

Repetition Compulsion And Defense Mechanisms As Manifestations of Trauma: A Freudian Analysis In Frankenstein (2025) Movie

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received Oktober 10, 2026 Revised Oktober 10, 2026 Accepted Oktober 10, 2026 Keywords: Repetition Compulsion, Defense Mechanisms, Trauma, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Frankenstein	This study examines psychological trauma in Victor Frankenstein in Guillermo del Toro's film adaptation Frankenstein (2025) using Freudian concepts of repetition compulsion and defense mechanisms. The research employs qualitative textual analysis, following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014): data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Of 28 identified data points, 16 represent repetition compulsion, including 10 patterns of situations, 3 patterns of behavior, and 3 patterns of dreams. The remaining 12 represent ego defense mechanisms: 1 repression, 3 denial, 3 rationalization, 4 projection, and 1 undoing. Findings indicate that Victor repeatedly reenacts childhood experiences of loss, rejection, and violence through later relationships and actions. His defense mechanisms conceal painful experiences rather than consciously resolving them, while the recurrent traumatic patterns reactivate the same defenses. Both concepts are therefore connected to the same unresolved childhood trauma and form a persistent psychological cycle. This interpretation contributes to literary psychology and film adaptation studies by examining how cinematic narratives represent trauma through character behavior, relationships, dreams, and defensive responses.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literary works use narratives to convey human experiences, emotions, and psychological conflicts. The scope of literary inquiry extends to visual forms such as film, where characters' actions, dialogue, and cinematic narratives represent experiences that can be interpreted psychologically [1] [2]. Contemporary films increasingly explore mental health, trauma, and the ways individuals respond to distress; representations of psychological trauma in cinematic adaptations invite analysis of how such experiences are narrated and repeated [3] [4].

Unresolved traumatic events can resurface in later situations and relationships. In Freudian psychoanalysis, repetition compulsion refers to the tendency to reenact painful experiences or conflicts unconsciously, even without pleasure or satisfactory resolution [5]. Contemporary interpretations also associate traumatic repetition with habitual actions that do not necessarily restore an individual's agency

[6]. Defense mechanisms constitute ego strategies that respond to anxiety and internal conflict; their operation does not necessarily resolve the causes of psychological pain [7].

The object of this study is Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025), an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Its narrative portrays Victor Frankenstein's childhood grief, his difficult relationship with his father Leopold, institutional and romantic rejection, and his treatment of the Creature. Earlier psychoanalytic studies have examined the Monster in Shelley's novel through Freudian concepts [8] and the Creature's fear and repression [9]. Other research has interpreted childhood trauma and defensive strategies in literary characters [10] and the central character of Hannibal Rising [11].

Those studies establish a basis for psychoanalytic readings but do not provide the same combined focus on repetition compulsion and ego defense mechanisms in Victor's characterization in del Toro's film. This article examines how Victor's trauma is represented in recurring situations, behavior, and dreams, and identifies the defense mechanisms employed in response to those experiences. The analysis addresses the connection between repeated traumatic patterns and unconscious defense, while treating the character as a fictional representation rather than a subject of clinical diagnosis.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Object of Study

This research applies a descriptive qualitative method of textual analysis with Freudian psychoanalysis as the interpretive framework. The film *Frankenstein* (2025), written and directed by Guillermo del Toro, is approached as an audiovisual text whose dialogue, monologue, character behavior, narrative events, and scenes are the primary data. Film can be treated as a text because its components generate meanings that may be interpreted systematically [12] [13]. The primary focus is Victor Frankenstein; other characters are considered only in relation to his traumatic experiences and responses.

2.2 Data Collection and Coding

Primary data were collected by repeatedly viewing the film, documenting relevant scenes, transcribing dialogue and monologue, capturing representative visual evidence, and selecting segments that display repetition compulsion or defense mechanisms. Secondary material consisted of psychoanalytic studies, literary research, and methodology references. The selected data units were classified using three repetition-compulsion codes—PS (patterns of situation), PB (patterns of behaviour), and PD (patterns of dream)—and five ego-defense codes: Rp (repression), Dn (denial), Rt (rationalization), Pj (projection), and Un (undoing). Qualitative inquiry emphasizes context, interpretation, and narrative evidence [14].

2.3 Data Analysis

The procedure follows the interactive qualitative analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification [15]. First, relevant dialogue and scenes were selected, transcribed, and coded according to theoretical categories. Second, coded segments were arranged in a matrix relating the events, trauma patterns, defensive responses, and timestamps. Finally, the interpretation was checked against the original dialogue and scenes and compared with previous studies. This approach follows the source thesis's treatment of textual materials as interpretable qualitative evidence [16].

