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THE GREATER BETRAYAL: *FRANKENSTEIN* AND THE HORROR GENRE

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ABSTRACT

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has long been included in the horror genre of literature. It is even occasionally accredited with the birth of that genre. This paper discusses how this practice not only misleads the audience about the nature of *Frankenstein* but in fact damages the integrity of any potential interpretation. It first establishes a working definition of the horror genre, then compares that with *Frankenstein* to show how the work does not fit the expectations that the genre lays out. This comparison focuses on the expectations that the horror genre places on its protagonists and antagonists and how Victor Frankenstein and his creation defy those expectations.

Genre as a concept fails *Frankenstein*, and this failure is indicative of the shortcomings of that system as a whole. It is a system that overwhelms meaning with labels, simplifying complex artistic pieces to fit into categories. Worse, this categorization is often logically flawed, and the full impact of the piece is reduced to something alien to its original intentions. *Frankenstein* demonstrates the worst of what labeling under a genre can do to a work of art and encourages us to move past this obsolete system.
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Introduction

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is typically considered the foundation of the broad genre of horror. Accounts of the genre often go forward from 1818, the date of the publication of the first edition of Shelley’s magnum opus. Yet *Frankenstein* does not have the same resonance as a horror novel that say, *Dracula*, has. In fact, the genre as a whole isn’t really fleshed out until the late nineteenth century, with the arrival of *Dracula* in 1897, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1886, and *The Invisible Man* in 1897. So why is Frankenstein’s monster a horror mainstay today?

You may notice that I said Frankenstein's monster, not *Frankenstein*. This is an important distinction, and one that many have made without thinking. Just as the heart of a romance is the relationship between the protagonist and his or her better half, the heart of horror is the monster. This does not mean that a monster makes a story a horror story, just as a romantic relationship does not make a story a romance. The truth is that the story of *Frankenstein* is not horrifying. It is the “monster” that we associate with horror, but a monster alone does not a horror story make.

Another important distinction is the use of the words "monster" and "creature." Mary Shelley refers in the narrative to Frankenstein’s creation as just that – a creation or a creature. Victor Frankenstein uses the word “monster,” but this vacillates as his interaction with and understanding of the creature changes. He also regularly calls him “devil,” “villain,” and “fiend.” But before Victor has suffered at the creature’s hands, the creature is a “being,” a “wretch,” a “daemon.” Yet he is constantly referred to as
Frankenstein’s monster in pop culture today. And that is when he is not misnamed entirely and called “Frankenstein.”

The fact is that *Frankenstein* is not and never has been a horror story. It was posthumously and perfunctorily included in a genre for which it could not have possibly been intended. This is a problem because trying to fit this novel into the horror genre has altered our interpretation of it. This thesis will discuss this problem in three parts.

Chapter One first discusses and defines genre before going on to consider how genre affects what it categorizes. Genre as we work with it today is a slippery concept (our use of genre today better fits the idea of subgenre that Hemfer suggests, as we will discuss later). Trudier Harris calls genre an “umbrella concept that allows for many disparate, and often related, concepts to be conveniently divided and subdivided” (509). It suffers from the disease of being too inclusive, and thus is prone to misapplication. However, it is as essential to our intellectual pursuits as labels are to our daily functioning. Accepting its convenience, it is also important to understand that labeling something is a give and take. There is an ever-present possibility of the label's meaning taking precedence over the meaning of the object it labels. This switch is exactly what happened to *Frankenstein*.

When Mary Shelley started writing her book\(^1\), there was no concept of horror literature. For fiction to elicit horror was plebeian, an emotion stirred by ghost stories for children and dark, stormy nights. Sure, she might have been creating something that

\(^1\) The story of the origin of *Frankenstein* borders on myth. It goes that Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron, along with Claire Clairmont and Dr. John Polidori, spent the summer of 1816 in a villa on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. On a stormy night, they challenged each other to write the scariest ghost story. Inspired by a dream, Mrs. Shelley composed the basic tale of what would later become her magnum opus. So *Frankenstein* started as a ghost story and evolved into a novel, only to prove that horror novels are not the evolved forms of ghost stories.
didn't fit any previously established genre, but the point is that it couldn't have been sold as a horror novel. No one would have known what that meant. “Categories of genre have a real impact on the way texts are produced, distributed, and received” (Gilbert), and the fact that *Frankenstein* now exists under a genre that didn't exist in the public consciousness when it came out puts a big hole in the idea of this novel as a horror novel.

Finally, the first chapter will create a working definition of horror through a Socratic examination of existing terms from field expert Noël Carroll, whose definitive *Philosophy of Horror* is the most thorough, researched, and historical account of the genre yet produced in English. This definition is then applied to *Frankenstein*, and where it works and does not work is discussed.

