



Adaptation of Gothic Fiction into Film - A Case Study. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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A deep study on the novel *Frankenstein*(1818) written by Mary Shelley and the adaptations it spawned over the years will throw light on why the new medium chose gothic novels as its perfect source material. Published in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or *Modern Prometheus* is a model for gothic fiction, science fiction and all the horror novels that followed it. Weaving the gothic elements of the supernatural, terror, anguish, and love with the romantic values of nature and individualism, Shelley delivers a chilling tale about unchecked ambition and the consequences of disturbing the order of nature.

Frankenstein was a highly successful novel that went through many adaptations for the stage shortly after its publication and by the end of the nineteenth century, it was also a magic lantern slide presentation before finally making it to the motion picture screen in 1910. It was through the production facilities of the Edison Manufacturing Company's movie studios in the Bronx, New York that Mary Shelley's creation first flickered into cinematic existence.

The 1931 film adaptation by James Whale was perhaps the best horror movie adaptation of the novel of the early half of the century. With Boris Karloff as the monster, the movie became an iconic one in the history of *Frankenstein* adaptations. It was followed by '*The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) by the same director and the narrative begins from where the earlier movie stopped. The monster is resurrected. Compared to it the '*Son of Frankenstein* '



which came in 1939 was not a remarkable adaptation even though much suspense is retained in the work.

More than 20 years after the Universal heyday of horror films, England's family-oriented Hammer Film Productions became the only other movie production company to create a serious ongoing film series based upon Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. And while Hammer's efforts were even more limited by time and budget than the Universal product, they were destined to be viewed as inferior variations on a theme. However, the Hammer efforts thrilled the generation raised during the 1950s and 1960s because we now had a modern Frankenstein vision to call our own.

Hammer added color and visceral violence to the mix, it emphasized the character of monster-maker Baron Frankenstein (a superb series of performances by Peter Cushing) over the Monster, and Hammer explored themes that were taboo during the 1930s – sexuality, soul transference and spirituality, insanity, etc. While Hammer never produced a movie with the creativity and vision of *Frankenstein or Bride of Frankenstein*, the company can proudly boast that they furthered the thematic concepts with superb productions such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958) and *Frankenstein Must be Destroyed* (1969). Even the lesser known Frankenstein productions – *The Evil of Frankenstein* (1964), *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1967) – provided thrills and a solid night's entertainment.

The first Hollywood Frankenstein of the decade was aimed squarely at the juvenile market. As a follow-up to the ultra-successful *I was a Teenage werewolf*, the film *I was a Teenage Frankenstein* unfortunately fell well short of its predecessor in its quality. One of the

themes that the Universal Frankenstein movies bombard the audience with was the depiction of father/son relationships that have gone awry. We have in the 1931 adaptation the elder Baron Frankenstein concerned that his son Henry (Colin Clive) is so obsessed with "another woman" that he fears his dalliance will destroy his relationship with fiancée Elizabeth as the wedding grows closer. The Baron simply cannot accept the concept that it is Henry's scientific work that threatens the relationship, not another female.

We also have the father/son relationship between Henry and his devoted assistant Fritz (Dwight Frye), who is excited by the very same things that excite Henry, simply to be accepted by his protective mentor. In the original 1931 production, we see just how much the elder Baron is a creature of tradition. Before the wedding he lifts the glass cover of an ornamental tray that houses orange blossoms which have been worn by Frankenstein grooms for three generations.

While another woman does not threaten this relationship between Elizabeth and Henry, the obsessive nature of Henry's work does. His work figuratively become the "other woman" in the relationship. In *Bride of Frankenstein*, newlywed bride Elizabeth becomes immediately fearful and jealous of Dr. Pretorius, thinking Pretorius will once again ignite those ungodly passions, which led to Henry's near death. So symbolically, Pretorius becomes "the other woman" to threaten Elizabeth's relationship with her husband.

While Fritz becomes the dutiful servant/assistant to Henry, Henry's increasing attention to his creation makes Fritz jealous; Fritz' abusive nature toward the Monster (tormenting him with whips and fire) may very well be a reflection of such jealousy. All this leads up to the dysfunctional relationship existing between Henry and the Monster – first the all-

attentive/obsessive Henry becomes bored with and neglectful of his "son", Henry's neglect allowing Fritz to torment the Monster and then Waldman to try to dissect it. Thus, the Monster feels unwanted, isolated, freakish, and desperately wants a friend of its own.

