

# The art and science of creating a monster

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Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientists in the world, believes that there is one question human beings must answer in order to truly understand the implications of existence itself: Is the Universe friendly? In the vast body of thought both ancient and modern, the answers to this question are numerous and mostly contradictory. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the narrators uniformly answer this question in the negative. In spite of their disparate stations in life, each storyteller feels separated from his fellows in some way, physically, intellectually, and geographically. Society does not ease the condition of such lost souls because it is so quick to ostracize and dismiss anyone that departs from its grand ideals of what is acceptable (Williams, 1).

Most artists, scientists, philosophers, and explorers are not celebrated until several centuries after death, if then. Human beings are extremely social creatures. In order to function well, people need to feel as though they are a part of something bigger than themselves, that they share a similar path to those around them. Though he was denied the decency of others, the creature had only one wish; to have a companion made for him. If he never encountered another living being except for her, he would have been contented in the spirit that there was someone in existence that could relate to him. Victor Frankenstein, brilliant scientist extraordinaire literally sold his soul for godhood.

At the end of his story, he shares the same fate of his creature: friendless and alone with only strangers to ease his passage into death. In a sense, one could conceivably argue that Victor suffered just as much as the creature because he had his whole world taken from him—his little brother,

best friend and his wife. In the end, he becomes as wretched as the creature without soul or companionship and perished among strangers. For one who has known genuine happiness, life's tragic moments become even more painful.

Robert Walton, the sailor that tells the story of Frankenstein and his creature is equally marginalized. He is without friends because his aspirations were lofty and his education limited. When one leaves the path of the establishment to explore new and sometimes frightening realms, or departs from the norms expected for one's gender, race, or intellectual achievements: society exacts punishment by banishing him to the fringes.

The creature is the most obviously reviled being in the story. On a dark and stormy November night, he awakes to Victor's horrified screeches. His physical appearance produces instant disgust in everyone he meets, including his "father" and creator. During the Romantic Era and in Gothic literature, physiognomy was a way to determine a person's character and inclinations (McLaren, 40). Elizabeth was thought to be an angel because of her beautiful golden hair and fair countenance, while people assumed the creature was morally degenerate because of his ugly appearance.

The creature had the sallow skin of a dead thing, he was extremely tall, strong, and bright, yet he was very malformed. In the eighteenth century, ugliness and deviance were heavily correlated. In many of the stories of the time, the hero and heroine were extremely good looking, virtuous, and talented in some special way. In contrast, the villain was ugly, amoral, violent, and without conscience. Even if there were a great degree of

credence to this, it would seem that the violence toward others is simply a villain's expression of loathing both self and society.

" This violent response to his own oppression shares the same elements of many of the post-WWII protest novels. Protest novels often delineate a relationship between the mainstream dominant society and the " Other," a character designated for his/her marginalization and oppression within that society"(Scott). Before departing to the wastelands of the North to end his miserable existence, the monster gives an accounting to himself to Walton, even though he believes that it would not move the sailor to sympathize with his plight.

Little does the creature know that his confessor had lived without a friend or companion. Had things turned out differently, maybe Walton and the creature might have become friends because both were alone in the world. The creature's story is very reminiscent of the tragic poor, malformed vagabonds living on the fringes of society, exposed to only the worst traits and abuses of other human beings. As a living creature, the monster wanted to be shown decency, compassion, gentleness and even love and he was denied at every turn. He hated himself and the world and turned his grief and rage into a force of darkness that would avenge itself on everything and everyone his creator holds dear.

" I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I thought to be only the criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?"(Shelley, 210). While some literary critics believe that the monster represents the depravity that lies dormant in all human beings until pushed to the breaking point (Scott), others have determined that he is <https://assignbuster.com/the-art-and-science-of-creating-a-monster/>

instead, a voice of social justice. When external conditions become so unbearable that it takes every ounce of effort to simply survive, this experience justifies any act of rebellion against the social order (Knoepfmacher & Lewis, 165). To the creature, Victor Frankenstein represented the malignancy and callous disregard for life he encountered in his life experience. When his last chance for a companion was destroyed in his creator's ultimate breach of trust, he made it his life's mission to destroy everything his creator loved without assuming personal responsibility for his death.

Victor Frankenstein, not content with pursuing a normal career in medicine, aspires to godhood. Because of his hubris, he loses everything he holds dear in his life and dies alone in an arctic desert. Unlike his unfortunate creation, he represents the very establishment from which his ambitions set him apart. His childhood was normal in an idealized sort of way. His parents lavished tons of attention on him and he never had a moment of feeling unloved, neglected, or spurned by other people. Growing up in Geneva, his life was extremely sheltered, and the people in his life were good and beautiful. His aversion to ugliness is one of his most pronounced character traits.

When he enrolls in University, he immediately judges the character of his professors based on their physical appearances, " I found even in M. Krempe a great deal of sound and sense and real information, combined, it is true, with a repulsive physiognomy and manners. In M. Waldman I found a true friend. His gentleness was never tinged by dogmatism and his instructions

were given with an air of frankness and good nature that banished every idea pedantry”(Shelley, 49).

