



The Monster's Human Nature
by
Stephen Jay Gould

An old Latin proverb tells us to “beware the man of one book” – *cave ab homine unius libri*. Yet Hollywood knows only one theme in making monster movies from the archetypal Frankenstein of 1931 to modern works. Human technology may not go beyond an intended order decreed by God or set by nature's laws. No matter how benevolent the purposes of the transgressor, such cosmic arrogance can only lead to killer tomatoes, very large rabbits with sharp teeth, giant ants or even larger blobs that swallow entire cities. Yet these films often use far more subtle books as their sources and in doing so, distort the originals beyond all thematic recognition.

The trend began in 1931 with Frankenstein, Hollywood's first great monster talkie. Hollywood decreed its chosen theme by the most upfront of all conceivable strategies. The film begins with a prologue featuring a well-dressed man standing on stage before a curtain, to issue both a warning about the potential fright and to announce the film's deeper theme as the story of a man of science who sought to create a man after his own image without reckoning upon God.

In the movie, Dr. Waldman, Henry's old medical school professor, speaks of his pupil's insane ambition to create life, a diagnosis supported by Frankenstein's own feverish words of enthusiasm: “*I created it. I made it with my own hands from the bodies I took from graves, from the gallows, from anywhere.*”

The best of a cartload of sequels, The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) makes the favored theme even more explicit in a prologue featuring Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (who wrote Frankenstein when she was only nineteen years old and published the story two years later in 1818). In conversation with her husband, Percy, and their buddy Lord Byron, she states: “*My purpose was to write a moral lesson of the punishment that befell a mortal man who dared to emulate God.*”

Shelley's Frankenstein is a rich book of many themes, but I can find little therein to support the Hollywood reading. The text is neither a diatribe on the dangers of technology nor a warning about overextended ambitions against a natural order. We find no passages about disobeying God – an unlikely subject for Mary Shelley and her freethinking friends (Percy had been expelled from Oxford in 1811 for publishing a defense of atheism.) Victor Frankenstein (I do not know why Hollywood changed him to Henry) is guilty of a great moral failing, as we shall see later, but his crime is not technological transgression against a natural or divine order.

We can find a few passages about the awesome power of science, but these words are not negative. Professor Waldman, a sympathetic character in the book, states, for example:

They [scientists] penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers.

We do learn that ardor without compassion or moral consideration can lead to trouble, but Shelley applies this argument to any endeavor, not especially to scientific discovery. Victor Frankenstein says:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your

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affections...then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observe...Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.

Victor's own motivations are entirely idealistic: *"I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption."* Finally, as Victor expires in the Arctic, he makes his most forceful statement on the dangers of scientific ambition, but he only berates himself and his own failures, while stating that others might well succeed. Victor says his dying words to the ship's captain who found him on the polar ice:

Farewell, Walton. Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes yet another may succeed.

But Hollywood dumbed these subtleties down to the essay formula – "man must not go beyond what God and nature intended" (you almost have to use the old gender-biased language for such a simplistic archaicism) – and has been treading in its own footsteps ever since.

Karloff's Frankenstein contains an even more serious and equally prominent distortion of a theme that I regard as the primary lesson of Mary Shelley's book – another lamentable example of Hollywood's sense that the American public cannot tolerate even the slightest exercise in intellectual complexity. Why is the monster evil? Shelley provided a nuanced and subtle answer that, to me, sets the central theme of her book. But Hollywood opted for a simplistic solution, so precisely opposite to Shelley's intent that the movie can no longer claim to be telling a moral fable (despite the protestations of the man in front of the curtain, or of Mary Shelley herself in the sequel) and becomes instead, as I suppose the maker intended all along, a pure horror film.

James Whale, director of the 1931 Frankenstein, devoted the movie's long and striking opening scenes to this inversion of Shelley's intent – so the filmmakers obviously viewed this alteration as crucial. The movie opens with a burial at the graveyard. After the mourners depart, Henry and his obedient servant, the evil hunchbacked Fritz, dig up the body and cart it away. Then they cut down another dead man from the gallows, but Henry exclaims: *"The neck's broken. The brain is useless; we must find another brain."*

The scene switches to the university where Professor Waldman is lecturing on cranial anatomy and comparing *"one of the most perfect specimens of the normal brain"* with *"the abnormal brain of a typical criminal."* Waldman firmly locates the criminal's depravity in the inherited malformations of his brain; anatomy is destiny. Note, Waldman says, the scarcity of convolutions on the frontal lobes and the distinct degeneration of the middle frontal lobes. All of these degenerate characteristics check amazingly with the case history of the dead man before us, whose life was one of brutality, of violence, and of murder.