Chapter Two expands on the discrepancy between the horror genre and *Frankenstein* by examining the novel’s protagonist, Victor Frankenstein. It expresses Noël Carroll’s definition of a horror protagonist as the vehicle of the audience’s experience, then addresses Victor’s failure to fulfill this purpose. This failure, based on how difficult it is to relate to Victor’s bizarre and unjustified decisions and emotions, is split up into the three problems that inhibit a connection between Victor and the audience. These problems include a lack of sympathy for Victor, an inability to understand him, and lack of empathy.

Victor is then considered in the light of common horror situations, which are built on being relatable to the Average Joe. We find that part of the reason Victor makes a terrible horror protagonist is that he is not average. Another issue with Victor’s playing the role of horror protagonist is that he is quintessentially a coward and a failure, and if there are two things people don’t want to associate themselves with, they are cowards and
failures. All these things ensure that the audience cannot connect with Victor Frankenstein, and that he will never be an effective horror protagonist.

Chapter Three refocuses on the shortcomings of the antagonist instead of the protagonist. It starts with a definition of a horror monster, once more from Noël Carroll’s informed perspective. It is of foremost importance that a horror antagonist is lethal and disgusting. On the surface, Frankenstein’s creation possesses these qualities and others that Carroll mentions, such as impurity and danger. The problem comes not in the constants of being a monster but in the variables. Primarily, the issue is how much we relate to the monster rather than Victor; our preference complicates the paradigm.

Chapter Three goes on to compare Frankenstein’s antagonist to stories that fit more consistently in the horror genre. It points out the importance of titles and how they, in horror stories, draw attention to specific characters that are usually the monster. Frankenstein does not follow this pattern, and that discrepancy is just one symptom of the larger problem of how exposure to popular culture has changed how we read this novel and especially how we respond to the monster. The creature’s cultural presence today is vastly different than his original nature in the novel, and Chapter Three analyzes these differences, showing the “monster” version of Frankenstein’s creation and the “creature” version. Trying to confine Frankenstein to the horror genre caused this split in the nature of his creation, and these two states, the “monster” and the “creature,” as well as the egregious misunderstanding that underlies them are the best argument against relying too heavily on genre to find meaning in a work
Chapter 1

Genre

Genre is a complex beast and should never be discussed without defining one’s terms. For my purposes here, we must include a definition of the genre of horror, of course. However, it is also important that the concept of genre itself is thoroughly examined. A working definition of genre is any category of literature, art, or entertainment that is characterized by a particular set of criteria regarding form, style, or purpose. This definition is a gently tweaked version of the Oxford English Dictionary’s. It is important to note that literary genres are often determined to greater or lesser degrees by conventions that change over time; this makes genre a dynamic thing. It is also vital to remember that genres are not mutually exclusive of one another and are in fact often combined. Look no further than Shakespeare’s tragicomedies for proof of that.

The categorization of literary works really started with Plato, who divided literature in Ancient Greece into three different classic genres: the drama, the dithyramb, and the epic. This was a system based not on content like our modern genres, in which, for example, a focus on a romantic relationship can make a romance. Instead, this system was based on the mode of imitation (Genette 73-74). Aristotle reexamined this system, adding criteria and recategorizing Greek literature into four genres: comedy, tragedy, parody, and epic. Where a literary work fits in Aristotle’s system is determined by two things: the mode of telling and the nature of the theme. For example, an epic is defined as “the-narrative-of-a-heroic-action” (Genette 73). The mode is narrative and the theme
centers on a hero’s actions. In Aristotle’s system, everything fits neatly into a simple table:

<table>
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<th>Mode</th>
<th>Dramatic</th>
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<td>Superior</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Epic</td>
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<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
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Aristotle's Taxonomy (Genette 14)

This system and the ones that followed were constantly challenged and doctored. Genette, in his essay “The Architext,” follows these fluctuations until the nineteenth century, when literary genres for a while settled into a lingering threesome of lyric, epic, and dramatic literature. These three genres, which are “superior” in that they are mutually exclusive and equal to one another, are later split into wider spread of categories and their variety and limitations into subgenres, a system which Genette saw as “fundamentally flawed[…] by their inclusive and hierarchical taxonomy” (74). This subgenre system is where we find genres like suspense, romance, action-adventure, and horror, which are based less on the form they follow and more on the content and intent of the work. This subgenre method of categorization, while more descriptive than the lyric-epic-dramatic trio, is necessarily more inclusive than that trio because of the variety of interpretations and categorizations that can be made of any given text. It is this taxonomy of ever-
inclusive subgenres that we work with today. It organizes our libraries, filters our music collections, and clusters our taste in movies. No form of art goes unaffected by it.

I use the term “taxonomy” because that is, at root, what our system of genres is. It is meant to parse and label for ease of reference; it is the science of classification, the act of arranging objects in a hierarchical structure. The taxonomy of genre is the science of arranging literature, music, cinema, theatre, etc. into categories for ease of reference and codification.

