

Comparison of scenes in the book and film of frankenstein essay examples

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The 1931 James Whale film *Frankenstein* bears, at times, little more than a surface resemblance to the original Mary Shelley novel on which it was based, *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*. One of the few distinct parallels that the book and film share beyond their core concept is a scene in which the monster interacts with an innocent little girl near a body of water.

However, whereas in the book the monster saves the girl from drowning, Boris Karloff's monster in the film unknowingly drowns the girl, only realizing what he had done far too late. The difference in these two scenes helps to illustrate the two different approaches to the story: Shelley's book paints the monster as more of a sophisticated, openly tragic figure, while the monster in Whale's film version is much more simple-minded and pathetic, deserving sympathy only because it does not know what evil it does.

In both stories, scientist Victor Frankenstein seeks to conquer the mysteries of death by reanimating dead tissue assembled from several bodies into a living creature. However, the unstable and misunderstood nature of the beast leads him to become exiled from society and from Victor Frankenstein himself, society turning against him for lack of understanding. The central difference in the nature of the Frankenstein monster heavily informs the different tones and messages of the books, and this scene in particular, making it important to distinguish the two. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature is intelligent, self-aware, sophisticated and has the capacity to be well-read; by the time this scene arrives in the book, he has met Victor Frankenstein after some time as a fully-literate individual, and is regaling him with his journeys after having escaped his castle. This showcases the monster as much more of a tragic figure, as he can function as a fully-

developed human being; not only is he fully capable of behaving in society if not for his looks, he is fully cognizant of the hostility and alienation he experiences.

Karloff's monster, on the other hand, is more childlike and primitive, a barely-human blank slate who can only relate to the world on a very simplistic level. In the text of the film, his brain was harvested from a dead criminal as well, Whale's version working to make the monster less sympathetic, or at least more prone to anger and violence if provoked. The scene with the girl in each film showcases the primary difference in how each of the monsters relates to the world around them, and consequently their ability to survive and fit into that world.

The scene in the book is a rather short moment, but it showcases the relationship the monster establishes with humanity (and which he will share throughout the entirety of the book). Before he encounters the girl, he is enjoying the lovely weather of the deep woods he is traversing:

“ I felt emotions of gentleness and pleasure, that had long appeared dead, revive within me. Half surprised by the novelty of these sensations, I allowed myself to be borne away by them, and forgetting my solitude and deformity, dared to be happy”(Shelley 168).

There, he hears a sound and hides behind a cypress bush (just as Karloff's does in Whale's scene), only to hear the sound of a young girl “ laughing, as if she ran from someone in sport” (Shelley 168). Wishing to remain hidden, he watches as she accidentally falls into the river because of her own mistake. Shelley's monster thinks nothing of running out to save the girl: “ I rushed from my hiding-place and with extreme labour, from the force of the

current, saved her and dragged her to shore" (168). This move is uniquely selfless, and the haste at which he comes to the aid of an innocent showcases the monster's uncannily human nature; if not for his grotesque appearance, he would easily be capable of interacting with the rest of human society. It should be noted that the girl does not regain consciousness, so she is unaware of the creature that saves her; it is entirely possible that she would reject him if she saw him.

Regardless of the girl's potential response, the monster's attempts to save the girl are interrupted by "a rustic," who rips the girl from his arms and returns with a gun to try to kill him. While the creature is injured, he escapes; however, his sense of benevolence and kindness seems to have been destroyed in that moment. He shows bitterness at how his kindness was received:

"This was then the reward of my benevolence! I had saved a human being from destruction, and as a recompense I now writhed under the miserable pain of a wound which shattered the flesh and bone" (Shelley 169).

Understanding his relationship with humanity at that point, the monster "vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" (169). In this scene, we get to experience the frustration and maddening disappointment the monster feels at not being able to fit in with the people who surround him, as he receives a painful reminder that any attempt to engage will be met with violence and pain. To that end, he chooses to condemn mankind just as they condemn him, turning himself into a monster despite having the intelligence to be more.

