moral transformation, and the Creature's social and psychological development—count as metamorphosis, but they do so in different ways and with unequal critical weight. Taken together, however, they explain not only how metamorphosis works in the novel, but also why *Frankenstein* qualifies as a literary classic.

Mary Shelley's own role likely contributes to the work's classic status (Sampson, 2018). She wrote the book as a teenager, at a time when female authors were rarely recognized in the literary sphere. That such a young woman succeeded in creating a work of such philosophical and existential weight has made *Frankenstein* a symbol of creative power, intellect, and courage. *Frankenstein* has become a classic because it uniquely unites horror and compassion, science and morality, myth and humanity. It poses questions that will always concern us: What does it mean to create life—and what does it mean to be human?

2.2. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

In late Victorian society, science had replaced religion as the source of truth, but with it came a new moral anxiety. In *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, transformation becomes an expression of the modern subject's inner division. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* has become a classic for several interconnected reasons—literary, thematic, and cultural (Mortensen, 2008; Nabokov, 1980). A central theme is the conflict between good and evil within the same individual—an idea that is both psychologically and morally universal. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde embody the struggle between humanity's civilized, respectable side and its dark, instinctive drives (Arata, 1996). The theme of “dual nature” is just as relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century, which makes the story timeless.

The theme of humanity's dual nature has throughout history been one of literature's most central motifs. It concerns the conflict between good and evil, reason and instinct, morality and desire—a struggle that recurs in countless works, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Goethe's *Faust* (1808-1832), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde was written during a time of rapid scientific develop-

ment, when Darwinism, psychology, and chemistry challenged traditional conceptions of humanity. Jekyll's experiments reflect both fascination and fear regarding what science can unleash—an idea that recurs in modern science fiction and horror. Stevenson blends Gothic horror with psychological drama. The London setting, nocturnal streets, and threatening atmosphere intensify the sense that evil is hidden in our midst. Hyde becomes not merely a character, but a symbol of humanity's inner monster.

In *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the transformation is physiological in mechanism, psychological in experience, and moral in consequence, but it is primarily psychological in its analytic function. The text insists on bodily change as the visible sign of metamorphosis, yet it repeatedly frames that change as the externalization of an already divided consciousness. Metamorphosis does not create a new self; it exposes how identity has been constructed, partitioned, and maintained all along.

The expression “Jekyll and Hyde” has become part of everyday language—a metaphor for a divided personality or hypocrisy. This demonstrates how deeply the story has embedded itself in the collective consciousness, far beyond literature, and contributes to the book's status as a classic.

2.3. Orlando

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) has become a classic because it combines bold narrative technique, playful imagination, and profound ideas about time, gender, and identity (Southworth, 2012). The novel is at once a satire, a love letter, a historical account, and a philosophical reflection—a book that, in its originality, broke with all literary and social conventions at the time of its publication. Bloom (2025) succinctly describes the work in his extensive analysis: “Orlando is sixteen when we meet him, thirty-six when we leave her, but these twenty years of literary biography encompass more than three centuries of literary history.”

Orlando has come to be regarded as one of the first modern novels to question the fixed boundaries of gender and identity. The novel is also a formal experiment. It is called a “biography,” yet completely violates the rules of the genre. It blends fact and fiction, and the narrator addresses the reader directly with irony and humor. In this way, *Orlando* becomes a playful engagement with narrative forms and a commentary on how history is written—often by men, about men (De Gay, 2007). By writing a “biography” of a person who changes gender and lives for several centuries, Woolf challenges the very concept of truth in literature.

Woolf's language and style also contribute to the novel's classic status. Her prose is poetic, associative, and filled with unexpected imagery. She unites the everyday with the fantastic, the comic with the serious. The novel moves from Elizabethan England to twentieth-century modernity and depicts how both time and humanity change. This combination of historical breadth and psychological depth makes *Orlando* a unique work within the modernist tradition.

Another important reason why *Orlando* has become a classic is its feminist per-

spectives (Silver, 1999; Svegard, 2005). By allowing the protagonist to change gender in a matter-of-fact and non-moralizing way, Woolf challenges the norms governing both sexuality and society. The novel also celebrates female creative power and freedom, which was radical at a time when women were still fighting for literary and social recognition. It is also based on the author's own love relationship with the poet Vita Sackville-West, which gives the narrative a personal and emotional dimension.

In *Orlando*, metamorphosis must be read differently from the transformations staged in Shelley or Stevenson, because its primary function is neither punishment nor exposure but liberation—even as it retains an element of instability. Distinguishing between these two modes clarifies how *Orlando* both belongs to and revises the modern metamorphosis tradition. Metamorphosis in *Orlando* is liberatory insofar as Orlando's change of sex does not fracture identity but extends it. Unlike Victor Frankenstein or Jekyll, Orlando does not experience transformation as moral collapse or psychic disintegration.

Orlando has achieved classic status because it has continually been reinterpreted in new ways. It has been read as a feminist allegory, as a satire of British culture, and as a poetic meditation on the passage of time. Each generation has found something new in it. *Orlando* has become a classic because it is both radical and timeless.

3. Conclusion

Frankenstein, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *Orlando* represent three literary reflections on human transformation. In Shelley, transformation is a warning about the moral limits of science; in Stevenson, a psychological allegory of humanity's inner division; in Woolf, a poetic play with gender, time, and identity. What they all share is the insight that transformation—whether it leads to catastrophe or freedom—reveals something essential about the human condition: that human beings are never static, never complete.

That these three works have retained their classic status is precisely because they show, each in its own way, that transformation is both humanity's curse and its possibility. It reflects our fear of change, and our inescapable drive toward it.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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