

**FRANKENSTEIN REFRAMED;
OR, THE TROUBLE WITH PROMETHEUS**
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Mary Shelley's enduring novel *Frankenstein*, considered by some to be the first science fiction novel in the English language, is often read as a cautionary tale about science and secrets man was not meant to know. I contend that this interpretation is not so much accurate as incomplete and that in fact Victor Frankenstein's choices are fatal not in his desire for knowledge but in his avoidance of it.

Victor's crime is not pursuing science but in failing to consider the well-being of others and the consequences of his actions. I contend also that Mary's great work is a tale not about the dangers of a man's quest for knowledge but about the ethics of his failure to attempt to anticipate and take responsibility for the results of that quest. There is a strong link between Victor's failure of empathy for his creature and the particular kind of hubris that allows for the discarding of other people's lives in service to an ambition. This failure of empathy is closely connected to the moral cowardice of refusing to take responsibility for one's actions or for the outcomes derived from one's research.

Explicitly in the subtitle of the novel, Mary identifies Victor with the Greek immortal and trickster figure Prometheus, who among other adventures steals fire from the gods and gives it to man. The trouble with comparing Victor to Prometheus, however, is that in stealing fire, Prometheus actually accomplishes something of great utility to humanity and is punished by the gods for his temerity. Victor does indeed step into a role previously defined by his society as being appropriate to a god—that of progenitor of life—but Mary makes it evident from the beginning that any scientific utility in his work is of very little interest to him. He undertakes his research in a spirit of self-aggrandizement: it's not knowledge he seeks but power and renown, and this ambition leads him to become far more of a monster than the creature he creates.

This motivation is reflected early in his life when he rejects the painstaking and boring—by his standards—research done by contemporary natural philosophers (who at the turn of the nineteenth century were beginning to make some real progress in developing the foundations of science as we practice it today) in favor of the type of research done by the

ancients, whose untested ideas, although widely accepted in the medieval period, had already been discredited by Mary's time. So Victor seeks the philosopher's stone, a mythical substance alchemists believed could grant eternal life, because it is sexy and because he sees "little worth" in modern—to him—science.

His purpose in this quest is quite patently glory and fame, not the betterment of the human condition. He gains interest in his contemporary science only when it seems to offer him a path to this same aggrandizement. This narcissism, this inability to engage with other creatures beyond their utility to him and his desire for glory, is his fatal flaw—his hamartia—that will lead him to isolation, to monstrosity, and—most particularly—to the destruction of himself and others.

Victor also fails as a parallel to Prometheus in that his eventual failure and punishment are delineated not by divine retribution but by the inevitable consequences of his own ill-considered choices and refusal to accept responsibility for the results of his actions. In the course of his self-appointed work, Victor withdraws from the world, his family, and his schooling. He isolates himself in an obsessive quest to create life from death, and as soon as he succeeds, he rejects his creation for the dubious sin of being unattractive, abandons it, and takes to his bed in a fit of emo pique.

As soon as he achieves his obsession, he rejects the accomplishment, and catastrophe results.

It's relevant to this point that Mary's text is marked by a cursory and much-undermined veneer of Christianity. For the time, this irreligion is unusual, though it appears typical of Mary's life experience. And yet Christianity is often portrayed as the religion of compassion: the word *compassion* itself derives from that religion, from *com* (with) and *passion* (suffering), as in "the Passion of the Christ." Compassion is literally, then, to experience suffering in empathy with another.

Victor himself professes to be a Christian, and a great deal of his internal conflict stems from his feelings that he has betrayed his faith and usurped the rights of his creator in imbuing life into dead flesh. But he never considers that he has failed in a far more sacred duty of Christianity: the Golden Rule upon which the religion is founded. He's such an incredible narcissist that instead of offering this *compassion*, this sharing of the suffering of others, he discards people when they are inconvenient, including his supposedly beloved family and fiancée. His treatment of his creation is really no different.

So, in other words, Victor professes Christianity, but he is a terrible example of it—especially to his creation. He’s a lousy parent—a lousy creator—because of his selfishness, his self-absorption, and his lack of foresight. He makes no sacrifices of the kind that would be appropriate for the education and upbringing of a sentient creature whose existence he is responsible for. He cannot even accept his creation as a fellow sufferer in need of succor and charity. And when confronted with the terrible murders of those close to him, rather than feeling pity or compassion, he uses his religiosity to justify how much worse his suffering is than theirs because they are dead and in heaven, while he remains on earth, suffering guilt. (But one of the victims dies while her soul is burdened with a false confession, which seems, in a Christian worldview, as if it might result in a little time in purgatory, at the very least.)

Although we can’t know, of course, what Mary’s religious outlook was in its entirety, we do know that she was raised by free thinkers, married an atheist, and was a social radical for her time, with determined opinions about the equality of women and the role of liberated sexuality in society. Significantly, one of her more noble and courageous characters, the beautiful Arabian Safie, is the product of a Muslim father and a Christian mother. Safie chooses to espouse her mother’s religion seemingly not out of any deep conviction but rather entirely because it offers her greater freedom and legal protection.

Safie is also a marginalized person—a woman and a Muslim—but even she can find at least a flawed asylum in a family where women are treated as human beings even if not as equals. Her experience raises the question of where the creature might seek such asylum—then as now.

