

Introduction

Henry Frankenstein: Look! It's moving. It's alive. It's alive ... It's alive, it's moving. It's alive! It's alive, it's alive, it's alive!

It's ALIVE!

Victor Moritz: In the name of God!

Henry: Now I know what it feels like to BE God!

Frankenstein, 1931 film

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS, and most parodied, moments in cinema. The set piece twenty-five minutes into the first feature-length *Frankenstein* film, in which Dr Frankenstein exults as his monster's fingers begin to move, is genuinely uncanny. It is also very funny.

Generations have found this mixture of hilarity and horror irresistible. I remember primary school playtimes when we ran screaming round the yard while boys lurched after us with their arms held rigidly in front of them. We didn't really know whether they were being Frankenstein's Monster, the Curse of the Mummy's Tomb or one of the Living Dead, and that was part of the point. The monster had stopped being a specific character in some long-ago book or film. He had become part of our shared imagination, and he could do whatever we thought he could. In

the rainy yard we used him in games about pirates, games of tag and especially, of course, in kiss chase. At any moment a boy could turn into the Monster, trumping the rules of whatever we were playing – and we'd scatter screaming. To be the one he singled out was a thrill and a terror, because there's something uncanny about the human who isn't quite a human. Masks serve purposes of enchantment, turning priests and actors alike into something more than their ordinary selves. And Frankenstein's Monster, as acted out in the schoolyard, was genuinely frightening and unpredictable in ways that the boys themselves were not.

'Frankenstein films' have had their own spawning, every bit as monstrous as the creature's own. They've become both a discrete horror movie sub-genre and one of the most fertile grounds of remakes ever. The classic 1931 film of *Frankenstein* alone remade the three silent movies that had preceded it, and launched a Universal Studios series of eight Frankenstein-themed movies in the 1930s and 1940s. Later the baton would pass across the Atlantic to Hammer Film Productions, who between 1957 and 1974 released a further seven movies, most starring Peter Cushing as Dr Frankenstein. These serial shlock horrors had brilliantly broad-brush titles: the American series included *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, the British *Frankenstein Created Woman* and *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell*. At least a dozen further films that retell the original story – or at least *a* story – of the monster's creation have appeared since then. Which is to say nothing of the tremendous mushrooming, since the Sixties, of Frankenstein-themed TV programmes, comic books, graphic novels and manga, video games, jokes, music, stage shows, popular fiction, toys, and allusions from *Blade Runner* to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Much of the genre's appeal stems from its sheer unbelievability. Like pantomime Dames, who fail gleefully in their attempts to impersonate women, the Frankenstein genre revels in implausibility. It is so much camp nonsense and yet, as is the way of camp, it gives us a peek at one of our primitive anxieties – before we run off screaming. If the Dame lets us play with our anxieties about gender, Frankenstein's monster lets us play with the anxieties we have about human nature itself. James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein*, badly acted by badly made-up actors in a magnificent set, is

perfect camp. But even it manages to include genuine sentimentality: *the miracle of life!* It's this oscillation between the meaningful and the ridiculous that our culture has been playing with for decades.

Yet in Mary Shelley's original novel *Frankenstein* the weird nativity is completed in just one sentence:

It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

And almost everything about this scene differs from the one popular culture has fixed in our minds. The moment in which Mary's creature comes to life is un-witnessed, except by a far from exultant Dr Frankenstein himself. The setting for the transformation isn't a laboratory, just a 'solitary chamber, or rather a cell, at the top of the house'. Man and monster aren't surrounded by gleaming equipment, occult with modernity, or even by nonsense machinery in the great British tradition that runs from William Heath Robinson to Nick Park's *Wallace and Gromit*. Above all, the novel gives us a scene not of success but of failure.

