



THE MONSTER: FRANKENSTEIN 2022

notes taken from *various sources*

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GOTHIC: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

Critics often see Gothic literature as a psychological phenomenon,

- it is to do with the ways in which otherwise repressed fears are represented in textual form

CONVENTION: ATTEMPTING TO EXPLAIN HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

The peculiarities of behavior in Gothic literature derive from author's intent to explain...

- the perverse,
- cruel,
- and murderous tendencies in human nature.
 - By examining...
 - dialogue,
 - dreams,
 - visions,
 - and delusions,
 - Gothic authors provide psychological insight into human perversity
 - and the survival instincts that enable individuals to combat terrifying experiences,

COMMON GOTHIC ELEMENTS

Gothic conventions emerged through a long and complex literary and philosophical evolution.

- The ornate elements that invest Gothic literature with its unique energy flourished during the Romantic era and continue to colour fiction and film today
 - The range includes
 - Chivalry
 - Piety
 - Mystery
 - Vendettas
 - medieval magic
 - the grotesque
 - illusion
 - terror
 - monsters
 - repression
 - sensationalism
 - the monstrous potential of science and technology
 - dissipation
 - and perversity





SATISFYING A DEMAND FOR THE MACABRE

gothic fiction depicts through story, the deepest human dread.

- the genre grew into a phenomenon of reader demand for superstition and the macabre.
 - the sinister novel profited from a marriage of high romanticism to pseudo-medievalism,
 - a dizzying, at times voluptuous union.
-

CONVENTION: FOCUS ON SUBCONSCIOUS

in the 1900s, a shift from the castle setting and medieval trappings of formulaic Gothicism preceded a focus on...

- Mystery
 - Eeriness
 - Surreality
 - subconscious impulses
 - and terror,
 - as found in a classic example from the American South, the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).
-

FRANKENSTEIN: WHO IS THE MONSTER?

The 1818 novel was revolutionary in its depiction of

- science
 - and religion
 - and served as a pioneer text in the sci-fi genre: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.
 - On the surface, it's a novel about a scary monster,
 - but her sympathetic description of a soulful creature makes us rethink who we label as the "monster."
-

THE HISTORY OF MONSTERS IN STORY

Monsters are literally as old as literature.

- Just about every great national story since the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh involves the hero confronting a monster—
 - Perseus slaying Medusa
 - Saint George killing the dragon
 - Beowulf defeating Grendel and Grendel's mother and then facing a dragon.
 - »Some of these monsters were created by gods
 - and some were believed to be inhabitants of unexplored regions
 - but none was deliberately created by humans.
-





- »Now, think about the non-magical monsters in stories.
 - They were monsters created by us—
 - by using science and technology, not magic spells.
 - That is why the genre is called science fiction. And, in fact, in the opinion of a number of literary historians, that's exactly where modern science fiction begins, with a monster created by science, not magic.

SCIENCE FICTION'S FIRST MONSTER

It's not completely fanciful to say that science fiction began with three things:

- a dead frog
- a volcano
- and a teenage bride.
 - The dead frog was one that an Italian physician named Luigi Galvani was experimenting with in the 1780s,
 - when he found that a mild electric shock could cause the frog's leg to twitch.
 - It was just an induced muscle reflex, but it suggested that there might be a connection between electricity and life.
 - The volcano was Mount Tambora in Indonesia, which exploded in 1815 in one of the largest eruptions in recorded history.
 - It threw up a huge cloud of ash that circled the world for more than a year, lowering global temperatures and causing crop failures.
 - It led to such a cold and rainy climate that 1816 was sometimes called the "year without a summer."
 - In that same year (1815), the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley brought his 18-year-old wife, Mary, to visit his friend Lord Byron at Byron's summer home in Switzerland.
 - Because the weather was too miserable to go outdoors,
 - Byron suggested an indoor activity:
 - Each of the guests would make up a ghost story and read it to the others in the chilly evenings.
 - Byron wrote a fragment of a poem.
 - Another visitor, Dr. John Polidori, wrote a reasonably scary story called "The Vampyre," which later became one of the inspirations for Bram Stoker's novel Dracula.
 - The teenage Mary based her story on a nightmare she'd had.