This does not, on its own, seem like an issue. What exactly is the problem with labeling a movie “action-thriller” or “romantic comedy?” This inclusiveness, however, is the mark of a failing system. It is a system that gives labels to a work as if they are concrete and meaningful in and of themselves. It works as if there is a definite set of criteria, as in Aristotle’s tabular system of labeling. But there is no such table possible for this taxonomy. Even if you split it up into neat headings as Aristotle did, using perhaps Hemfer’s “implicitly hierarchical system” of modes (mode of presentation), types (specifying within the mode, such as homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration), genres (“concrete historical realizations” like novels and epics), and subgenres (more specific limitations within genre), respectively, you run into paradoxes (Genette 74). These categories allow for their own subdivisions. In practice, these subdivisions are then not held to the confines of their initial category’s hierarchical standing. Genre can then take precedence over type and mode, for instance, even though they are higher on the hierarchy than genre is. The logic of this system is flawed, but it is treated like it is a well-oiled machine. This flawed logic has trickled down into every conversation about genre and become the norm, so that we still attempt to use this broken system to classify
individual works. These broken classifications then lend meaning that is built on an invalid system of assumptions to works of art of every form which changes how we experience them. Rather than having an external system that merely organizes content, we have a warped system that has bullied its way into our subconscious and affected the art we encounter.

Apart from the broken logic that mars the accuracy and effectiveness of the categorical capabilities of this taxonomy, another issue with genre is its reciprocity. When something is accepted into a genre, it begins to define the genre. This means that its characteristics fit into that genre, while the genre shifts to fit its characteristics. It is both an inductive and a deductive process. According to genre theorist Amy Devitt, “A genre is named because of its formal markers, [but] the formal markers can be defined because a genre has been named” (10). This means that every piece that has the characteristics of a genre will be included in that genre and will then contribute to the definition of that genre, including adding characteristics that did not fit the definition before the new work was added. By this process, traits that don’t make sense as part of a genre’s definition are included in the revised definition of the genre anyway. These characteristics both define and are defined by genre. Neither position takes precedence; “no one aspect fully determines the other” (Devitt 10). The same traits that let us label something as part of a genre also define that genre. This reciprocity comes into play with Frankenstein because of its timing in respect to the birth of the horror genre – that is to say, Shelley’s novel and the horror genre are a case of the chicken and the egg, and we can’t tell which came first and sometimes not even which is which.
This flawed system of reciprocity and broken logic is where we find the horror genre. In trying to define it (a circular process indeed), Noël Carroll follows in Aristotle’s footsteps, attributing her inspiration for doing so to the first book of *Poetics*. She offers “an account of horror in virtue of the emotional effects it is designed to cause in audiences,” presuming that “the genre is designed to produce an emotional effect” (Carroll 8). Horror, in other words, is defined by its intent to elicit fear from its audience. It has a few other traits – a monster counted as extraordinary and a protagonist that the audience identifies with, to name two. The formality of delivery also impacts the effect—there is a difference between a ghost story told around a campfire and a horror story told through a novel or movie, for example. Aristotle recognized this from the beginning; the method of telling changes the audience’s interpretation – the medium is the message. The form of a ghost story drives it towards different characteristics than are found in a horror story, like ease of retelling, clarity of plot, and a length that is conducive to telling in a single sitting. What is horrifying in a novel is not necessarily horrifying when sitting around the fire.

Science fiction is another genre that merits discussion. According to Eric Rabkin, “If we ask what science fiction is, we may find[…]that it is the branch of fantastic literature that claims plausibility against a background of science” (459). It is distinct from horror in that it does not require any intent to frighten the reader. It does require, however, a scientific element. Rod Serling, the man behind *The Twilight Zone*, defines science fiction as “the improbable made possible,” as compared to fantasy, which is “the impossible made probable” (Rabkin 460). Science fiction often deals with the causes and
consequences of technological advancement, and it typically avoids the purely supernatural side of horror.

But even Noël Carroll, in her book on the horror genre, does “not respect the notion that horror and science fiction are absolutely discrete genres” (13). Indeed, “horror films deal with the fears of their ages” the same way that science fiction does (Rabkin 463). Both genres are very contemporary, dealing with the foremost social issues of the time. *Dracula* deals with, for example, the Victorian obsession with sexuality. *War of the Worlds* dealt with, among other things, British imperialism at the end of the 19th century.

When content is the defining factor in genre as we understand it in the twenty-first century, genre is no longer specific to medium. Whereas the genre was largely based on the forms literature took on paper and were therefore limited to letters on paper, content-driven classification allows us to transcend paper and words and move into performance and images. This is vital to understand because the reciprocity of genre means that anything that fits under a genre’s umbrella also defines it; in other words, *Hannibal* decides if *Frankenstein* is horror just as much as *2001: A Space Odyssey* decides if *Frankenstein* is science fiction. Rabkin says,

Science fiction, in other words, is no more limited to science fiction literature than love is limited to love letters. Science fiction is what I would call[…]a cultural system[which] merely acknowledges that it fulfills an *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *system*: “A set or assemblage of things connected, associated, or interdependent, so as to form a complex unity.” We recognize that assembled unity when we speak of Faustian bargains, Frankenstein experiments, Star Wars weaponry, and aliens who move faster than a speeding bullet. (461-62)
Here he speaks specifically of science fiction, but the concept applies to all genres. In the face of the technology we see applied to all forms of art today, we have to see any genre as a system. A painting can affect what a genre is just as much as a novel. A poem and a movie can have the same impact. The medium does not deter the capacity of the message to be a part of this ever-changing system.

