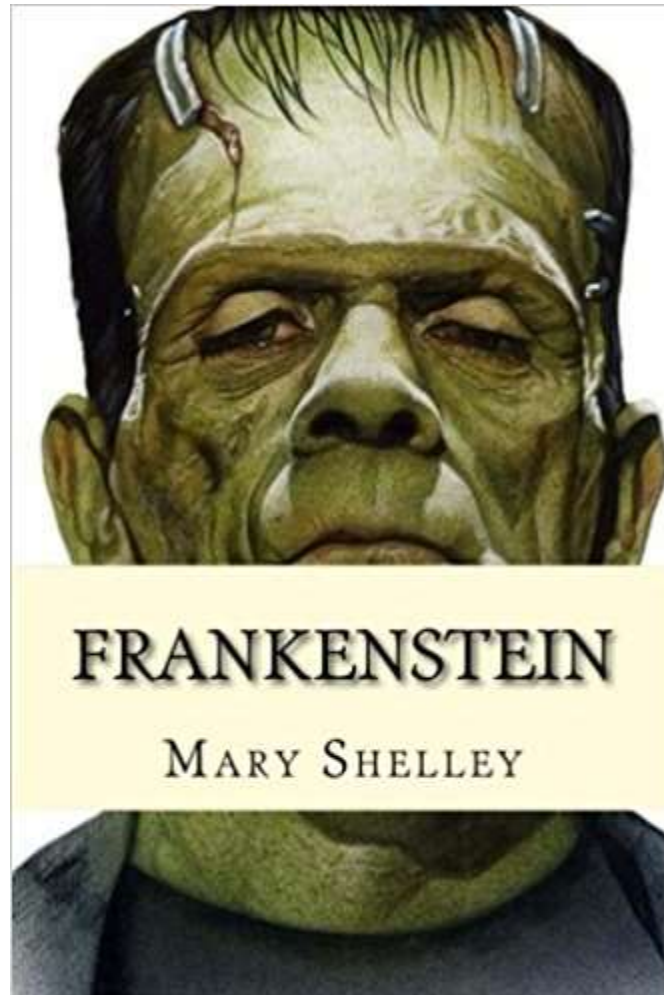


## The Monster Is Alive: 200 Years of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Rajesh V. Basiya, Ph.D.

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Frankenstein-Mary-Shelley/dp/1512308056>

### Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the classic horror stories and is regarded as the forerunner of modern science fiction. *Frankenstein* originally a brief story, at the suggestion of Shelley, was developed to a full-length novel. Since its publication, the thrilling fantasy in last two centuries has been adapted as movies, comic stories etc. *Frankenstein* is about Dr. Victor Frankenstein who is interested in the secrets of life. He secretly collects bones and body parts of dead from charnel-houses and animates the creature. The monster kills Victor's brother, friend and wife and is indirectly responsible for his father's death and the maid's death. Thus, it is a creation done without thinking about the consequences. Do we make monsters or monsters are born? How do we turn a person into a monster? The novel is relevant even today as we face ethical dilemma around appropriate of stem

cells, questions about organ donation and organ harvesting as well as animal to human transplants. At the same time as well, the rise of artificial intelligence indicates an uncertain future of the boundaries between machines and humans.

**Keywords:** Monster, *Frankenstein*, Creation, Consequence, Mankind, Relevance.

The year 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the publication of the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851). *Frankenstein* the tale of ‘Gothic horror,’ is the most well-known of Mary Shelley’s works. It was published in 1818. Told in the technique of epistolary form, *Frankenstein* remains as one of the classic horror stories and is regarded as the forerunner of modern science fiction. Mary was the only daughter of the well-known philosopher and author William Godwin. Mary’s mother Mary Wollstonecraft was radical feminist who died giving birth to Mary. In 1814 Mary met the renowned poet Percy B. Shelley and eloped with him to Italy. They were in Germany in 1814 when Byron challenged them to write horror-ghost story. *Frankenstein* originally a brief story, at the suggestion of Shelley, was developed to a full-length novel. Since its publication, the thrilling fantasy in last two centuries has been adapted as movies, comic stories etc.

What is a monster? Its dictionary meaning is ‘a creature which produces fear or physical harm by its appearance or its actions’. In the religious context of ancient Greeks and Romans, monsters were seen as sign of ‘divine displeasure’, and it was thought that birth defects especially ominous, being ‘an unnatural event or a malfunctioning of nature’. During early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Old French *monstre* basically from Latin *monstrum* means ‘divine omen, abnormal shape, monster, figuratively repulsive character, object or dread ‘from root of *monere*’ to warn, advice, to think’, so to say that the thing that makes you think. It was ‘malformed animal or human, creature, afflicted with a birth defect’. Abnormal or prodigious animals were regarded as signs or omens of impending evils. But in this novel the monster is created by a human being who is a young scientist.