SHELLEY'S DESCRIPTION OF THE MONSTER

Dr. Frankenstein was the Scientist who created the nameless creature.





- Boris Karloff's depiction of a tall, shambling, mute man with bolts sticking out of his neck has become the classic image of the monster.
 - But Shelley's original description is actually much more macabre. Shelly writes:
 - "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness...his watery eyes...his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips."

WHY VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN REJECTS THE SUPERNATURAL

Those who have never read Mary Shelley's story may be surprised at a number of key elements that are barely touched on in films based on the novel.

- For one thing, the novel begins with a series of letters from an adventurer named Robert Walton to his sister.
 - On one of his journeys, Walton encounters Victor Frankenstein, whose story makes up the more familiar part of the novel.
 - Victor tells us that as a teenager, he became enamored of alchemy and what was then called natural philosophy.
 - But when Victor mentions this to his father, the father explains to him that "a modern system of science had been introduced which possessed much greater powers than the ancient."
 - As a result, Victor says, "I at once gave up my former occupations."
 - Victor's rejection of alchemy and natural philosophy in favor of modern science is a key moment in his education
 - and in the history of science fiction.
 - Natural philosophy encompassed patterns of quasi-scientific or pseudoscientific thought that had built up over the centuries, sometimes leading to supernatural results.
 - Victor abandons all suggestion of supernaturalism in the creation of his creature, as does Mary Shelley.

HOW VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER WAS CREATED

The monster in Mary's story was created not by magic or alchemy — Victor Frankenstein was a scientist who rejected those supernatural ideas — but by the application of electricity in an attempt to reanimate dead tissue.

- In fact, Mary had read about the experiments by Galvani on the dead frog and wondered, not unreasonably for the science of her day, if electricity could actually be used for that purpose.
 - Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein assembled his Creature from materials found in "chapel houses,"
 - the vaults where corpses were kept.
 - But he also took bits from "the slaughter-house."
 - Thus, the creature is made of both human and animal parts.
 - However, Shelley is making a point here;





- The Creature definitely looks scary, but just because something looks scary, doesn't mean it is.

MAKING THE MONSTER FROM BOTH HUMAN AND ANIMAL PARTS

"My cheek had grown pale with study, and my person had become emaciated with confinement. Sometimes, on the very brink of certainty, I failed; yet still I clung to the hope which the next day or the next hour might realize. One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I had dedicated myself; and the moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? My limbs now tremble, and my eyes swim with the remembrance; but then a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit. It was indeed but a passing trance, that only made me feel with renewed acuteness so soon as, the unnatural stimulus ceasing to operate, I had returned to my old habits. I collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion."

QUESTION RAISED

Victor's grave robbing and torture of animals raise the following questions:

- Do the ends ever justify the means in research or in other areas?
- If useful data can be gathered through unethical means, should they be?
- And if such data are so gathered, ought they to form part of the evidence base of science?
 - Analysis of the history of human experimentation in the twentieth century comes solidly down on the negative answer, based on experiences like those of concentration camp inmates experimented on by Nazi doctors during World War II and of African Americans and Guatemalans experimented on by US Public Health Service researchers in the decades following the war.

PRINCIPLES OF BIOETHICS

- The principles of bioethics hold that human beings may never be used solely as experimental means to a scientific end, but human autonomy can also create an affirmative role for self-sacrifice, allowing people ethically to volunteer for dangerous experiments.
- Some bioethicists also argue that if a practice is physically or viscerally repugnant—"the horrors of my secret toil," in Victor's words (p. 38)—then the practice is at least suspect of being morally repugnant.
- For a time, the ethical debate about human embryonic stem cell research focused on whether medical science should be permitted to progress based on research that was putatively unethical in its destruction of human embryos to derive human pluripotent stem cells.



- Is such research always spoiled as the fruit of evil exploits?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FRANKENSTEIN AND HIS MONSTER

Victor describes the creature that he brings to life as a “demoniacal corpse.”