For Mary Shelley's imagination doesn't snag on the apparatus of physical transformation. Her novel is an exploration of the consequences of *being* a monster, and it is not a comedy but a tragedy, as her choice for the book's epigraph makes clear:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

It's the cry of protest that Adam makes to God in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's tough, often bitter, retelling of the Biblical account of human creation. When I actually read *Frankenstein*, some time in my teens, I was astonished and relieved to discover that this was a story about selves and their feelings. I was moved by Frankenstein's creature, destined by an ugliness that's not of his choosing to a life of loneliness. He's an easy figure to identify with for any teenager coping with a newly grown body and not yet, perhaps, feeling secure about the world of sexual agency – or even dating. I had less sympathy for Frankenstein himself. His good

looks seemed to me no excuse for a failure to live up to his moral obligations. All the same, I was caught by the book's shifting, ambivalent sympathies. Although its narrator insisted that Frankenstein was good, the narrative only seemed to show him being bad. It was the first time I had found myself being forced by a story to decide who was right – to choose between two truths – and I was shaken.

I had anticipated a sci-fi novel crammed with hardware, and instead, against all expectations, I was thoroughly engaged. But of course Mary Shelley would never have written science fiction. Modernity was not her chief concern, even if experiments in living were, and she could certainly have had no way to understand modernism – leave alone postmodernity. She lived in the Romantic era, when European culture was trying to build sense outwards from the individual self. The investigation of human experience by Idealist philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had led to revolutionary questioning of that human's rights across Europe, and would also define some of the forms that human knowledge could take. 'Romanticism' was the term invented around the turn of the century for the effect of this new way of thinking on the arts, where it made emotion and experience primary.

Mary's version of this *zeitgeist* was both very new and rooted in a Classical education. *Frankenstein's* subtitle is 'The Modern Prometheus', and the Greek myth of the Titan who creates humans in an almost mechanical way was being revisited by Romantic artists as an alternative to the story of divine creation. Goethe had published his poem 'Prometheus' in 1789; Beethoven composed his *The Creatures of Prometheus* in 1801 (the ballet has disappeared, but the overture entered the repertoire). In the year of *Frankenstein's* publication, Mary's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, started work on his own verse drama on the theme, *Prometheus Unbound*.

I don't think I was alone in my ignorance about Mary Shelley and her novel. When I was a teenager, its author was chiefly remembered as the poet's wife. Sometimes she also had an honourable mention as a one-hit wonder who had somehow – perhaps inadvertently? – come up with 'the Frankenstein idea': the notion that if humans play God with the 'instruments of life' they will produce something monstrous. The date stamps showed that my battered library copy of *Frankenstein* had not

been borrowed recently. Though in the late twentieth century the novel form was seen, at least in the West, as *the* 'great' literary form, and that greatness often seemed to be as much a question of scale as of depth. The model, at least for a non-academic, general reader like me, was still late nineteenth-century fiction – that almost symphonic creation – and its reception not dissimilar to that for the bloated symphonic orchestral pieces of that same period. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century work like *Frankenstein* was seen as transitional, primitive: the first steps towards inventing a form that would become fully fledged only once it had sized up.

None of this is how we think about Mary Shelley now. She has been claimed by scholars and literary biographers, contradictorily both as the author of a canonical novel and as part of a tradition of serious women writers largely excluded from that very canon. The facts of her life have been excavated by her biographers. They've also been revisited by those more interested in her husband. Some have believed the poet's grumbles about her, not remembering that he was at the very least a subjective, embroiled witness to his own marriage: hardly a reliable narrator. One cohort, who accuse Mary of unfaithful editing of her husband's poems, even seem to assume that the grieving widow had access to twenty-first-century research facilities and training in today's archival best practice: a curious precursor of how the survivor of another great British literary couple, Ted Hughes, would face similar accusations when he produced the posthumous editions that ensured Sylvia Plath's reputation.

