

# Frankenstein: In Defence of the Monster

by Patrick Kelly

**T**WO FAMOUS NAMES will inevitably call forth the inexhaustible talent of mimicry in a young child. “Napoleon” provokes in the youngster the upright military posture and the familiar crooked right arm and the hand over the heart; “Frankenstein” galvanizes the child into not merely a pose but a motion—the rigid, uncertain walk, the glassy stare, and the outstretched arms precariously balancing the imagined eight-foot frame. That Napoleon actually existed and the Frankenstein monster is a fiction is, from the point of view of the imagination, not an essential difference. Both have become mythical figures, a part of our collective imagination. In the case of the Frankenstein story, film has fostered the myth. The brilliant comic film *Young Frankenstein* is a testimony to this phenomenon, for it is more a parody of other films of Frankenstein than of the novel.

Yet to read Mary Shelley’s novel of 1817 with fresh eyes points up how popular myth can sometimes trivialize and distort the original. For the reader, the differences between the films and the novel are everywhere evident. We learn that “Frankenstein” is the name of the scientist rather than of his creation; that there is no hunchbacked and cross-eyed assistant named Igor, nor any of those electronically overloaded machines, with crazy dials and numerous levers, in front of which Igor customarily performs his spasmodic dance; that the Creature is so articulate that he speaks flawless English during the whole of six chapters that comprise his own narrative; and most curious of all, that the Creature is not the monster we thought he was.

For the Christian reader the novel may offer unexpected insights. In an age when abortion and euthanasia are countenanced without shame and when genetic engineering is hailed as the latest secular panacea, the description of Dr. Frankenstein’s attempts “to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world” (the words of Mary Shelley’s introduction to the novel) should speak to us in a compelling way. But the novel’s most enduring value will perhaps reside in its analysis of how we may irresponsibly arrogate to ourselves godlike powers and “create” others, instead of recognizing the imperfection of the human soul, its unique dignity, and its need for love and sympathy.

Mary Shelley’s moral is conveyed at least partly through her ingenious use of Christian and mythological parallels. In subtitling the novel *The Modern*

*Prometheus*, she draws upon both sources. In Greek mythology Prometheus was the titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to man. In doing so, Prometheus gave man control over nature, but he also brought down the wrath of the gods. Later, in Roman mythology, Prometheus became the creator of man and his fire the source of human life. Finally, the early Christians interpreted Prometheus as the type of the Creator, the creative spark now becoming the emblem of the soul. Although Prometheus is viewed as a culture hero in much romantic poetry (a good example is the *Prometheus Unbound* of Mary's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley), in the novel he is analogous to the scientist, embodying his irresponsibility and even blasphemy. Dr. Frankenstein, who acknowledges the life of the Creature as only a monstrous "mockery of a soul," and seeks to extinguish the spark of life he "so negligently bestowed," fails dismally in the duties of a god.

When the Creature becomes acquainted with *Paradise Lost*, the epic attempt of the great English Puritan poet John Milton to justify the ways of God to men, he evaluates his creator with respect to the Christian God:

Remember that I am they creature; I ought to be they Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

Though not inherently evil like Satan, and never having possessed the heavenly bliss that Satan enjoyed, the Creature is rejected by his creator as firmly as God rejected the rebellious angel. He aspires to be blessed as Adam was in Paradise but discovers an earthly hell of isolation and despair. Convinced at last that neither his creator nor human society itself will provide a reflection of his early benevolence and innocence, he demands a woman of his own species—an Eve to love. Dr. Frankenstein, moved by the Creature's tale of woe to feel "what the duties of a creator towards his creature were," at first agrees to the request. But, later, he destroys the Creature's mate when he feels the same revulsion for her that he felt for his first creation.

One of the most striking ironies in the novel is that the Creature is more human than his creator. Although by definition he is without a soul, the artificial man nevertheless has a capacity for sympathy and benevolence that constantly underscores the egotism and even solipsism of his human creator. Even his violent acts—such as the killing of both Dr. Frankenstein's best friend and his fiancée—are, if not justifiable, at least understandable. The Creature moves outward in search of relationship, only to be disappointed, first by the human community as a whole and then in a twofold way by his creator, who refuses both to love his creation and to provide him with a mate. In analyzing himself the Creature realizes

that his vices are “the children of a forced solitude.” Dr. Frankenstein, on the other hand, woefully lacks such lucidity. He eagerly embraces solitude, appealing to the rationalization that the scientist must isolate himself in order “to benefit the race.” Dr. Frankenstein’s friend Clerval and his beloved Elizabeth both dearly love him; yet he chooses to take this love for granted and, indeed, even to flee it.