While the Frankenstein Monster might briefly haunt of terrifying us, as it did audiences in the 1930s, the audiences is much more likely to relate to the Monster's symbolic function as a rejected, isolated, unloved, innocent victim. And here is where the Monster becomes most mythic and ingrained in our psychological consciousness. This is where the Monster becomes the most important of all the Universal icons. Simply stated, the universality of the Frankenstein Monster originates from the simple fact that he is like us at various moments in our lives: disconnected, alienated, frustrated, lonely, rejected, hated, awkward, jealous. Unfortunately, for the Monster, he is doomed to forever exist in this disparate, uncaring, negative abyss.

First, to illustrate Frustration from Learning, we have the initial appearance of the Monster from Frankenstein as he slowly backs through the door, slowly turns around, and then we see a close up of the Monster's face, its dead half-closed eyes, its stiff movement, and its obeying of commands almost catatonically. Sitting in a chair, the skylight opened, the Monster rises and looks upward, raising its bare arms skyward to grasp for the warming light. When the light source is turned off, the Monster thrusts its arms out pleadingly toward Henry." And now for our lesson", the blind Hermit intones from Bride of Frankenstein. In this very humorous yet warm sequence, the Monster learns the fundamentals of speech, what bread is, how wine is "good", how to shake the hand of a friend, why wood is good for the fire, and that even fire can be good (having already learned fear of fire at the end of a burning torch and at the hands of the villagers in Frankenstein).



Second, to represent Loneliness caused by the Feeling of Being one of a Kind, we are reminded of the conclusion of *Frankenstein* when the Monster, trapped in the burning windmill, screams and wails like a cornered animal, never understanding fully why its actions resulted in so much scorn. Symbolically, the sequence that best drives home the point of the loneliness of the Monster is the wonderfully symbolic sequence from *Bride of Frankenstein* when the Monster roams the foggy graveyard, stumbling past various statues and gravemarkers, savagely knocking over one such marker leading to the crypt below. There he eyes the coffin of his bride-to-be. Such a sequence illustrates the Monster's recognition of himself as a creature separate from living human beings; he sees himself as a creature of the night, of the graveyard, of the dead.

When *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* was first being planned in the late 1960s, most English-speaking youths were embroiled in a bitter conceptual battle with the "Establishment". In America, people were assaulted by images on nightly newscasts featuring the latest atrocities of an unpopular and apparently unwinnable war. President Nixon's adversary relationship with America's youth was well documented, and the Watergate scandal was just around the corner. A rapidly expanding atmosphere of social pessimism threatened to corrupt the national mindset of the late 1960s, and filmmaker's latest projects began to mirror the gloominess that had become so prevalent during the Johnson and Nixon eras. Horror movies were not immune and the fairy tale quality that had been the backbone of many of them (especially the Hammer products) collapsed to be replaced by a newfound realism/cynicism that would continue to dominate U.S and British products for some time.

Producer Anthony Hinds, who wrote many of Hammer's thrillers under his alter-ego pen name John Elder, often employed a Brothers Grimm kind of atmosphere as a jumping-off



point for his Gothic projects. Scriptwriter Batt eschewed the "viewer-friendly" technique of the Elder storylines, opting instead to work in elements that touched on more modern concerns including domestic violence, recreational drug use, blackmail, mental illness, deception, and murder. As a result, *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* turned out leaner and a whole lot meaner than the typical Hammer horror.

Hammer's fourth Frankenstein film, *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1966), was a unique reconstruction of the Modern Prometheus story with "ugly duckling" trimmings; in contrast, the 1969 follow-up began on a note of ultra-violence and moved forward from there, hard-nosed, cynical, and nihilistic. In *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* (1969) directed by Terence Fisher, the Baron truly has become more monstrous than the monsters he created – a catch line used in Hammer advertising and promotion. The idea is suggested immediately in the opening sequence, when an unseen assailant (Frankenstein) attacks Dr. Heidecke (Jim Collier) under cover of the dark, using a scythe to lop off his head. The point is then driven home visually when Frankenstein shows up in the following sequence wearing a mask that makes him look something less than human. A burglar (Harold Goodwin) who stumbles into Frankenstein's clandestine lab is attacked by this horribly scarred "monster". During their brief fight most of the delicate scientific equipment perched atop the worktables is shattered, and the gory, decapitated head of Heidecke bounces out of a metal container at the burglar's side. This frightens him away completely, and the disfigured man then strips away a rubber mask to reveal the aquiline features of the infamous Baron Frankenstein (Peter Cushing).