Clearly, in our complex, disorganized, and misunderstood system of genres, labels will come under question. With the system’s inherent dedication to inclusiveness, it becomes easy to adhere to the letter of a genre but not the spirit; a piece may have characteristics that seem to include it in the horror genre, but this inclusion ignores many, often more pressing attributes of that piece. Overlooking those other, better attributes is what has spurred this discussion. *Frankenstein* is a novel that doesn’t fit its horror assignment in spirit (and, as we will see, in letter as well). The horror genre not only does not match *Frankenstein*, it limits it. As Derrida says in his essay “The Law of Genre,” “As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity” (57). When the horror genre attaches to *Frankenstein*, it implicitly demands that the norm of the genre be respected, even when that norm is irrelevant.

Derrida explains that the ultimate failure of the concept of genre is, while inclusive when in the process of categorization, as soon as a work is successfully labeled, in our minds it becomes exclusively a member of that category, regardless of traits that align it otherwise. The traits external to the genre’s norm are downplayed or even ignored in an effort, subconscious or otherwise, to keep our categorization relevant. For much of

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2 Intended like letter of the law, but perhaps not clear.
popular art, this isn’t a problem. The genre system thrives because simpler works fit into it, because simpler approaches gloss over the blatant paradoxes of any hierarchy yet established. But when it comes to works of true beauty and brilliance, the system only limits them. Such is the fate of *Frankenstein*, to be held to the standards of lesser works to the detriment of its ability to be interpreted.
Chapter 2
Protagonist

The argument for *Frankenstein's* assignment to the horror genre really disintegrates when one considers Victor Frankenstein's character. Noël Carroll defines the horror genre in terms of the "emotional effects it is designed to cause in audiences" (8), wherein "the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of the characters" (17), specifically the protagonists (or other, less focal characters in a work with whom we associate positively). Victor is the vehicle for the story to transpose horror to the audience. When this horror fails to be communicated, it shows either that Victor is an ineffectual horror protagonist or not a horror protagonist at all.

This failure is threefold. For the audience to mimic his emotions, the protagonist must be sympathetic. We have to like him. He also needs to be coherent – we need to understand his actions. Finally, we need to commiserate with him and understand his feelings; he needs to inspire empathy in the audience.

The first question is, then, do we like Victor Frankenstein? Is he made to be liked? It seems not, particularly in his interactions with Elizabeth. Initially, he says, "I loved to tend on her, as I should on a favourite animal" (Shelley 21). Not long after, in the same discussion of Elizabeth (which Mary Shelley edited and drastically changed for the 1831 version), he treats her like an object and a possession:

On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully, 'I have a pretty present for my Victor – tomorrow he shall have it.' And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with
childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine – mine to protect, love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own. We called each other familiarly by the name of cousin. No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me – my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only.

(Shelley 37)

This passage is put forth quite early in both texts, in Victor's first description of himself. It should be noted that he is narrating, not some omniscient other; this concept of ownership is a feeling that he is not afraid to share. One would imagine that the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft would not endorse this sort of possessiveness and objectification, so it is a safe bet that he is being made to be intentionally uncouth here. There are other incidents, as well. His life, his entire origin story, is rife with pretense and self-importance. He is inconsiderate of his friends, cowardly, and helpless in the face of danger. Victor Frankenstein is just not a likeable man.

Neither is he understandable. His actions do not seem to mimic those of a real individual most of the time. In fact, nothing about him is terribly real—from his idyllic childhood to his unquestioning obsession with his creation and his consistent claims of possessing a good nature. His idealism is untrustworthy. His reaction to seeing the creature come to life is one of the less relatable moments in the novel, for instance; he "rushe[s] out of the room […] unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] had created" (Shelley 39). He then proceeds to take a nap, but he is "unable to compose his mind to sleep" (Shelley 39). What a bizarre course of action! Having just brought something of
monstrous proportions and unsure intentions to life, Victor leaves his creation unattended in his laboratory and *sleeps*.

Similarly, Victor decides to break his promise of creating a companion for the creature. Having seen the creature watching him, Victor grows nervous. This is understandable, but upon catching a glimpse of the creature's face, which "expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery," Victor makes a "solemn vow in [his] own heart never to resume" construction of a mate for the creature (Shelley 139). He abandons his silver bullet, the one thing that can solve all of his problems, because the *monster's* face expressed malice and treachery. Why does this surprise Victor?