But Dr. Frankenstein is more than just the complement of the Creature: he is implicated in the Creature’s crimes. Literary critics now recognize that the Creature is the “Shadow” of his creator—that is, he enacts what Dr. Frankenstein subconsciously desires. The most disturbing aspect of the scientist’s solipsism is not his desire to flee relationships, but his desire to destroy those who offer him love. What prompts Dr. Frankenstein to fear and to hate the very thing the Creature so ardently desires is suggested in the chapter that describes the moment of creation. The scientist’s immediate reaction is one of horror and also amazement that the Creature should be so hideous when his limbs were chosen to be in proportion and his features designed to be beautiful. Both the horror and the amazement seem to play a part in the curious dream the scientist experiences when he tries to escape his anguish in sleep:

. . . I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms: a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel.

The dream suggests that the Creature is meant to replace Elizabeth, the feminine ideal in the novel. But the actual experiment (symbolized in the dream by the kiss of death) destroys the ideal life or, more precisely, creates death out of life.

Yet the dream tells us more about Dr. Frankenstein’s limitations than the Creature’s. Though made up of the parts of corpses, the Creature is fully alive. His imperfections are part of life, not death. Dr. Frankenstein cannot bear imperfection; yet he does not realize that perfection, in his narrow and perverted view of it, more truly partakes of death. Not merely bound to the ideal of mere physical perfection, Dr. Frankenstein seeks a “perfect” relationship in which he need not give of himself to the other. So, before the experiment, his daydreams betoken the obsessively self-centred, not the generous ideal of relationship: “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.”

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is most illuminating when we are no longer blinded by its gothic trappings, when we no longer see the Creature as a monster but as an imperfect being like ourselves. Near the end of his life, when he is befriended by the explorer Walton, Dr. Frankenstein recognizes in a lucid moment that the value of relationship is intricately bound up with human imperfection: ". . . we are unfashioned creatures, but half made up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves—such a friend ought to be—do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures." Yet, ironically, the scientist utters these words while still intent on destroying his Creature, surely one who is "unfashioned" and "half made up."

Mary Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel provides a remarkably apposite gloss to the hero's solipsism and its consequences. Mary's account of her friendly rivalry with Shelley, Byron, and Dr. Polidori as to who could write the most thrilling ghost story is often quoted. But it is her comments on her development and sensibility as a writer that are more relevant to the novel's themes. Like Dr. Frankenstein at the beginning of his career, the child Mary isolated herself in daydreams. While alone, her creative talent allowed her to "commune with the creature, of [her] fancy" and to "people the hours with creations." The suggestion that her powers as a writer are analogous to those of the scientist whom she created is further implied in her calling him "the artist" and the "pale student of unhallowed arts." Her limitations are like his, too, for the writer's inventive capacity "does not consist in creation out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded." But, ultimately, Mary is saved from Dr. Frankenstein's fate by her affection for her novel ("my hideous progeny") and by the fact that her talents as a mature writer were nurtured in the love she bore her husband. In her introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel, Mary wrote:

And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words which found no true echo in my heart. Its several pages speak of many a walk, many a drive, and many a conversation, when I was not alone; and my companion was one who, in this world, I shall never see more.

For the Christian reader, *Frankentein* is in some respects wanting. There is no suggestion in the novel that relationship with God can help us to approach moral perfection. There is neither the Protestant sense of "grace abounding" that John Bunyan beautifully describes nor the Catholic sense, everywhere present in the wold of G. K. Chesterton and Gerard Manley Hopkins, of a wondrous sacramental universe through which God bestows grace. Perhaps Mary Shelley's

preoccupation with Dr. Frankenstein's godlike powers leaves room for the transcendent God only in the rich network of allusions. Most likely, the novel ultimately derives from her secular humanism. The concept of God in all her works is at best vague. Christ, she felt, was the exemplar of virtue, but she could not conceive of Him as other than human. Nonetheless, a sense of Christian culture—especially as it is filtered through literary masters such as Milton—pervades her work. Moreover, its moral vision coincides with Christian teaching in pointing up our faults as well as our need for sympathetic relationships. In the final analysis, the novel reminds us as Christian readers that we, too, should be vehicles of God's grace for one another.

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