Fritz breaks in after the students leave and steals the normal brain, but the sound of a gong startles him and he drops the precious object, shattering its container. Fritz then has to take the criminal brain instead, but he never tells Henry. The monster is evil because Henry unwittingly makes him of evil stuff. Later in the film, Henry expresses his puzzlement at the monster's nasty temperament, for he made his creature of the best materials. But Waldman, finally realizing the source of the monster's behavior, tells Henry, *"The brain that was stolen from my laboratory was a criminal brain."* Henry then counters with one of the cinema's greatest double takes, and finally manages a feeble retort: *"Oh, well, after all it's only a piece of dead tissue."* *"Only evil will come from it,"* Waldman replies, *"you have created a monster and it will destroy you"* – true enough, at least until the next sequel.

Karloff's intrinsically evil monster stands condemned by the same biological determinism that has so tragically and falsely restricted the lives of millions who committed no transgression besides membership in a despised race, sex, or social class. Karloff's actions record his internal state. He manages a few grunts and in one of the sequels, even learns some words from a blind man who cannot perceive his ugliness, although the monster never gets much beyond "eat," "smoke" and "good." Shelley's monster, by contrast, is a most remarkably literate fellow. He learns French by assimilation after hiding for several

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months in the hovel of a noble family temporarily in straitened circumstances. His three favorite books would bring joy to the heart of any college English professor who could persuade students to read and enjoy even one: Plutarch's Lives, Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther, and Milton's Paradise Lost (of which Shelley's novel is an evident parody.) The original monster's thunderous threats certainly pack more oomph than Karloff's pitiable grunts: "*I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends.*"

Shelley's monster is not evil by inherent condition. He is born unformed – carrying the predispositions of human nature, but without the specific manifestations that can only be set by upbringing and education. He is the Enlightenment's man of hope, whom learning and compassion might mold to goodness and wisdom. But he is also a victim of post – Enlightenment pessimism as the cruel rejection of his natural fellows drives him to fury and revenge. (Even as a murderer, the monster remains fastidious and purposive. Victor Frankenstein is the source of his anger, and he only kills the friends and lovers whose deaths will bring Victor the most grief; he does not, like Godzilla or the Blob, rampage through cities.)

Mary Shelley chose her words carefully to take a properly nuanced position at a fruitfully intermediate point between nature and nurture – whereas Hollywood opted for nature alone to explain the monster's evil deeds. Frankenstein's creature is not inherently good by internal construction or benevolent theory of "nature alone," but no different in mode of explanation from Hollywood's opposite version. He is, rather, born capable of goodness, even with an inclination toward kindness, should circumstances of his upbringing call forth this favored response. In his final confession to Captain Walton, before heading north to immolate himself at the Pole, the monster says:

My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy; and, when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change without torture, such as you cannot even imagine.

He then adds: *Once my fancy was soothed with dreams of virtue, of fame, and of enjoyment. Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth. I was nourished with high thoughts of honor and design. But now vice has degraded me beneath the meanest animal...when I call over the frightful catalogue of my deeds, I cannot believe that I am he whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil.*

Why, then, does the monster turn to evil against an inherent inclination to goodness? Shelley gives us an interesting answer that seems almost trivial in invoking such a superficial reason, but that emerges as profound when we grasp her general theory of human nature. He becomes evil, of course, because humans reject him so violently and so unjustly. His resulting loneliness becomes unbearable. He states:

And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with figure hideously deformed and loathsome...when I looked around, I saw and heard none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?

But why is the monster so rejected if his feelings incline toward benevolence, and his acts to evident goodness? He certainly tries to act kindly, in helping the family in the hovel that forms his hiding place:

I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption, but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts and roots, which I gathered from a neighboring wood. I discovered also another means through which I was enabled to assist their labors. I found that the youth spent a great part of each day in collecting wood for the family fire; and during the night, I often took his tools, the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days.

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Shelley tells us that all humans reject and even loathe the monster for a visceral reason of literal superficiality: his truly terrifying ugliness – a reason heartrending in its deep injustice and profound in its biological accuracy and philosophical insight about the meaning of human nature.

The monster, by Shelley's description, could scarcely have been less attractive in appearance. Victor Frankenstein describes the first sight of his creature alive:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath: his hair was a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set; his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips.

At the hyper-NBA height of eight feet, the monster scares all who cast eyes upon him.

The monster quickly grasps this unfair source of human fear and plans a strategy to overcome initial reactions and prevail by good ness of soul. He presents himself first to the blind old father in the hovel above his hiding place and makes a good impression. He hopes to win the man's confidence, and thus gain a favorable introduction to the world of sighted people. But in his joy at acceptance, he stays too long. The man's son returns and drives the monster away – as fear and loathing overwhelm any inclination to hear about inner decency.