His emotional motivations are even more convoluted than his decisions. Victor blames breaking his promise to the creature on what is plainly a baseless fear of a female that is “ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight[s], for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness” or, even worse, one that reproduces with the original creature (Shelley 138). Why is he helpless in the creature's presence when the creature comes to confront him for destroying his half-finished mate? (Shelley 139). How can he possibly mention, even in passing, that he blames his father for all of his faults? (Shelley 52). Why did he suddenly decide to fight back, to declare his weakness past, on the next page? (Shelley 140). Equally confounding is his obsession with Cornelius Agrippa (Shelley 23) and his fear of what he had spent two years creating (Shelley 39). These confusing emotional motivations destroy the audience’s immersion in the story because we cannot align our own feelings with Victor’s. Real people just do not react in this way.

The entire purpose of scary stories is to envelope us in the action by putting relatable characters in frightening situations. Think of every campfire story that starts
with campers "just like us" alone in the woods. Think of urban legends where terrible things happen to ordinary people "just like you and me." Think of the American campy horror movies from the 1950s that featured housewives and quarterbacks. American horror movies from the 1970s often featured small, insular towns. These attributes are things with which American audiences are familiar. American filmmakers use these characters and settings because they enable more of the audience to identify immediately with the characters, thereby enhancing the audience’s immersion and helping to horrify them better.

The disconnect that the audience feels with Victor’s emotions and decisions is amplified by how different he is from the average reader. He is an aristocrat's highly educated son. He has no challenges in life until the loss of his mother, and he does not have to struggle to find love or friendship. Everything is handed to him. Now, the fact that he still succumbs to his tragic fate is an interesting commentary on human nature, but it does not serve the purpose needed by the horror genre. His elitism, privilege, and naivety spur us to reject Victor, and therefore the fear that Victor experiences is not translated to fear experienced by members of the audience. The vicarious nature of the audience’s experience that marks the horror genre, as Noël Carroll has showed us, is just not present in *Frankenstein*.

It comes down to the fact that Victor is an ineffective man and a coward. No one wants to deal with a coward in horror because we do not like to believe that we, the readers, are cowards, that there is no hope. Horror demands that the reader sees himself in the protagonist, and no one voluntarily sees himself in a hopeless coward. Victor takes lying
down almost every conflict he encounters; why would the audience ever want to empathize with him?

Cowards, however, may be redeemed. A horror protagonist needs to have a fighting chance, but that isn’t something that Victor is afforded. Every time he tries to make a stand, he is shot down by brute force. His bravery on his wedding night is made completely useless as he is trounced in both intellect and strength, and he faints, "los[ing] recollection" (Shelley 164-165). Before that, the destruction of his second creation is rendered meaningless by the creature's threat (Shelley 139), followed immediately by the creature's swift retreat and disappearance. The creature holds all of the power in this relationship, all the way to the end. He even calls Victor "slave" and says, "You are my creator, but I am your master" (Shelley 140). This is the best description of Victor, better than his own. He is in fact a slave not only to the creature but to his own cowardice. How can the audience be expected to relate to a coward? Humans aren't receptive to associating themselves with cowardice. Not only is he a coward, he is a coward without a chance. There is no point in their lives together at which Victor holds the cards over the creature. The one opportunity he has to overcome his creature is during the negotiations for the conditions under which Victor will build the creature a mate, but in that is his one moment, he botches it thoroughly. He is scared and ineffectual, which is all the more terrible when combined with his being placed on a pedestal from early on, both his life and in the audience’s interaction with him. The reader’s entire reaction to him is doomed to be reduced to anger, frustration, and disappointment.

Arguably, Victor's bravest moment is his decision to hunt the creature down. Is this really bravery, though? The creature has reduced Victor’s actions to desperation,
robbing them of their impact. His chase is fraught with frenzy and a monomania that would raise Ahab's eyebrows, with none of the dignity of avenging a lost love.

Meanwhile, the creature moves steadily forward with a focus usually reserved for those with a purpose bordering on divine. In his clearly justifiable revenge, Victor still seems weak and insane. He does, in fact, fail at his final task, passing it on Robert Walton to do with what he will. Walton does not finish the job, and the creature dies on his own terms. And isn’t the audience a little sad to see him go? Walton does not go on to greater acts of bravery, spurred by the death of the man who gave him his singular opportunity for real friendship. Instead, Walton retreats from his challenge, returning to family (and rightfully so), turning from any greater successes. He becomes a sad survivor, just as Victor is a sad protagonist.