- Rejected by his creator, the creature flees.
 - But for several chapters in the middle of the novel, the creature meets with Victor and tells him of his experiences.
 - Eventually, the creature even learns to read and write;
 - one of the first books he reads is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which he takes as a true history because he hasn’t yet mastered the distinction between imagination and reality.

THE MONSTER’S HUNGER FOR LEARNING

The creature’s hunger for learning makes for an interesting contrast with Victor’s own education,

- not to mention Victor’s various failures as a “father” or teacher of his creation.
 - Having achieved his scientific breakthrough, Victor simply abandons it and all responsibility for it.
 - When the creature demands that Victor create a companion, Victor at first agrees
 - but later reneges on his promise.
 - It’s not difficult to understand why the creature becomes vengeful.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROMETHEUS IN FRANKENSTEIN

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is the story of a man who tries to create a superior creature but accidentally creates a monster.

- But there’s a much deeper meaning behind this story aside from the warning that we shouldn’t play God.
 - By likening *Frankenstein* to a “Modern Prometheus”, is Shelley doing more than just drawing a comparison,
 - or is she commenting on the nature of man’s pursuits of knowledge?
 - Is the “Modern” state of man’s creation beneficial or detrimental to a healthy civilization?
 - The *Frankenstein* myth, according to author Yuval Noah Harari, tells us that humanity’s last days are fast approaching.
 - Simply put, the pace of technological progress will soon lead to us being replaced by creatures who are physically, cognitively, and emotionally superior.

CONVENTION: CREATING SHOCK





To create the stark, sometimes shocking contrast that fuels Gothic romance, they often focused on the control, torment, and/or murder of an innocent person, usually inexperienced female naif.

- The early Gothic masters ornamented verse and fiction with...
 - outrage,
 - the supernatural,
 - mystery,
 - pathetic fallacy,
 - chiaroscuro,
 - and a foreign exoticism
 - against a backdrop of...
 - dim,
 - stormy nights
 - and characters peering through the mist from massy battlements at...
 - dismaying rogues,
 - stalkers,
 - or monsters.

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS THE MONSTER RAISES

Shelley's original creation is a highly intelligent vegetarian who hates the idea of harming another living creature.

- At the beginning of the novel, he wants nothing more than to be accepted and loved by another being.
 - Ironically, it's the monstrous treatment he receives from humans that drives him to kill.
 - Dr. Frankenstein abandons the Creature at the moment of his animation, letting what basically amounts to a newborn wander into the darkness alone to fend for himself.
 - The tension between Frankenstein and the Creature represents
 - the struggle between parent and child,
 - self and other,
 - love and hate,
 - science and morality,
 - abandonment and acceptance.
 - It's a warning, to treat all living things with respect, or else.
 - Shelley also invented one of the central concerns of science fiction:
 - that a scientific education divorced from moral education and the abandonment of responsibility for one's own achievements could lead to disaster.
 - Shelley's novel ends in tragedy: Frankenstein and his entire family dead, and the Creature himself presumably committing suicide.

WHAT HUMAN FEARS DOES THE MONSTER REPRESENT?





the monster can be seen to represent xenophobia. ...

- Frankenstein is afraid of what the monster will do
 - and he is afraid because he doesn't know what it is capable of or if he will be able to control it
 - He is afraid of what he has created and how he created it.
 - Perhaps, however, a more interesting view would be that the monster represents Victorian society's fear of the power of science itself and the monsters it could create, especially without moral guidance
 - Nevertheless, this fear was not unique to the Victorians
 - Lord of the Flies offers a more modern perspective on this
 - Golding portrays atomic weapons as the monsters of the modern world, created by unchecked science
 - Shelley's question in Frankenstein could be about the limits of scientific creation
 - "Just because we can create something, does that mean we should?"
 - And
 - "And are we prepared to take responsibility for the things we create?"

MOVIE ADAPTATIONS DEGRADE SCIENTIFIC IDEAS

It wasn't long before Frankenstein's creature got entirely out of Mary Shelley's hands.