Repetition compulsion was operationalized as recurring situations, behaviors, and dreams that evoke unresolved traumatic experiences. The selected ego defenses comprise repression, denial, rationalization, projection, and undoing. Their interpretation follows the framework of Freudian

psychoanalysis and Anna Freud's account of ego strategies [17]. These analytical categories are applied to representations of Victor's experiences in the film, not to infer a medical diagnosis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Distribution of the Identified Data

The analysis identified 28 data points in chronological film order. Sixteen data points represent repetition compulsion, and twelve represent ego defense mechanisms. The first group comprises ten patterns of situations, three patterns of behavior, and three patterns of dreams; the second comprises one repression, three denials, three rationalizations, four projections, and one undoing. Table 1 summarizes the distribution obtained in the undergraduate thesis.

Table 1. Classification of the Research Findings

Analytical group	Category	Frequency
Repetition compulsion	Patterns of situation (PS)	10
Repetition compulsion	Patterns of behaviour (PB)	3
Repetition compulsion	Patterns of dream (PD)	3
Ego defense mechanisms	Repression (Rp)	1
Ego defense mechanisms	Denial (Dn)	3
Ego defense mechanisms	Rationalization (Rt)	3
Ego defense mechanisms	Projection (Pj)	4
Ego defense mechanisms	Undoing (Un)	1
Total	All coded data points	28

3.2 Repetition Compulsion in Victor Frankenstein

Patterns of situation (PS) appear in ten data points and involve repeated experiences of rejection, violence, abandonment, and emotional insecurity. In his childhood Victor witnessed frequent disputes between his parents; at 00:12:35–00:12:47, he recalled hearing their incessant arguments about wealth, estate, and himself and stated that their voices filled him with fear. His father later punished him while teaching medical science. The scene at 00:14:39–00:14:54 shows Leopold striking Victor and declaring that his hands must be protected for his work while his face is “vanity.” The thesis interprets this violence as an early situation later reenacted in Victor's own relationship with the Creature.

Rejection likewise recurs beyond the family. Victor is dismissed by scientific authorities after his controversial experiment and experiences romantic rejection when Elizabeth refuses his advances at 00:49:20–00:50:42. Later he is physically harmed by the Creature, whose response to mistreatment reproduces the violence that Victor had previously experienced. The source analysis describes these episodes as recurrent situations shaped by early loss, family conflict, social rejection, and an inability to escape the traumatic relational pattern.



Figure 1. Leopold punishes Victor during a medical lesson (source film screenshot in the thesis).

Patterns of behaviour (PB) occur three times, principally in Victor's treatment of the Creature. His harsh teaching and verbal degradation, abandonment and confinement of the Creature, and subsequent beating reproduce the dominant and punitive relation previously imposed by Leopold. In the scene at 01:22:30–01:22:44, Victor demands obedience and calls the Creature a "beast." The study reads this progression as a transition from experiencing violence to perpetrating similar violence and eventually becoming its target.

Patterns of dream (PD) occur three times. Victor's image of the Dark Angel represents a fantasy of mastering life and death that reappears in visions, nightmares, and hallucinations. The recurring figure is linked to grief following his mother's death and to his ambition to overcome the limits that defeated his father. What initially functions as an idealized wish becomes a frightening manifestation of unresolved conflict. The thesis therefore interprets dreams not as isolated narrative ornaments but as repeated, symbolically charged responses to traumatic experience.



Figure 2. Victor's hallucinations and recurring dreams (source film screenshot in the thesis).

3.3 Ego Defense Mechanisms

Repression (Rp) is identified once. The findings describe Victor as having buried painful memories and guilt so that he can avoid a distressing recollection; when William reminds him of a past event, his uncertain response suggests that material excluded from conscious reflection still affects his conduct. The interpretation concerns a fictional manifestation of unconscious avoidance rather than proof of clinically repressed memory, which remains debated in empirical psychology [18].

Denial (Dn) appears three times, including Victor's refusal to accept his father's statement that no one can conquer death. At 00:19:03–00:19:12, Young Victor insists, "I will. I will conquer it." Other instances concern Victor's unwillingness to accept objections to his experiments and a reality about Elizabeth's forthcoming marriage. In the thesis, these responses allow Victor to hold beliefs that protect his self-image despite evidence to the contrary.

Rationalization (Rt) is identified three times. Victor repeatedly gives apparently logical explanations for experiments and behavior rooted in painful needs and failures. His ambition to master death is framed as scientific progress and ethical necessity. In other contexts, he recasts criticism or humiliation as evidence of accomplishment or as a justifiable action. These instances exemplify a defensive use of reasoning to conceal guilt, disappointment, or fear while sustaining a coherent image of himself.