The fact that Victor is a coward is an intriguing and meaningful choice on the part of Mary Shelley. That kind of realistic quality in any story is a risky choice; it is telling people what they don’t want to hear. The implications of her realism in this instance are far reaching and resounding. To make such a decision in a horror story is not conducive to the ends that a horror story is trying to achieve. One alternative is that she was not aware of those implications. What are the chances that she just happened upon these resounding implications while haphazardly throwing together her ghost story? That the child of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin wrote the progenitor of all horror wherein nothing fits the genre at all? It was, after all, a quickly written piece with a tale behind the writing that borders on mythicized, and she was very young at the time. It seems more likely that *Frankenstein* was never meant to scare the audience, as horror stories are wont to do. Instead, the daughter of the Mother of Feminism and the Father of
Anarchy was writing a story of humanity and hubris that was processed and diluted by popularity to make it easier to follow. Of course, Victor makes a terrible horror protagonist; it’s because he’s not a horror protagonist at all.

If *Frankenstein* is to be deemed a horror novel, the timing is also problematic. If *Frankenstein* was the first, then she did not have any of the genre's rules by which to abide. Logically, however, if a father shares none of his child’s features, it is likely that he is not the father at all. *Frankenstein* wasn't written to be horror – it couldn't have been – but it also didn't directly spawn the genre. Call the novel “protohorror,” perhaps, or “Gothic” like the popular American stories of Edgar Allen Poe, the strange and fascinating uncles of the Horror family tree that were to come out later. But don't degrade *Frankenstein* with such an oversimplifying and misleading label.

Let us give the woman some credit. She did not write Victor as a vehicle of the reader's vicarious experience, as a horror writer would have done. She wrote a cautionary tale about humanity’s immoderation, about toying with forces beyond our control, about what makes us human. Filing this story under the category of horror not only does a disservice to her intentions and remarkable execution, it in fact also cheapens the value of the beautiful prose and story that she composed. Understanding its genre can ease a reader’s experience of a literary work, but it can also detract from it. Labeling *Frankenstein* as a horror novel does the latter.
Chapter 3

Antagonist

Victor Frankenstein isn’t the only weak link in *Frankenstein*. The creator’s imperfections are reflected in his creation. The creature’s failures as a horror monster, however, are more subtle than his master’s. After all, isn’t Frankenstein’s creation one of the most lasting monsters we know? He has even overtaken his master’s name, since many people make the mistake of calling the monster Frankenstein, rather than the creator.

Noël Carroll gives the monster an understandably broad role when she defines it. She says the monster must not only pose a threat to the protagonist (and therefore the audience) but also inspire “revulsion, nausea, and disgust” (Carroll 22). The monster must be “not only lethal but – and this is of utmost significance – also disgusting” (Carroll 22). This combination of “terror and disgust” pushes the characters and the audience to regard the monster with “not only fear but with loathing” (Carroll 23). It is this combination that creates the horror monster that audiences can so easily recognize.

Frankenstein’s creature, at first glance, seems a good fit for a horror monster. He is clearly lethal; he kills many people important to Victor. His speed, size, and strength let us know he is lethal before anyone even dies. We also know that Victor himself can’t stand the sight of the creature from his reaction to the creature’s first living moments when he runs from the room (maybe our best explanation for the aforementioned senselessness of Victor Frankenstein is that the creature disgusted the sense right out of
him) (Shelley 39). We see disgust and fear mark his every interaction: with the De Lacys (Shelley 111), with the rustic that shot the creature (Shelley 115), with Victor’s young brother William (Shelley 117), even with Walton (Shelley 189).

These interactions all mark him as a monster, but Carroll’s definition does not necessarily refer to horror monsters. “Even if a case can be made that a monster or a monstrous entity is a necessary condition for horror, such a criterion would not be a sufficient condition. For monsters inhabit all sorts of stories – such as fairy tales, myths and odysseys – that we are not inclined to identify as horror” (Carroll 16). We can accept that the creature is a monster in Carroll’s definition without automatically designating *Frankenstein* as a horror novel.

There is no room for other variables in Carroll’s definition of a horror monster, and this is where Frankenstein’s creature loses its status as a horror monster. Whereas in a horror story, the audience is intended to feel fear and loathing, often in *Frankenstein* we commiserate with the creature. More than that, we often side with the creature; the reader can appreciate his outrage when Victor destroys his half-made mate-to-be. We understand his misery at Victor’s death and his anger at Robert Walton’s assumptions. The creature is an analogue for the human condition, and in comparison, Victor seems elitist, insular, and coddled. Carroll says, “The monsters of horror […] breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story. That is, in examples of horror, it would appear that the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world” (Carroll 16). And indeed, the creature is the extraordinary character in the story, not because of his origins but for overcoming them to connect with the reader. Even in the story, he overcomes everything to connect with Robert Walton.
Walton, who has been an analogue for the audience in that Victor speaks to him throughout his narrative, gives the creature a chance. As he learns the creature’s story, Walton makes the same realizations the audience made when we first heard the creature’s point of view; he listened to the creature’s recounting of self-loathing, and it halts his revenge (Shelley 189). Walton ends up listening to the creature and letting him leave on his suicidal path. That sort of lenience is not afforded monsters.