The sequence serves more than a single purpose; it gets the film off to a rousing start, of course, but more importantly, it informs the audience that Baron Frankenstein is not playing

around. No longer the scientific dreamer, now Frankenstein kills – frequently and unrepentantly – to further whatever experiment currently engages his attention. Batt takes care to suggest that Frankenstein has been up to his old tricks by including a scene of the Baron disposing of a corpse-raw material, which was to have served as yet another man-made creation. The doctor has always had a keen intellect so it comes as no surprise that his first move after the encounter with the burglar is to dispose of the evidence of not just his most recent crime, but of the burglar’s entire existence.

There is a subtextual theme running through *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed*, and it is one of duality: good and evil, black and white. All the major cast members have something to hide. Even the Baron’s ”creature” could be called ”Janus faced” since the personality finds itself at two extremes (sane and insane) while housed in two entirely different ”containers”. The theme involves virtually every cast member. There is the nature of struggling young Doctor Karl Holst’s (Simon Ward) work. On the one hand he performs acceptably at the hospital, but he siphons off quantities of pharmaceutical drugs to sell on the black market. Yet, even here Batt and Fisher tip the audience that Karl’s illegal profits are intended for a good purpose: to pay the necessary to maintain health services for his fiancée’s mother, who is confined in an asylum. The film is exceedingly rich with this sort of double-imagery.

Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed is one Frankenstein film in which there is no real hero or heroine – only characters burdened by varying degrees of culpability (not necessarily guilt) as a result of their day-to-day activities. In contrast, recall Hammer’s *The Curse of Frankenstein*, in which Victor is condemned to death (but significantly never shown to perish). The Baron was the (implied) loser; the winners were Paul Krempe and Elizabeth. In the 1958



follow-up, *The Revenge of Frankenstein*, there are two winners – Dr. Kleve (Francis Mathews) and Frankenstein himself, who survives in the guise of Dr. Franck. *The Evil of Frankenstein* (1964) also had distinct winners: the Baron's assistant, Hans (SandorEles), and Rena (Katy Wild), the mute beggar girl; both escaped the fiery finale, which claimed Frankenstein and his Creature (Kiwi Kingston). In *Frankenstein Created Woman*, (1969) the borderlines separating winners from losers were carefully delineated, while the outlines of good and evil were blurred into indistinction. The Baron survived unscathed as a winner along with his befuddled assistant, Dr. Hertz (Thorley Walters), while the story's losers included the unfortunate Christina Kleve (the late Susan Denberg) and her alter ego Hans (Robert Morris), as well as Christina's father, Mr. Kleve (Alan MacNaughton), and the three young ruffians, (Barry Warren), Anton (Peter Blythe), and Johann (Derek Fowldes), all of whom meet their deaths by story's end.

As a black comedy remake of *The Curse of Frankenstein* the film *Horror of Frankenstein* (1970), is the only entry in the series to feature an actor other than Peter Cushing in the title role, the film is not very successful. Here the Baron (Ralph Bates) remains alive at the film's conclusion, while Graham James as Wilhelm (in the Robert Urquhart role) is transformed into the loser. (In fact, Frankenstein murders him). The final film in the series, *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (1973), ends with the Baron (Cushing again) a winner once more in that he survives his latest creation's (Dave Prowse) attack and begins planning a whole other series of experiments with new assistants Dr. Helder (Shane Bryant) and Sarah the Angel (Madeline Smith).

In the film *The Evil of Frankenstein*(1964) the director, Freddy Francis shocks the viewer even before the opening credits, when an overzealous body snatcher steals the barely cold

corpse of a young man right before his frightened little sister's eyes. The child flees in terror, only to run into Baron Frankenstein lurking in the nearby woods. Francis perfectly captures the helpless dread of a childhood nightmare; furthermore, as she recoils in horror from the Baron's touch, the message is underscored that the real antagonist of the Hammer Frankenstein is the Baron himself-his creations are merely incidental to what the scientist himself represents.