Victor, in other words, is as tremendous a religious hypocrite as he is a scientific one. His monstrousness and abnormality are manifest in his behavior, even though Robert Walton, the ship’s captain and explorer to whom he relates his tale and who serves as the reader’s intermediary for understanding Victor’s life, sees him as nobly countenanced and well spoken. Victor is a beautiful man and fairly obviously a spoiled and indulged one, though he himself does not realize this, even at the end of his life. Victor and those around him think of him as a noble intellectual. But his intellectual achievements pale in comparison to those of his creation, who teaches himself in the span of a few years to read, to speak several languages, to navigate a ship, and to comprehend the nuances and hypocrisies of human society.

And yet because the creature is ugly, he is spurned first by his creator and then by every other human person he meets, despite the apparently innate goodness of his impulses. Mary makes it plain that though the creature is manufactured as a blank and willing pupil, he is benevolent in spirit and wishes only to help, to be accepted by human society, to find companionship. It is only after repeated abandonments and rejections that he becomes violent and vengeful.

Victor, the hypocrite, has no such excuse for his own monstrosity. He simply is incapable of considering the needs or desires or even the safety of anyone beyond his own immediate gratification. He cannot rise above his own innate selfishness and his ingrained tendency to dismiss, deny, and abandon something he considers ugly and unnatural—even though it is his own creation. Even worse, Walton—who in many ways represents the better aspects of human character—cannot see his way past Victor’s beauty and the creature’s ugliness to the truth of their relationship and of Victor’s abandonment and abuse of his creation. As with all literature, the reader sees his or her own best and worst aspects reflected in the narrative, externalized so they can be examined with new insight.

Victor is such a narcissist, in fact, that it never occurs to him that the creature might take revenge for Victor’s refusal to manufacture a companion for him by killing Victor’s own intended wife and life companion. He assumes that he himself will be the focus of any such revenge.

Victor is incurious about the results of his actions, which is an enormous failing in a scientist. I admit, personally, to a fair quantity of scientific curiosity about exactly how Victor preserves the “materials” he uses, as he so euphemistically describes them. His world is one without refrigeration beyond ice houses, and he mentions spending months collecting body parts and then assembling his creations before imbuing the first one, at least, with the “spark of life.” To the scientifically minded reader of 1818, this phrase would have been a transparent reference to the explorations of such near-contemporaneous scientists as Luigi Galvani (1737–1798), Giovanni Aldini (1762–1834), and Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) as well as to a long-brewing debate over vitalism and the origins of life. Many early nineteenth-century readers would have been familiar with and perhaps even have witnessed infamous public experiments where human and animal corpses jerked briefly to life through the application of electricity.

The novel is pointedly vague on the details of Victor’s work. I have a rather unpleasant image of Victor wandering around England for some time with two hundred pounds of grave-robbled body parts in a steamer trunk, taking them out each night to dry them on racks before the fire.

Walton's description of the creature—the only actual description of him, other than Victor's noting his filmed eye, great stature, and horrible countenance—mentions that his hand is “in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy” (p. 183).

I also find myself wondering, in the interests of science, if Victor's fears of the monster breeding with the bride Victor begins to make for him could not be simply addressed by, oh, leaving out the ovaries and womb of the female creature? One does rather wonder how effective mummified testes are in producing viable creature germ cells. ...

My point here is to reinforce that Victor really doesn't think things through, which is an aspect of his monstrosity: the fatal flaws that result in his destruction are that incuriousness and that narcissism.

But the creature has a fatal flaw as well: it is his desire for vengeance when he is ostracized. Whereas Victor's self-isolation is a symptom of his innate monstrosity, it is his ostracization of the creature—the creature's othering, to use the modern parlance—that turns his creation into a monster.

Thus, failing to consider the impact of his decisions on the creature he creates and then compounding that failure with selfishness and lack of compassion, Victor causes the very carnage that so desolates him. And so he becomes the author of his own ruined life and of the ruined lives of so many more innocent others.

This relationship is pointed out quite brilliantly at the climax of the book, when Walton is confronted by the remainder of his fast-dying crew, who wish to abandon their quest for the Northwest Passage and return to warmer southern waters. Victor berates them as cowards, almost literally with his last breath. And yet, in the end, Walton chooses his men's safety over his own selfish desire for glory and discovery as well as over Victor's demand that he continue the obsessive, vengeful quest to destroy Victor's creation.

Walton stands in contrast to Victor in this choice, which creates a thematic counterpoint to those decisions Victor makes that destroy him and his much-abused family and friends. In fact, Walton treats his own quest for knowledge responsibly. He considers the well-being of others, and he maintains his human connection to his family—personified by a beloved sister to whom he writes at every opportunity—throughout his adventures. That he turns back is not a scientific defeat—he makes no grand declarations about the impossibility of his quest for knowledge and pens no polemics about the uselessness of further ventures.

Rather, Walton demonstrates a simple acceptance that Victor never manages to embrace: other human lives have worth and value. Even those of a group of nameless sailors.

Victor himself states the problem, even as he is unable to comprehend how thoroughly he has failed to compass it: “In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty; but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards my fellow-creatures had greater claims to my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery” (pp. 181–182). He does not number his own creation among his fellow creatures, although in truth he owes it a greater debt than he does to any other person because he is responsible for its existence and abandonment. As the creature itself says, “Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me?” (p. 185).

Because the creature looks like a monster, he is treated as one despite his initial benevolence, and so he becomes one. Because Victor looks like an angel, he is treated as one despite being a monster, and he never grows and changes. The great tragedy of his life is that if he had simply considered the moral implications of his work and chosen a different course or if he had accepted his own debt of care to his creation from the beginning and nurtured it—if he had, in other words, behaved as a responsible scientist—every tragedy for which he bears the guilt would have been averted (and he might have received the accolades he so desired).