- By the time she returned to England a few years later, her novel was already a hit stage play,
 - focusing on the horror story and almost entirely overlooking the science.
 - And a century later, one of these stage adaptations gave the name Frankenstein to the creature itself — never named in the novel — leading to a misunderstanding that persists to this day.
 - Unfortunately, that has been the case almost ever since, with more than 50 movies and innumerable comics, spinoff novels, action figures, and even breakfast cereals based on Shelley's work.
 - This brings us back to that point that science fiction movies sometimes oversimplify and even degrade the ideas of science fiction novels.
 - The most famous Frankenstein movie was made in 1931, and there's no doubt that it is a classic horror film, but almost no one, either now or in the 1930s, viewed it as science fiction.
 - The same is true of all the dozens of Frankenstein movies ever since, many of which have reintroduced the same supernatural elements that Shelley so carefully excluded from her novel.
 - There is certainly some irony in how the first science fiction novel in the modern sense—the first novel to introduce a monster created by rational scientific experimentation rather than incantations or the intervention of the gods—should give rise to an entire industry of monsters of the irrational, but that has been one of the fates of science fiction.





- At the same time, a number of actual science fiction movies, such as the Terminator series, have been based on Shelley's original idea: that of a creation turning on its creator. Technology, not monster tales, is the real heritage of Frankenstein.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION: THE DOPPELNGANGER

A mirroring or duality of a character's persona, the concept of the doppelgänger refers to the ...

- twin,
- shadow double,
- demon double,
- and split personality,
 - all common characterizations in world folklore., dating back to playwright Plautus in Republican Rome
 - and his separated twins in Menaechmi (186 B.C.)
 - and to possession by a Dybbuk in Jewish Kabbalism,
 - the concept of paired characters evolved into a psychological study of duality in a single person.
 - The term doppelgänger derives from the German "double goer" or "double walker,"
 - a complex characterization that novelist Jean Paul Richter coined in Siebenkäs (1796), a novel depicting a bisected persona.
 - The story was the beginning of a subset of Gothic psychological fiction in which characters gaze inward at warring dichotomies through...
 - shadowscapes,
 - look-alikes,
 - mirror images,
 - portraits and statues,
 - and dreams
 - and nightmares.
 - The doppelgänger motif typically depicts a double who is both duplicate and antithesis of the original

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DOPPELNGANGER

The idea of the doppelgänger can be interpreted in a number of ways:

- it can be seen simply as a **double**, an alternative version of the individual concerned;
 - it can be seen as a **complement**, a version of the individual that possesses different qualities and thus completes the personality;
 - it can be seen as an **opposite**, a being that possesses all the qualities that the individual lacks and most abhors.
-





THE DOPPELGANGER CONCEPT IN FRANKENSTEIN

The use of the doppelganger in Frankenstein comes closest to the third of these interpretations:

- the monster becomes a kind of external embodiment of Frankenstein's increasingly divided and conflicted personality
 - he is living proof that Victor has become separated from the best in himself and the potential for using his intelligence and skill for beneficial purposes
 - as he obsessively pursues his studies, Frankenstein divides his head from his heart; his intellect and desire for scientific knowledge separate from his emotions, affections and responsibilities to other people.
 - the monster's ugliness makes him the image of a purely intellectual, heartless Victor, the opposite of the young man who begins his studies with hope and the desire to contribute to the improvement of humanity.
-

CONVENTION: AN ANCIENT PROPHECY

An ancient prophecy is commonly connected with a castle or its inhabitants (either former or present).

- The prophecy is usually obscure, partial, or confusing.
 - "What could it mean?"
 - In more watered down modern examples, this may amount to merely a legend: "It's said that the ghost of old man Krebs still wanders these halls."
 - Ancient, undecipherable maps showing the location of amazing treasure represent another variant of the ancient prophecy aspect.
-

SUBTITLE ALLUDES TO PROPHECY IN FRANKENSTEIN

Mary Shelley alludes to the story's prophecy through the subtitle, *Frankenstein*

- ,or The Modern Prometheus
 - To understand this allusion we need to step back and look Prometheus's story.
-

THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS

In classical mythology, Prometheus is attributed as the creator of mankind.