Compare this scene with the equivalent scene in James Whale's

Frankenstein, in which Karloff's monster interacts with a different little girl, named Maria. Here, the monster, rather than filling himself with joy at the pastoral beauty he finds in the woods, is hunched over, afraid, constantly looking around protectively to ensure he is not being followed or chased. At this point, Whale makes the fascinating choice to cut to a short scene of Maria and her father interacting; this helps to establish the character of Maria and elicit the audience's sympathy for her. By the time she meets the monster, we know all about her innocence, precociousness, and her love for (and obedience of) her father. She holds a cute kitten in her arms, further showcasing her adorableness and sympathetic nature towards innocent creatures. Instead of the cavorting young girl dashing near a river and making trouble for herself, Maria is obedient, kind and innocent, making her impending death all the more tragic.

Here, the monster's motivation for going to the girl is not to save her from impending doom, but merely that of one child wanting to play with another. The monster is shown peeking out from the bushes; as if to put the audience at ease, Maria reacts innocently and with kindness, introducing herself and asking if the monster wants to play. Here, she holds flowers, the primary symbol of the scene; not only do they provide another innocent image to adorn Maria with, she also uses them as an olive branch to reach out to the monster with kindness – an offer he accepts. The close-up shot of the hand grasping the flower, panning up to the monster's slow smile shows him finding a rudimentary understanding of beauty and friendship; the constant cross-cutting of mid-level shots of Karloff's and the girl's faces put them at roughly an equal plane, indicating to the audience their equality as childlike

characters.

The climax of the scene showcases the most dramatic deviation of Karloff's monster from the book's – the monster's misunderstanding leading to the girl's death by drowning. As the two sit side by side, throwing flowers into the water, the monster mistakenly believes that Maria can float, just as the flowers can. Cutting to a wider, even higher-angle shot from the previous cross-cutting shots, showing them spatially apart from each other, Frankenstein picks up Maria and dunks her in the lake. Whale then cuts to a medium shot, with Karloff's back straight to the camera as the ripples spread out from the center of his frame in the image – further indicating that the drowning was his fault.

The mise-en-scene of this scene showcases the monster's childlike personality, which is overshadowed by his great strength – this puts him at an unequal power relationship to the child, despite having the same mind. Despite having trouble understanding the human world because of his simple mind, the monster immediately understands what he has done, though it is too late to save her. He recoils in terror instantly and tries to dig her up out of the water; however, he panics and runs back off into the woods. Shelley's monster would have known better than to do this; his only crime is having the body of a monster, while Karloff does not understand his own strength and the danger he can do.

The tragedy of Maria's death is doubled by the work Whale does to establish Maria as a character before she even meets the monster; unlike Shelley's drowning girl, of whom we learn little, the audience feels familiar with Maria, putting us in the place of hating the monster even though we understand he

did not know what he was doing. The infantilization of the Frankenstein monster in Whale's film allows it to play this curious line of sympathy throughout, even though Shelley's monster vows to actively harm mankind after being shot as a result of his own kindness.

Comparing the intent and presentation of both of these scenes, the scenes with the girls near water in Shelley's Frankenstein and James Whale's 1931 film adaptation illustrate the fundamental difference in tone, message and character that the works take, particularly toward the monster. In Shelley's book, the monster's kindness and human desire to save lives is rewarded by fear and violence. Conversely, Karloff's monster accidentally causes monstrous harm at the result of an innocent misunderstanding, eliciting both sympathy and horror at the sake of the monster by working to make Maria such a sympathetic and fully realized character from the beginning. Both of these girls symbolize how the world will treat each monster; the girl in the book would probably be grateful for her life being saved, if not for the monstrous nature of the sensitive creature who did it. Meanwhile, Maria represents innocence lost for Karloff's monster, as he only understands his power to take life and be a monster because of a simple mistake.

Works Cited

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