



Boris Karloff as the monster (1931)

Frankenstein is widely studied for coursework and is a set text at A2 in AQA B Gothic option

FRANKENSTEIN

IS IT REALLY ABOUT THE DANGERS OF SCIENCE?

Chris Bond explores how *Frankenstein* is about something more than the danger of scientific experimentation

From our contemporary perspective, it seems obvious that Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is about the dangers of scientific experimentation. Each and every time something is cloned, or some human-animal hybrid posited, the media screams 'Frankenstein science!'. However, science is not necessarily the main focus of the novel that lends the journalists their easy headlines.

Frankenstein does, indeed, witness the introduction of science into the Gothic novel, which has the effect of giving a greater degree of immediacy to the horrors depicted. Advances in science frequently create a sense of unease among the public, fitting as the impetus for Gothic fright. However, it is not the dangers of scientific discovery per se with which *Frankenstein* is concerned, but rather the traits in the scientist's character, and his treatment of his progeny. At the time Shelley was writing, the term 'scientist' had not been coined. Look for descriptions of Victor's profession in the novel and you will find him referred to as an 'artist' or a 'pale student of unhallowed arts'. The novel's concerns lie rather more with matters of egotism, neglect and alienation, and their consequent destructive results.

A NARRATIVE CONVENIENCE

The science in *Frankenstein* is really a matter of convenience. It is not realistic, but rather hocus-pocus, and serves a representative purpose. Frankenstein could equally have been a philosopher with some personal theory, or a Romantic poet, and the dominant themes of the novel would have remained the same. Science is convenient as it provides a concrete end product, and one that can be mutated through scientific misapplication, but it is not the cause of the narrated troubles. Indeed, Victor ignores scientific method, with its formulating and testing of hypotheses, and rushes headlong towards a preconceived solution. Therefore it is necessary to consider the true dangers of the novel, which are not exclusive to science but are of universal application and concern.

DIVINE AMBITIONS

The problem central to *Frankenstein* is the belief of its central character that he can perform the ultimate usurpation, that of God. There is an extreme vanity and egotism acting as the motivating

force for Victor's work, as opposed to a disinterested desire to further the interest of the human race in general. This is hinted at when Victor begins to recount the formation of his obsessive interest in science:

The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine.

The resonance of the closing verb of the statement is telling, revealing Victor's true (albeit unconscious, at this stage at least) desire to gain divine knowledge of the world, with the inevitable consequence, therefore, of substituting himself for the divine entity.

Waldman's lecture reveals to him the power of science and its exponents, who:

have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places... They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.

This kindles the flames of Frankenstein's egotism, encouraging him to settle for no less than unfolding 'the deepest mysteries of creation'. Hereafter, his vainglorious self is oblivious to any motion of restraint, at a point when he should have been considering the ethics of his science. Instead, his vanity and ego promote extravagant notions for his positioning at the head of all hierarchies, denying God as the sole creator of man:

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species 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 theirs.

THE OVERTHROW OF THE FEMALE

This last sentence highlights another aspect of Victor's scheme — elimination of the need for the female. The reason no other father can demand so completely his child's gratitude is due to its

being shared with a mother. Yet if he can remove the necessity of the female in reproduction he can achieve this. This isolationist attitude, which also seeks to avoid sexual congress, is seen throughout the novel. His life with Elizabeth is asexual, living mostly as brother and sister, and when sexuality threatens to enter the relationship with their engagement, he cuts himself off from friends, family and fiancée for two years, while creating a means by which the reproductive faculty of the fiancée would become redundant.

Victor chooses not to involve himself with the pleasures of the marital bed on his wedding night, a neglect that brings about the death of his bride, ravished on the bed by her husband's creation. Thus, having sought to eliminate the need for anyone else in creation, his achievement is to eliminate his loved ones literally, with his creation killing his family and his bride.

Yet Frankenstein does not regret his actions so much as their product, and becomes a Marlovian overreacher like Dr Faustus. He is not content with being less than the epitome of overreachers, however, and sees himself as:

like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell. My imagination was vivid, yet my powers of analysis and application were intense; by the union of these qualities I conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man. Even now I cannot recollect, without passion, my reveries while the work was incomplete. I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how am I sunk!

Not only does Victor regard himself as Satan in the Miltonic tradition, where the poet is 'of the devil's party', but his musings clearly do not include any regret at his efforts. There is rather a pleasure in their recollection. Frankenstein's sole regret, and the solution to all the problems in the novel, is that he did not create an aesthetically pleasant being.

AESTHETIC DISAPPOINTMENT

Frankenstein's difficulty was not his success, which pleases him until death, but the limitation of his success. The progeny was hideous to the eye and thus his creator abandoned him. This is the other major theme of the novel — the neglected being who, because he cannot integrate into society, becomes alienated from common kindness and interaction, and rewards ostracism with violent crime. The process begins at the creature's 'birth', as Victor, only upon the animation of the being, finally recognises his:

dull yellow eye ... His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath ... his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

This prompts disgust in his creator, who rushes from the room, henceforth leaving his child to face the world unguided and unprotected. Furthermore, it is a child of monstrous appearance, for whom 'the human senses are insurmountable barriers' to integration into society, as the monster later explains to his neglectful father.

OSTRACISM

The consistent complaint of the monster in his narrative is thus that he is excluded from receiving any human affection, and is, instead, in receipt only of human aggression. He is not innately evil and 'admired virtue and good feelings'. Crime is a distant evil, he reveals, for:

benevolence and generosity [in the form of the cottagers] were ever present before me, inciting within me a desire to become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed.

To become active in society, however, is impossible, as he is unlike humans:

When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?

There is not even the comfort of familial contact as 'No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses'. His crimes are seen to arise owing to nurture — as opposed to nature — and he declares 'everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery'.

In contrast to Victor, whose egotism isolates him from his friends, family and fiancée, his creation craves human contact, and desperately pleads for a companion capable of accepting him:

I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me.

He argues that, his maliciousness stemming as it does from his miserable solitude, if:

...any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them an hundred and an hundredfold; for that one creature's sake. I would make peace with the whole kind!

Not permitted the possibility of fulfilling this pledge, the reader cannot know categorically if this is true, but with the motion of him being more 'sinn'd against than sinning' existing until the final page, the accuracy of the claim appears to be supported.

In conclusion, the concerns of *Frankenstein* are only incidentally concerned with science. First, there is the unrepentant, energetic egotism of a creator, and a creation who would have been welcomed if he had met the physical norm, particularly given his apparent intelligence and awareness. Second, the notion of neglect and isolation is vividly considered. What is clear is the technique repeatedly witnessed within the Gothic genre of projecting the fears and problems of the domestic onto a dark, imaginative narrative. Selfish parents, sexual inhibition, the neglected child and the need for human relationships, become extreme, fantastic cases, in order simultaneously to provoke and entertain. Science is a side issue, for the dangers of *Frankenstein*, and of the Gothic in general, are much closer to home.

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