- He formed the first men out of clay from the earth, which Athena then breathed life into.
 - As the father of mankind, Prometheus cared for them and taught them the arts necessary to survive, like
 - plowing and harvesting a field
 - hunting
 - and building homes.
 - The story continues to Prometheus's theft of fire, for which Zeus punished him.
 - He steals fire from the gods to give to man
 - to encourage and enable them to prosper, learn, and discover new things.





THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS AND FRANKENSTEIN

The subtitle functions as an appositive to the primary title;

- Shelley likens Frankenstein to the classical father of mankind.
 - The most obvious correlation is that both figures form a living being out of lifeless material.
 - Frankenstein's ambitions are aimed towards "a new species [that] would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve of theirs" (80-82).
 - In the Romantic era, Prometheus came to be regarded as a symbol for civilization and intelligence, as well as scientific knowledge.
 - Victor himself, in his early studies, felt as though "the world was to me was a secret, which I desired to discover" (66).
 - His longing to learn the secrets of the world led him to look beyond what was natural for man to achieve.
 - He longed to go deeper into scientific knowledge and expand the possibilities of human civilization.
 - But like with Prometheus, going beyond the natural limits of man results in consequences.
 - Prometheus was punished for loving his creation too well by giving him the necessities for progress (fire).
 - Frankenstein, on the other hand, is disgusted by his work, and his work will eventually turn on him.

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ORIGINS OF SHELLEY'S DARK IDEAS

Mary's life was plagued by death.





- Her own mother died from delivery complications only a few days after giving birth.
 - Shelley would mourn the woman she never knew for the rest of her life.
- Shelley's first child with her married lover Percy, died shortly after birth in 1815.
 - The following year was known as the "Year Without a Summer" due to the lingering effects of the eruption of Mount Tambora. Stuck indoors,
 - Shelley and her friends entered into a "dare" to pen the most terrifying story they could imagine. Shelley's story came to her in a nightmare.
 - In 1818, she finished Frankenstein, and was finally able to get married—but only because Percy's pregnant wife committed suicide.
 - Mary's second child Clara, also died that year,
 - and their third child, William followed Clara to the grave in 1819.
 - Then, just four years later, in 1822, Percy's drowned body washed ashore.
 - All that death and grief may be why when editing Frankenstein for an 1831 edition, Shelley made Dr. Frankenstein's decision to form the Creature a matter of "fate."
 - This change makes the Creature more of a monster as his violence and desire to destroy Frankenstein becomes his "destiny."

MODERN ADAPTATIONS OF THE MONSTER & SHELLEY'S PURPOSE

Shelley's original text, and all those that follow in its shadow, makes us ask, "Who is the real monster in this story?"

- We are constantly updating the Frankenstein myth and the themes of life, loss, and monstrosity Shelley wove into the original text as a way to explore our definitions of humanity.
 - Interpretations like Ex Machina explore the intimate, and complicated, relationship between the creator and the created, and asks the audience to consider if robotic consciousness constitutes "life."
 - "You are dead center of the greatness scientific event in the history of man. If you've created a conscious machine, it's not the history of man, that's the history of gods."
 - The film Splice, looks at how engineering human and animal DNA to design an entirely new life form can result in dangerous, unforeseen complications—even if the creator shelters, educates, and loves their creation.
 - "Do you think they could really look at this face, and see anything less than a miracle?"
 - Frankenweenie, retells the Frankenstein story as a young boy's decision to resurrect his dead dog, emphasizing the devastation, and desperation, that comes from loss.
 - "Sparky! You're Alive! I can't believe it. You're alive!"
 - The 2017 comic series Victor LaValle's Destroyer updates Shelley's story for the current moment adding conversations about
 - Race
 - Gender
 - Immigration
 - police brutality
 - social injustice
 - and the proliferation of violence in the modern world.
 - All of these interpretations show sympathy for both the creatures and their tragically flawed creators.





- Despite all the destruction that comes from scientific experimentation in these adaptations, it may be too simplistic to say that Shelley intended her original story to scare readers into believing all science is evil or monstrous.
 - Instead, perhaps she is warning us to consider the repercussions of technological and scientific advancement.
 - Just because we can, doesn't mean we should.
 - Shelley's novel calls us to be accountable for what we create, and what might be destroyed in the process.

