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Frankenstein Lives!

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Frankenstein Lives!

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the article's first paragraph:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has remained in print ever since it was published two hundred years ago this year, and has been the basis for innumerable adaptations. While most novels from so long ago have been forgotten, Shelley's lives on. Why has it remained so popular? Perhaps, at least in part, it's due to the philosophical themes it addresses: tampering with nature, the dereliction of duties, and the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. The tale of a being born without a mother, written by a young woman whose own mother died a few days after giving birth to her, it is perhaps most of all an examination of the need for love in order to survive in a harsh and unforgiving world. It is also a cautionary tale of a man who achieves what he sought to do, only to have his creation turn on him and all he loves.

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Comments

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Frankenstein Lives!

Tim Madigan considers the core philosophical themes of the long-lived novel.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has remained in print ever since it was published two hundred years ago this year, and has been the basis for innumerable adaptations. While most novels from so long ago have been forgotten, Shelley's lives on. Why has it remained so popular? Perhaps, at least in part, it's due to the philosophical themes it addresses: tampering with nature, the dereliction of duties, and the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. The tale of a being born without a mother, written by a young woman whose own mother died a few days after giving birth to her, it is perhaps most of all an examination of the need for love in order to survive in a harsh and unforgiving world. It is also a cautionary tale of a man who achieves what he sought to do, only to have his creation turn on him and all he loves.

Bittersweet Victory

Frankenstein is the story of a man obsessed with creating life. A brilliant and arrogant researcher who sneers at the ignorance of his teachers, Victor Frankenstein is nonetheless plagued by questions: "Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries?" These were the very types of questions which fascinated Frankenstein's author, eighteen-year old Mary Godwin, who began writing the work during the summer of 1816 while living with her married lover the poet Percy Shelley by Lake Geneva, swapping horror stories with their friend the infamous poet Lord Byron and his rather sinister doctor, John William Polidori. She and Shelley were in exile, having a forbidden love affair, which resulted in the birth of a child, whose premature death may well have influenced her to write a tale of bringing the dead back to life. After the suicide of Shelley's wife, the two of them married, which is why the book (originally published anonymously) was authored by Mary Shelley, not Mary Godwin.

It is often said that the work Mary Shelley created is a warning against hubris, particularly concerning humans trying to take on the role of God. As Frankenstein himself relates to his host Robert Walton, "Life and Death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through... A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me." Not only did he wish to find the way to eternal life, then; he also desired to bring into the world new life which would worship him as its creator. While he does indeed bring new life into existence, his creation, rather than worshipping him, comes to haunt him. Was there some irony here in Shelley naming her lead character 'Victor'?

At this point it is good to recall the subtitle of the novel: *the Modern Prometheus*. How exactly does the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus relate to this story?

Prometheus, taking pity on the dreary, cold state of humanity, stole the secret of fire from the gods for us, for which presumption he was condemned to have an eagle daily tear out his liver for all eternity. In his 1997 book *Forbidden Knowledge*, the literary critic Roger Shattuck writes that the myth of Prometheus represents the human desire to break boundaries and to challenge the limitations of nature: "The stolen gift of fire," he says, "has been variously interpreted as representing a great number of crucial human capacities – mechanical arts, science, language, imagination, consciousness itself... Prometheus' defiance became our salvation in an episode that appears to rebut the proverb that ignorance is bliss" (p.14). By stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humans, Prometheus symbolically gave us all the gift of reason, the ability to think for ourselves, and to thereby create things that did not otherwise exist in nature, much like the gods themselves could do.

However, Shattuck goes on to note that the myth is a cautionary tale as well. Not only is Prometheus punished severely by the gods for his theft, the gift is also misused in a destructive way by humans, who instead of simply making life better for all, create weapons that bring new miseries to the world. In addition, in retaliation for Prometheus' theft, Zeus sends down Pandora, who releases grief and suffering by opening a box she is told to leave alone. Curiosity, an offshoot of the gift of reason bestowed by Prometheus, leads to destruction. "The dire effects of her 'gifts' cancel out the benefits bestowed by Prometheus' defiance of the gods", Shattuck states (p.15). The Prometheus and Pandora stories thus go hand in hand, as Mary Shelley well knew.

Defying the Laws of Nature

Frankenstein continues this dual theme of achievement and destruction. Indeed, one reason for its continuing popularity may be called the 'Frankenstein Impulse' – the desire to alter nature, even to the point of creating new forms of life. Victor Frankenstein is usually accused of having the character defect of hubris, of over-reaching pride and ambition, attempting to be like God. And, like other famous fictional characters, such as Oedipus or Captain Ahab, it is hubris which causes his downfall.

But was Mary Shelley denouncing hubris? It is important to keep in mind that the author was raised in a free-thinking household. Her parents and their friends were very much Enlightenment rationalists. Her father, William Godwin, was a famous Utilitarian philosopher and social critic, notorious in his day for his excoriations of the church and clerics, and his advocacy of political anarchism. Her mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the early feminist tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* [see Brief Lives this issue, Ed]. Godwin and Wollstonecraft defied convention by living together without the sanction of marriage, only agreeing to marry when Wollstonecraft learned that she was pregnant, to save their child from the stigma of illegitimacy.

Frankenstein

The Monster Lives!
by Steve Lillie 2018

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Frankenstein

Mary admired both her parents for their Promethean spirit, and was not one to hold that laws, including the laws of nature, were meant to be obeyed without question. She was not reared in a religious tradition, and seemingly had no qualms about humans playing God, since for her the role remained unfilled. In addition, Percy Bysshe Shelley (Mary's lover while she wrote *Frankenstein* and her future husband) had been expelled from Oxford for co-authoring a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*.