Other exciting scenes abound, such as the one in which Frankenstein and Hans free from the wrath of the Karlstadt authorities, or the sequences in which the Creature ferociously murders the burgomaster and a hapless constable (in one of the film's best combinations of thrills and laughs, the bored constable makes the mistake of trying on the Chief of Police's uniform, thereby confusing the Creature and making himself an accidental target). The conclusion of the film is suitably thrilling – there is no dearth of action here. Freddie Francis may not like horror films very much, but he knows the key to shooting a successful one involves fluid camerawork, effective thrills, and a tone of Gothic menace. Here the director does a fine job of delivering the goods.

In the film, *I was a teenage Frankenstein* (1957) the burning themes of life, death, the battle of the sexes, and the disposal of unwanted limbs and organs, are covered and the screenplay also tackles the dreaded Generation Gap. Though he himself sits squarely on the shoulders of middle age, Professor Frankenstein seemingly takes the youthful side of this age-old conflict. While using Frankenstein as the mouthpiece of the young, however, Kandel and Cohen also cast him in the contradictory light of an unbending, authoritarian parent who goes so far as to make his child/creation call him "sir". The horror! By far the two greatest assets possessed by

Teenage Frankenstein are the authoritative playing of Whit Bissell as Professor Frankenstein and the impressive makeup atop Gary Conway's buffed frame.

In 1965 interest in the space program was still high, and rock-and-roll music was bigger than ever. Since *Frankenstein Meets the Space monster* (1965) was obviously aimed at an adolescent audience, the combination of space, a rock-and-roll soundtrack, and the Frankenstein Monster was natural. However, one of the main Frankenstein themes – that of man-made monster – is the focus theme of *Frankenstein Meets the Spacemonster*.

Blackenstein (1972) directed by William A. Levey tries to be relevant with the seventies, a few turgid references to DNA sufficing for acumen. DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, contains the genetic codes that distinguish each person from all others and is contained in each human cell, and Dr. Stein's prizewinning work with it does imply the possibility of using DNA to inhibit the rejection problem that comes with transplants, tailoring the body to accede to the new limbs. Unfortunately, alien the doctor stars blathering about RNA substitution and primeval throwbacks, theories are sled out like a baby with the bathwater. Where he and Winifred procure the limbs to graft onto Eddie is passed over and left unexplained.

In the film *Gothic* (1987) directed by Ken Russell and *Haunted Summer* (1988) by Ivan Passer, we are exposed to the actual events than happened during the creation of monster. The imagery in the *Gothic* comes from well-known paintings. Henrei Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare*, was used as an official poster of the film, Mary Shelley's style of referring to art and poetry is seen repeated in the movie *Haunted Sumer*. In Roger Corman's *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990) takes the element of science fiction in the novel too seriously and takes the viewers into

AD 2031, where the hero meets Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley and assures the latter that one day she would be come famous. In a futuristic subterranean computer laboratory Buchanan finally confronts and destroys the Monster.

Meanwhile Kenneth Branagh attempted adaptation, which would stay close to the original novel in the film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). True to the tradition of Frankenstein movies, and of course following the expectations of a cinematic audience, Branagh and the screenwriters had to show how Victor animates his creature. The film includes a number of elements of the novel important to the many readers who regret that the arctic pursuit and setting in which Frankenstein tells his story and the Creature's ability to speak are absent in previous cinematic treatments. Many of the changes Branagh made, preserve and even enhance the story, as is the case with his having Victor restore life to the murdered Elizabeth.

The large-scale spawning of film adaptations of gothic novels, especially Frankenstein, has led the scholars to probe into the reasons why people enjoy adaptations. Horror is Gothic's basic feature and it is meant to elicit fear among the audience. Filmmakers try to distil the terror elements in the novel as they adapt the story, and retell it visually, exploiting the immense graphic potential of the new medium. They also make it a point that apart from throwing back to old times from where they could still use the traditional gothic props, the new adaptations speak to the concerns, fears and anxieties of the times where the film is made and marketed.

A proper understanding can be made only if we study what amounts to horror and how it affects the reader of the new medium. A study of elements that constitute horror requires a historical as well as a deep psychoanalytical analysis.



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