Reading these multiplying accounts can feel like squinting at a radar screen. Mary Shelley was a literary star. But too often she appears as little more than a bright spot being tracked as she moves from one location to another. This is no replacement for encountering the person herself. We know *where* Mary Shelley was, yet I still find myself looking for her. Like the monster she created in *Frankenstein*, she seems to race ahead of us 'with more than mortal speed':

Amidst the wilds of Tartary and Russia, although he still evaded me, I have ever followed in his track. Sometimes the peasants, scared by this horrid apparition, informed me of his path; sometimes he himself, who feared that if I lost all traces of him, I should despair

and die, left some mark to guide me. The snows descended on my head, and I saw the print of his huge step on the white plain.

But, unlike her monster, Mary Shelley does not need fictionalising. She deserves better than imaginative reconstruction: she deserves to be listened to. Her letters, journals and publications, and those of her friends and colleagues, tell us a great deal about what she actually felt and thought. Mary Shelley is not a fictional character. She was a real person, sometimes paradoxical and at other times predictable, and as complicated to get to know as anyone else. It's this real person, full of living contradictions, who often seems to be hollowed out from accounts of her life and of her circle. This all the more surprising because the Romantic movement in general, and Mary's writing in particular, is so much concerned with the psychological. After all, the great plea of her most famous novel is that we should understand who Frankenstein's creature is *to himself* – his own feelings and motives – rather than judging on appearances.

Mary wrote that plea astonishingly early in what was already becoming a sometimes heartbreakingly difficult life. She started work on her most famous novel when she was only eighteen, and when it was published she was still no more than twenty. Each time, over the years, that I reread her *Frankenstein*, its plea for understanding seemed more audible. I wondered who she could possibly be, this teenage author of not one but two of our culture's most enduring archetypes: the inventor not just of the scientist with no thought for consequences but also of the near-human that he creates. Who *was* the unmarried teenage mother who attended Lord Byron's house party on Lake Geneva and responded to his playful challenge to write a ghost story, one of the first and surely among the most influential 'creative writing' exercises in literary history? What extraordinary resources did she draw on to become a major writer, in an era when women mostly 'knew their place' as literary muses rather than protagonists? And what was it about her – as well as her pure exceptionalism – that so often seemed to bring out the worst in those around her?

The most enduring image of Mary's *Frankenstein* is, for me, her story's ending, in which the creature goes out, alone again, onto the Arctic ice to die. It is the original 'fade to white'. If we're not careful, the same thing happens – again and again – to the woman who created that image. I

want to rewind the film: to bring Mary closer to us, and closer again, until she's hugely enlarged in close-up. I want to see the actual texture of her existence, caught in freeze-frame. I want to ask what we do in fact know about who and how and why she is – who she is – and about *how it is for her*.

Of course, there are disadvantages to this approach. One is that a freeze-frame is a form of tableau, which asks a single moment to represent a wealth of incident and information that doesn't make it into the chosen image. Another is that viewing Mary like this produces a kind of foreshortening. To put it another way: we see everything that's 'in front of', or leads up to, the given moment; we don't necessarily see what happens when our characters are released into movement after that moment has passed. But this, of course, is how we picture human events. We see the motivation prior to the action, and think in terms of decisions that get us to certain points at certain junctures. Indeed we visualise entire life stories this way: it isn't only psychoanalysts, or Jesuits, who believe that the child is father to the man.

And so it is that the rules of perspective apply even to a freeze-frame biography. Mary's youth, and her life with Percy Bysshe Shelley, take up more space in this kind of storytelling than the equal number of years of her widowhood, in which she was able to settle into a literary life of her own. This isn't because she was a one-hit wonder; she was not. It is because the later years of a life – of anyone's life – do not build a personality, and they don't go on to affect a future. They *are* that future. *Frankenstein* is not unconnected to what comes after it in Mary's life. On the contrary, it changed her life just as it has changed our cultural imagination. But that's the thing: Mary's first novel informs her future; her last does not inform her past.

When Mary's silver ghost steps away from her and comes towards us it's the future, not the past, that it is on its way to haunt. We are all haunted by our own childhoods, with their particular dreams and nightmares. The Frankensteins of the schoolyard that haunt my dreams – or yours – aren't quite the monsters that haunted Mary's. But they are kissing kin.