The greatest indication of the creature’s shortcomings is his Hollywood career. In almost every cinematic retelling, the creature has been remade into a mute, blundering, distractible, and sometimes evil fool. We will take the most famous portrayal, James Whale’s 1931 movie, as an example. Boris Karloff’s creature is not the self-educated, hopeful, intelligent individual that Mary Shelley made the original. He starts off as damaged goods, given a brain labeled “abnormal.” Didn’t Victor make every effort to use only the very best parts he could salvage? Giving this reason for the creature’s malevolence simplifies him, making him more digestible for movie audiences. His malevolence truly comes from neglect and punishment for any acts of benevolence. At the beginning of his life, the creature is a perfect example of the tabula rasa, as demonstrated by his interaction with fire:

One day, when I was oppressed by cold, I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it. In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects! (Shelley 81)
The creature knows nothing of the world, certainly. And we soon see that he has no predisposition towards malice. The first shelter he finds is outside a small village, which, not knowing any better, he enters. When the villagers are frightened and attack him, he retreats without hurting anyone, never returning for revenge (Shelley 83). The creature is a product of his environment.

Interestingly enough, the movie does have a moment that supports the idea of tabula rasa. One of the creature’s first interactions is with Maria, a farmer’s young daughter. For some unexplained reason, she is not frightened by the creature’s appearance. She shares with him a collection of flowers that she is throwing into a lake to see them float, and the creature has a moment of genuine happiness. Without understanding, he then picks up the girl and throws her into the water as well, hoping to imitate the flowers. It is a moment out of place in the movie, however, and not an indication of some greater character complexity.

This lack of complexity is finalized with the character’s death. In the book, the creature kills himself both because he no longer has a purpose and to punish himself (Shelley 190-191). This action has a noble nature; the creature could have gone on to wreak havoc, freed from the course of vengeance he had until then followed. The movie takes this noble moment from the creature, and he dies the (depressingly) more famous death trapped in a windmill set afire. Popular culture has dulled the sharp implications of Shelley’s story and characters for entertainment value.

Being diluted into popular entertainment has stained every impression the novel could possibly leave. The creature’s name in popular culture becomes the name of his master; the movies “The Bride of Frankenstein” and “Frankenstein’s Daughter” do not
reference the bride and daughter of Victor Frankenstein but the bride and daughter of the creature. It is not Victor who meets the Wolfman and Abbott and Costello and Scooby Doo; it is his creature. Bergen Evans argues that the transference of the creator’s name to the created is standard practice (he gives guillotine and derrick as examples) (Evans 124). This interpretation is linguistically sound but contextually sophomoric. It treats the creature as an object instead of a being and makes an ontological assumption about our relationships to those who create us. But whether it is an acceptable linguistic leap or not, this shifting of names is a telling event.

In every other horror story, the featured character – that is, the character that the story is about, if not the one it is rooting for – is the monster. Dracula. Hannibal. The Creature from the Black Lagoon. Carmilla. Godzilla. They take the title role because the story is about them and what they do to normal people. What then does that say of Frankenstein? The title character is Victor, though the monster is supposedly his creation. The monster assumes the name Frankenstein in popular culture because that is what the horror genre demands. The novel was not written to fit in that genre, and its monster is not a horror monster. In taking his creator’s name, the creature becomes something that he is not. In giving the creature his creator’s name, the genre changes what the creature means.

Mary Shelley included a subtitle in her novel. The full title is Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. The subtitle might make more sense as the title than the title does, as both Victor and the creature have moments of Promethean action, as when the creature finds a fire (Shelley 81) or Victor’s creation of life in man’s and therefore God’s image (Shelley 35). If The Modern Prometheus were the title, that would at least open up
a little flexibility in determining on whom the novel focuses. But Shelley chose to keep the focus on Victor, and when that later defied the standard of the horror genre, the name of the creator was given to the monster.

This is where genre betrays what it categorizes. Because the creature didn’t fit the horror mold, he was assimilated to its expectations. The concept of reciprocity, discussed earlier, neglects this aspect. The genre in question expands to include similar works, as Devitt says, but it also contracts, culling whatever doesn’t belong, boiling off the fat. So it happened to *Frankenstein*. Let’s for a moment assume that it is in fact the first horror novel. Since then, we have only become more effective at the eliciting the response that is the goal of the horror genre. Every generation of stories got better at achieving this end, maybe too much better, to the point where the story lost priority to the effect that it has on its readers. Is it any wonder that the original *Frankenstein* looks so alien to the horror world today?