The monster finally acknowledges his inability to overcome visceral fear at his ugliness; his resulting despair and loneliness drive him to evil deeds:

I am malicious because I am miserable: am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? Shall I respect man when he hates me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and instead of injury, I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be: the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union.

Our struggle to formulate a humane and accurate idea of human nature focuses on proper positions between the false and sterile poles of nature and nurture. Pure nativism – as in the Hollywood version of the monster's depravity – leads to a cruel and inaccurate theory of biological determinism, the source of so much misery and such evasive suppression of hope in millions belonging to unfavored races, sexes, or social classes. But pure nurturism can be just as cruel and just as wrong – as in the blame once heaped upon loving parents, in bygone days of rampant Freudianism, for failures in rearing as putative sources of mental illness or retardation or autism that we can now identify as genetically based, for all organs, including brains, may be subject to inborn illness.

The solution, as all thoughtful people recognize, must lie in properly melding the themes of inborn predisposition and shaping through life's experiences. This fruitful joining cannot take the false form of percentages adding up to 100 – as in intelligence is 80 percent nature and 20 percent nurture – and a hundred other harmful statements in this foolish format. When two ends of such a spectrum are commingled, the result is not a separable amalgam (like shuffling two decks of cards with different packs), but an entirely new entity that cannot be decomposed (as adults cannot be separated into maternal and paternal contributions to their totality.)

Frankenstein's creature becomes a monster because he is cruelly ensnared by one of the deepest predispositions of our biological inheritance – our aversion toward seriously malformed individuals. (Konrad Lorenz, the most famous ethologist of the last generation, based much of his theory on the primacy of this inborn rule.) We are now appalled by the injustice of such a predisposition, but this proper moral feeling is an evolutionary latecomer, imposed by human consciousness upon a much older mammalian pattern.

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We almost surely inherit such an instinctive aversion to serious malformation, but remember that nature can only supply a predisposition, while culture shapes specific results. And now we can grasp – for Mary Shelley presented the issue to us so wisely – the true tragedy of Frankenstein’s monster and the moral dereliction of Victor himself. The predisposition for aversion toward ugliness can be overcome by learning and understanding. I trust that we have all trained ourselves in this essential form of compassion, that we all work hard to suppress that revulsion (which in honest moments we all admit we feel) and to judge people by their qualities of soul, not by their external appearances.

Frankenstein’s monster was a good man in an appallingly ugly body. His countrymen could have been educated to accept him, but the person responsible for that instruction – his creator, Victor Frankenstein – ran away from his foremost duty and abandoned his creation at first sight. Victor’s sin does not lie in misuse of technology or hubris in emulating God; we cannot find these themes in Mary Shelley’s account. Victor failed because he followed a predisposition of human nature – visceral disgust at the monster’s appearance – and did not undertake the duty of any creator or parent: to teach his own charge and to educate others in acceptance.

He could have schooled his creature (and not left the monster to learn language by eavesdropping and by scrounging for books in a hiding place under a hovel.) He could have told the world what he had done. He could have introduced his benevolent and educated monster to people prepared to judge him on merit. But he took one look at his handiwork and ran away forever. In other words, he bowed to a base aspect of our common nature and did not accept the particular moral duty of our potential nurture:

I had worked hard for nearly two years for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation. But now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room... a mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.

The very first line of the preface to Frankenstein has often been misinterpreted: “The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of German, as not of impossible occurrence.” People suppose the “Dr. Darwin” must be Charles of evolutionary fame. But Charles Darwin was born on Lincoln’s birthday in 1809 and wasn’t even ten years old when Mary Shelley wrote her novel. Dr. Darwin is Charles’s grandfather, Erasmus, one of England’s most famous physicians and an atheist who believed in the material basis of life. (Shelley is referring to his idea that such physical forces as electricity might be harnessed to quicken inanimate matter – for life has no inherently spiritual component and might therefore emerge from nonliving substances infused with enough energy.)

I will, however, close with my favorite moral statement from Charles Darwin who, like Mary Shelley, also emphasized our duty to foster the favorable specificities that nurture and education can control. Mary Shelley wrote a moral take, not about hubris or technology, but about responsibility to all creatures of feeling and to the products of one’s own hand. The monster’s misery arose from the moral failure of other humans, not from his own inherent and unchangeable constitution. Charles Darwin then invoked the same theory of human nature to remind us of duties to all people in universal bonds of brotherhood: *“If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.”*

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