It is also known that she took a keen interest in the scientific investigations of her day, especially those that dealt with the origins of life. As she was to write in the 1831 Introduction to the novel: "Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated... Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth." In her 2018 book *Making the Monster: The Science Behind Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Kathryn Harkup says of galvanism, the use of electricity to stimulate muscles, that "Sensational demonstrations on the corpses of recently hanged criminals appeared to show that electricity had the potential to reanimate the dead. The phe-



Prometheus Brings Fire to Mankind
by Heinrich Friedrich Füger c1817

nomenon of galvanism was discussed in private homes and fashionable gatherings as well as scientific societies; it was the subject of conversation, along with other medical and macabre topics, at the Villa Diodati when Mary was inspired to write *Frankenstein*" (pp.19-20). The bounds of life and death which Victor Frankenstein longed to break were much on Mary Shelley's mind when writing this novel.

Science Unbound

The several film adaptations of *Frankenstein* have given it an occult and horrific quality which is not found in the book. In fact, *Frankenstein* is better described as one of the earliest works of science fiction rather than as a work of horror. There is no supernatural element in it. Victor Frankenstein does not live in a castle in Transylvania, aided by a hunchback assistant. Instead, he is a medical student (not even a doctor!), and he performs his famed creation in what is essentially his dorm room. He masters the known scientific laws of his time, and applies this Promethean knowledge to achieve his stated aims of overcoming death and bringing to life a new species.

If Victor Frankenstein can be faulted – as indeed he can – it is not for hubris, but rather for two qualities he's already been quoted as disdaining, cowardice and carelessness. He performs his experiment without telling anyone else; and when his creation does come to life, he rejects it by running away and hoping that the creature will die. This rejection of what he has brought about and his failure to share his findings with the scientific community or the people around him ultimately leads to tragedy, for the unloved and ill-treated misbegotten creature gets his revenge by killing all of Victor's loved ones, who were in the dark about his very existence. It is thus significant that Mary Shelley subtitled her novel *The Modern Prometheus*.

Like Mary, her husband was fascinated by this ancient myth. While she was completing her novel, Percy Shelley was hard at work on his own masterpiece, the epic poem *Prometheus Unbound*. In it, the Titan Prometheus realizes that what has kept him chained to the rocks for centuries was not the power of Zeus, but rather the hatred in his own heart. Once he retracts the curse he has placed on Zeus, murmuring, "I wish no living thing to suffer pain," the chains fall from him, and Zeus topples from his throne. The peoples of the world, inspired by Prometheus' compassion, unite as one, forgetting their own age-old hatreds and finally using the gifts of technology he had bestowed upon them for peaceful ends. Who can forget the closing stanza?:

"To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory."

Prometheus Unbound, an optimistic hymn to the potential of human beings working together to solve their common prob-

lems, and a celebration of intellectual audacity, was published in 1820, two years after *Frankenstein*. Yet one senses that Mary Shelley did not share her husband's positive evaluation of human nature. She is rather more cautionary. Her Promethean figure, Victor Frankenstein, does not live up to his role model. He lacks compassion for his creation (perhaps a reflection on the lack of belief in a benevolent deity in which Mary was raised), and he shirks his moral responsibility by refusing to disclose his experiments to the community around him.

A Cautionary Tale For Our Times

But it is a mistake to assume that this story, although ending on a tragic note, is a jeremiad against scientific explorations of human possibility. Rather, it is an ethical examination of the importance of enlightened compassion. Frankenstein's impulse to use his scientific knowledge to create new forms of life was not wrong in itself; but it was not tempered by a necessary sense of connectedness with his fellow human beings. By not sharing his findings, and by rejecting the life he brought into the world, Frankenstein sowed the seeds of his own destruction.

Frankenstein is still relevant as a cautionary tale for research ethics, especially in regards to the proper treatment of people and other organisms, the necessity of making one's experiments known to and vetted by proper monitoring agencies, and the need to be clear on what the potential benefits are in relation to the potential harms the proposed research may cause. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the book raises important questions about the personal character of the researcher – was Victor Frankenstein truly a 'mad scientist', or rather a tormented genius who would have kept his sanity and his life if only he had confided in others about his research? That remains an open question, as does what might have happened if instead of rejecting the creature he had brought to life, he had given his child a name and welcomed him into the world as his son. Pedantic sorts like to point out that 'Frankenstein' is the name of the creator and should not be used to describe the 'monster' created (who remains unnamed throughout the novel). But I think that there is poetic justice in the fact that in popular culture 'Frankenstein' is the name of the creature, since he is in a sense the son of Victor Frankenstein, and has every right to that name. As the creature so poignantly says to his creator when they finally meet face to face: "Remember that I am thy creature – I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the Fallen Angel, whom thou drivest out from joy for no misdeed." Those who wish to play God must have the fortitude and the courage to live up to that lofty ambition. Ultimately, Victor Frankenstein may be a genius, but he is no god.

Mary Shelley, by drawing upon her own deep knowledge of philosophy, literature, science, and history, and by speculating upon the likely ways in which humans would attempt to reshape the natural world, has given us a work that continues to be relevant. Victor Frankenstein and his rejected creation aren't far removed from today's ethical discussions on fetal tissue research, life extension, human cloning, and artificial intelligence. *Frankenstein* is as immortal as any novel can be.

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Tim Madigan is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at St John Fisher College, and a bona fide 'Doctor of Madness', certified by the Monster Bash University.

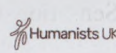
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