Nothing sums this situation up so well as one of the title cards from Edison’s *Frankenstein* movie from 1910, the first cinematic adaptation of the story. After the creature comes to life, a card flashes that says, “Instead of being a perfect human being, the evil in Frankenstein’s mind creates a monster.” In the story, there is no evil in the creature when we first meet him. He is an innocent being, terrifying of course, but not of his own volition. By assigning him a morality, the movie (and first, the play that it was based on) takes away most of the important messages of the story, that we are all born a blank slate. And if the creature is born evil, then all the things Victor does to him are justified, which contradicts his own faults in the narrative and the idea that even with the best of origins, we can still do horrible things. There is a contrast between these two
characters in the original narrative – a man given everything, and a being given nothing. Both do evil things, despite where they came from, despite intent and nature. To make Mary Shelley’s story more frightening, the agents of popular culture compromised the themes of the narrative. To better fit its genre, *Frankenstein* was plucked of its more complex ideas and messages. This is the damage to which genre can give rise.
Conclusion

There is too much in *Frankenstein* that complicates its inclusion in the horror genre. The time of its publication puts it far too early to allow any intentional inclusion on the part of the author. The protagonist fails to transfer his emotional responses to the audience by being all-together too difficult to relate to. The antagonist is easier to commiserate with than the protagonist because he is intelligent and truly the victim of circumstance. And, when it comes down to it, the audience just isn’t horrified.

It might be fun to examine *Frankenstein* as a science fiction novel. If science fiction is *imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes*, it isn’t hard to see where *Frankenstein* fits. The postulated scientific discovery is Victor’s discovery of how to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter” (Shelley 34). And Isaac Aasimov called science fiction “that branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings” (Rabkin 461). The story is in its entirety about the impact that this scientific advancement has on Victor and his family, so it fits there too. But science fiction belongs to the same tier as horror on the hierarchy of genre, and it damages what it classifies just the same. For instance, I have argued before that the theme of *Frankenstein* is often pushed to specifically concern the moderation of technology, a viewpoint encouraged by science fiction which has a technological focus. *Frankenstein* really discusses moderation on a much broader scale, as evidenced by the underlying story of Robert Walton’s journey (Kowalchuk 7).
Maybe these genres, really these subgenres, aren’t ever going to be good enough. Maybe we have to go back to the original organizers, because at its heart, isn’t *Frankenstein* a tragedy? A noble, high-born character falls from grace because of a fatal flaw. Is Victor in the same boat as King Lear? Victor has everything a man could want, but he still strives for greater knowledge and power. He suffers through the death of everything he loves and dies in the cold of the Arctic, having failed to do anything positive for anyone. The creature has the bearing of a rival nobleman, like Edmund, *Othello*’s Iago, or *Hamlet*’s Claudius. He is a being literally without a birthright, because he wasn’t born. He is cunning and perhaps more deserving than his enemy because of it. Victor is constantly being manipulated by the creature, as Iago manipulates Othello. But he, like his fellows, is doomed because he is distracted by desire, as every tragic antagonist is. The creature longs to be treated equally, just as Claudius longs for the throne, as Iago longs for vengeance.

There is the moment of anagnorisis, when Victor realizes what he must do, what he should have done from the beginning. He begins his desperate pursuit of the creature. And like King Lear trying to save Cordelia, Victor is too late. The creature has evaded him. Cordelia has died. They all proceed straight to their own deaths in an attempt to right their greatest mistakes, but Desdemona is dead, Cordelia is dying, Gertrude has drunk the poison. All that is left is for the tragic hero to die, redemption to be left ever unfinished.

The entire system of subgenres is problematic because it categorizes on such a specific level. It has four, five, eight, ten different qualifiers. But tragedy works because it only has two. As Table 1 showed us, tragedy is the dramatic telling of a superior object.
That’s all. Everything else falls into place because of the nature of those two aspects. Even Aristotle’s system, however, has flaws. For example, it excludes the non-representational genres (Genette 74) and neglects lyric poetry (Genette 10). The system is oversimplified to maintain its clarity, which is just as much of a problem as overcomplicating it is, but in different ways.

All these genres have something to say about *Frankenstein*, and they all have shortcomings. The problem is that their role as genres make them inflexible. If we were to use genres as critical lenses, as we use feminist or psychoanalytic theory, instead of categorical blockades, they could show us the same patterns, aspects, and secrets that they do as genres but without the capacity to do damage that they can currently inflict. This would let the piece stand on its own, with genres able to visibly step between the piece and the audience, rather than the subterfuge they commit in the collective subconscious as they do now. They could provide a new light under which to examine a piece, not just a label to be plastered on its spine.

To prevent that quiet infiltration into our interpretations, our entire labeling system should be reexamined. We might be better off working with a genome instead of the taxonomy currently in place. A genome is a system of organization that is becoming increasingly common in music organization today which is made more realistic in the face of digital libraries. Genomes sort by characteristics and tags, creating categories that that are flexible and come under the art they describe, rather than towering over it as genres do. If the genre system makes the audience say, “I like horror novels,” then a genome lets them say, “I like strong female leads, alternate histories, and the novel mode.” *Frankenstein* might be tagged as a story featuring a monster, a tragic story, a
commentary on technology, a Romantic period story, a story authored by a woman, or simply a novel.

Whatever path is chosen, there needs to be a change of consciousness about how artistic endeavors are thought of and organized. Genres have confined our thought processes and our art for too long, and breaking free of them is the only way we can regain our interpretive autonomy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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