This passage makes Frankenstein appear shocked that M. Krempe would have anything of value to offer him because of his unattractive appearance. Another despicable character trait is Victor’s inability to take responsibility for his actions. Once the creature wakes up, he rushes from the room (Shelley, 57). Later, he allows an innocent woman—thefamilymaid he grew up with no less—to be executed for a crime she never committed to hide the existence of his creature (Shelley, 84).

Robert Walton, not content to explore the vast inhabited regions of earth, braves the cold and ice to look for a northern route to the Pacific Ocean. He wants to “ boldly go where no man had gone before” to paraphrase Star Trek. However, all he found was an endless wasteland that did not deliver the passage he had sought. Though he merely serves as the recipient of Frankenstein’s story, he has no one in the world except his sister. In this sense, he identifies with the creature’s feelings of loneliness. In his second letter he tells his sister, “ But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy, and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil.

I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate in my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection”(Shelley, 18). While he is normal physically, his educational background sets him apart from others. He is self-taught, and his curriculum included books of voyages and fantastic adventures, and the poets he had become familiar

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with were British. Later, he laments that he is “ more illiterate than many schoolboys of fifteen”(Shelley, 19). Still, he could not help feeling a little pity for the creature’s ordeal since part of it resembled his own, “ Once my fancy was soothed withdreamsof 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 unfolding. I was nourished with high thoughts of honor and devotion. But now crime has degraded me beneath the meanest animal”(Shelley, 209). In that last desperate section following Frankenstein’s death, we realize that had Frankenstein not treated his creature so ill, he could have become a reliable companion, loyal friend, and confidant...the very thing Walton had become to Frankenstein when he was cold, alone, and starving. Even as two wealthy white European men, Walton and Frankenstein failed to flourish in a society that was uniquely designed for them.

While the two men and the monster keenly felt their separation from others, the women are practically non-characters. Even though a woman that inhabited the extremely liberal artistic scene of the Enlightenment Era wrote the story, all the female characters assumed no importance of their own in a truly strong and heroic sense outside of their impact on Victor’s life. They were objects, not subjects. Even the monster was able to express himself as a subject, while the women served as props. Still, there was much about them that would potentially interest a reader if the characters were explored in greater depth. Frankenstein’s mother was a philanthropist who visited poor families and attempted to ease their lot in life.

Elizabeth was very passionate in the defense of Justine when she was falsely accused of murder (Shelley, 81). As an orphan raised by peasants and adopted into a wealthy family, her character's death would have been much more dramatic and poignant had she been flushed out more. While Shelley achieved much as a writer, she did not want to encourage women to become more assertive, and none of the female characters (other than Walton's sister) survived until the end of the book.

One account states that Shelley believes women must behave differently from men (Schoene-Harwood, 42). During the Romantic Era, men were the heroes, the creators, the actors in public life and the centerpiece of home life. Women were the passive observers, and sometimes creators of brilliant artistic works. Otherwise, the rest of the world belonged to men.

Times have certainly changed, but not as much as people think. Global travel exposes people to different cultures, ideals, and mores. In the field of socialpsychology, the most successful societies assimilate outsiders rather than marginalize them. To maximize the likelihood of maintaining a peaceful civilization, the newcomers must adapt the mores, values, and language of the dominantcultureand the institutions must be able to accommodate the tansition. When a population is exiled to the fringes, it would possibly create a volatile situation of accelerating tensions between the marginalized group and the dominant group to the point where the people on the fringe begin to attack the establishment in ways both subtle and explosive (Simon, 141-146).

In American history, immigrants were looked down upon and many laws were passed to keep them out. Eventually, groups of immigrants had begun

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forming their own communities, keeping the spirit of their home culture alive in a country that neither wanted nor welcomed them. With the growth of these communities, people no longer have the need nor desire to learn the dominant language. On a whole, people in the West are gradually becoming more tolerant toward alternative lifestyles, minority groups, and religious preferences, but the bias and prejudice against people not gifted with physical beauty is the final socially acceptable prejudice to hold. Women in the Western World had finally been granted the right to vote; even so, a woman's value is still vested in her looks and ability to become a wife and mother.

Until a woman's choice to attain worldly power is respected, they will never achieve the same level of equality that men assume. Shelley's women were faithful in their duties of domestics, artists, and lovers, but like many women of the time; were not allowed to express the hidden passion they were forced to repress. Even in our own society, marginalizing others is still par for the course. In the US, a strict racial hierarchy is still perpetuated even though the apartheid was legally dissolved in the 1960's. There is a great disparity between the races when looking at factors such as life expectancy, disease profiles, and income.

Progress toward a better world is often slow and always painful. In order to maintain social stability, people did not evolve the ability to accept sweeping changes on all levels. Appearance in the twenty-first century will become an even greater obsession than it was in the past. With superior technology to alter, enlarge, or diminish undesirable characteristics, beauty will quickly become associated with social class and personal value. When Elizabeth was

adopted, Frankenstein's mother believed that she was a higher order of being by virtue of her physical appearance, " a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features" (Shelley, 34).

Victor Frankenstein's monster was a different order of being himself, he was purely logical, empathetic, and selfless, but he was hideously ugly. Eventually, through repeated rejection, brutal treatment, and several attempts on his life, he was trained to mold his character to match his looks. To those living on the fringes, the universe is an extremely unfriendly place indeed.

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