Projection (Pj), found four times, is the most frequent defense mechanism. Young Victor accuses Leopold of letting his mother die at 00:18:50–00:19:05; later Victor attributes human failure to divine incompetence and blames the Creature for violence and death arising in the wake of his own choices. He also tells William that the Creature killed Harlander in a fit of rage. The thesis interprets the shifting targets of blame—father, God, and Creature—as the displacement of unacceptable guilt and aggression onto others.

Undoing (Un) occurs once near the end of the film. At 02:15:51–02:18:45, Victor apologizes to the Creature, stating that regret consumes him and asking, “Forgive me. My son.” The Creature responds, “I forgive you.” The thesis interprets this encounter as a symbolic attempt to repair a relationship damaged by rejection, neglect, and violence. While the past is not reversed, Victor’s acknowledgment of responsibility is an emotional departure from earlier strategies of denial and projection.



Figure 3. Victor’s late attempt at reconciliation and undoing (source film screenshot in the thesis).

To demonstrate how the analysis links audiovisual data with theoretical indicators, Table 2 presents selected examples from the datum-level documentation in the source thesis. Each example retains the datum identifier and the timestamp of the relevant film scene; these are illustrations of the classification, not additional observations beyond the 28 data points.

Table 2. Selected Scene Evidence from the Original Data Mapping

Datum	Scene time	Interpretive category and evidence
2	00:12:35–00:12:47	PS: childhood exposure to parental arguments and fear
4	00:14:39–00:14:54	PS: Leopold physically punishes Victor
8	00:19:23–00:20:11	PD: vision of the Dark Angel
16	01:11:38–01:11:59	PB: Victor treats the Creature harshly while teaching
18	01:16:34–01:16:46	PB: neglect and confinement of the Creature
7	00:19:03–00:19:12	Dn: Victor refuses to accept the limits of death
6	00:18:50–00:19:05	Pj: Victor blames his father for his mother’s death
28	02:15:51–02:18:45	Un: Victor apologizes and asks the Creature for forgiveness

3.4 Relationship Between Repetition and Defense

The identified repetition patterns and ego defenses are interconnected manifestations of Victor’s childhood trauma. The situations of loss and paternal violence are repeated in later relationships, including his controlling and abusive treatment of the Creature; the ensuing anxiety activates defenses that shield him from recognizing his own role. When the Creature returns violence to Victor, the relationship completes a victim–perpetrator–victim movement discussed in the thesis. The compulsive reenactment of painful relationships is consistent with the source study’s reading of repetition beyond the pleasure principle [19].

Victor’s father–son relationship also provides the narrative connection among situational repetition, aggressive behavior, and subsequent projection. Leopold’s punishment is reenacted in Victor’s treatment of the Creature, while the Creature’s rejection and revenge reproduce circumstances Victor feared as a child. Similar discussions of trauma, victimization, and aggression appear in psychoanalytic interpretations of Shelley’s novel [20]. The source thesis goes further by explicitly relating these recurrent situations to the defensive responses in the 2025 film.

The recurring Dark Angel and Victor's scientific desire to overcome death link dream patterns with denial and rationalization. His refusal to accept mortality intensifies his obsessive project, while fantasies and nightmares continue to symbolize unresolved grief. This delayed return of trauma is consonant with psychoanalytic discussion of belated traumatic reactions [21]. The film's traumatic imagery is interpreted as part of its narrative representation, not as an independent clinical measure.

The final instance of undoing contrasts with earlier defensive responses. Victor's apology does not eliminate past suffering, but it acknowledges a relationship that repression, denial, rationalization, and projection had obscured. Comparable psychoanalytic film studies relate experiences of trauma to the defenses characters employ [22] [11]. In this study, however, the joint classification of 16 repetitive patterns and 12 defenses shows how the two processes reinforce each other across situations, actions, and dreams. Together they form the continuous psychological cycle emphasized in the source thesis.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Frankenstein* (2025) identified 28 data points depicting Victor Frankenstein's unresolved traumatic experiences. Sixteen repetition-compulsion patterns comprise ten patterns of situation, three of behaviour, and three of dream. Twelve ego-defense manifestations comprise one repression, three denials, three rationalizations, four projections, and one undoing. Early bereavement, paternal violence, emotional neglect, and repeated rejection are connected to Victor's later actions, relationships, and nightmares. The resulting victim-perpetrator-victim cycle illustrates how the same painful dynamics are reenacted in his treatment of the Creature.

Repetition compulsion and defense mechanisms share an unresolved traumatic origin: repeated situations and actions generate fear, anxiety, and guilt, while ego defenses attempt to keep those experiences outside conscious recognition. The apology and reconciliation near the ending mark an attempt to acknowledge wrongdoing after the failure of other defenses. These findings constitute a psychoanalytic interpretation of a fictional character, not a clinical assessment. The research is limited to Victor Frankenstein and the two Freudian concepts used; future studies could compare the original novel and the 2025 adaptation or extend the analysis to additional characters and theoretical perspectives.

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