### ***Frankenstein***

*Frankenstein* is about Dr. Victor Frankenstein who is interested in the secrets of life at the University of Ingolstadt. He secretly collects bones and body parts of dead from charnel-houses. After two years of laborious work he animates the creature to life. But because of its hideous appearance Victor is terrified and he runs away from the apartment. He becomes ill and is looked after by his friend Henry. After some days Victor receives a letter from his home. It informs that his younger brother William is murdered by someone. Victor comes back home to Geneva. He sees the monster from distance and knows that his brother is killed by him. Justine, the maid servant of Victor’s family is accused for the murder and executed. One day the monster meets him and narrates his story. The monster describes how cruelly he was treated by people and he took shelter in a shed and how he learnt language. As the monster suffers from loneliness, he demands for a female companion with equal deformity from his creator. Dr. Victor initially starts the creation of one more creature but later on destroys it. The monster is enraged and kills Victor’s close friend Henry Clerval. The monster kills Victor’s wife, Elizabeth on their wedding night. In the end, Victor regrets for his grotesque creation and desires to destroy the monster. The ruined and helpless scientist realizes that he had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunts him. Finally, he thinks:

*I am the assassin of those most innocent victims; they died by my machinations. A thousand times would I have shed my own blood, drop by drop, to have saved their lives; but I could not, my father, indeed I could not sacrifice the whole human race. (Frankenstein 165)*

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## Social, Cultural Perspectives

If we think his presence from social, cultural perspectives, even today it seems that the monster is alive in our society. Our desire and blind race for inventions and technology especially in the areas of artificial intelligence and bio-engineering leads us creating monsters. A time comes when the monster is beyond our control. As a human being do we have the right to create life? Should we do it before knowing the consequences of it? Victor works hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. Finally, he succeeds and gives life to the creature. But a time comes when the creation becomes more powerful than the creator and challenges him. The monster warns Dr. Victor, '*Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple.* (Frankenstein 83) He asks for a female companion of equal deformity. The monster threatens to Victor:

*Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!'... I am fearless and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom. Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict.'... remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night.* (Frankenstein 148-149)

## A Creation Not Thinking about Consequences

The monster kills Victor's brother, friend and wife and is indirectly responsible for his father's death and the maid's death. Thus, it is a creation done without thinking about the consequences. If we think from social and cultural perspectives do we make monsters or monsters are born? How do we turn a person into a monster? By creating a gap, 'I am this and you are not this'. The monster was beaten and dejected by people because of his deformity. Because of his ugly appearance he was made 'other' by people. The monster like a human being was longing for the integration and recognition that are denied to him on account of his appearance. The monster is expelled from everyday life chiefly because of his appearance, so he has to stay alone in very poor conditions in distant parts of the mountains. The only source of his energy is his hate for people who do not accept his existence and who only live according to prejudices, which he regards as grievous and deserve to be punished. Shelly seemingly blames the society for its irresponsibility, showing its obsolescence, lethargy and imperfection of a man. Human beings had only to free themselves from social oppression and prejudice.

## Caste, Creed and Religion

Even today people are made 'other' in the name caste, creed and religion in our society. This categorization of making people 'other' leads them to becoming of monsters. The dejected monster left lonely and nameless prefers destruction or revenge. The monster feels:

*All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life?* (Frankenstein 83)

Victor's irresponsible action leads him to immense disaster. The way he runs away that night shows his irresponsible attitude towards the creature. Victor himself is fearful of the site:

*I beheld the wretch-the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His*

*jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs. (Frankenstein 45)*

### **Irresponsible?**

Why does he run away? Is it not irresponsibility? We are stunned on some of the monster's questions to his maker. The despised and dejected creature asks, "*Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?*" (Frankenstein 111). The monster tries to defend his wretched condition, "*I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept.*" (Frankenstein 86) This is the condition of every deprived one in our society. They suffer from the same condition today. Not only the dejection that but the ingratitude of the society makes the monster malicious. The monster saves a girl from drowning in a river, but he is fired and wounded by a man. Then he says, '*I vowed eternal hatred and vengeance*' (Frankenstein 123). He determines, '*I will revenge my injuries... I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?*' (Frankenstein 126). He says, '*Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?*' (Frankenstein 198) The monster regrets in the end, '*I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation. Polluted by crimes and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death? ... I shall die, my ashes will be swept*' (Frankenstein 199). The novel ends with disappearance of the monster in darkness and distance.

### **Brings in Disaster**

Thus, a creation done without thinking about the consequences brings disaster to the scientist. Doctor Victor was not aware of the social consequences of the research he was doing. Even today the novel is relevant and warns us on our inventions and experiments in the areas of life science, gene editing technology, duplicate cells, organs, and bioengineering experiments. It still raises questions. The novel is relevant even today as we face ethical dilemma around appropriate of stem cells, questions about organ donation and organ harvesting as well as animal to human transplants. At the same time as well, the rise of artificial intelligence indicates an uncertain future of the boundaries between machines and humans. *Frankenstein* can warn us be cautious in our blind race for scientific inventions and medical research. We are practicing monstrosity in various ways for various purposes even today. As in the novel the monster claims his power saying, "You are my creator, but I am your master" in today's context when we have unleashed demonic forces beyond our control. The whole world is in race for power and prosperity that has led to creation of atom bomb and nuclear weapons. Mary Shelley warned us 200 years before. Mary strongly expresses that it is impossible to overthrow the rules and the structure of nature and also handle it as God, so therefore she does not hesitate to punish Victor for his arrogance and to use him as a warning for the whole of mankind.

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