

In the 1998 movie, *Gods and Monsters*, Sir Ian McKellen was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal of 1930s film director James Whale. Whale directed the 1931 version of *Frankenstein*, and its 1935 sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein*.

The title for the movie, *Gods and Monsters* comes from a toast given by one of the mad scientists to the other in *Bride of Frankenstein*. Dr. Pretorius offers a toast to Dr. Frankenstein and says, "To a new world of gods and monsters."

Gods and monsters. That toast captures much of the themes of these two Frankenstein movies. We have scientists who want to be gods and to create life and to create a new world. And we have their creations, monsters who resent being created and who curse their creators.

The themes go straight back to the original novel, Mary Shelley's 1818 classic whose full title was, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. This novel is arguably the first science fiction novel in history. And it was written for a contest. Mary, and her fiancée Percy Shelly, and their friend Lord Byron, along with Byron's personal physician, all undertook to write the scariest story. Mary won the competition. This is actually portrayed in the introductory scene of *Bride of Frankenstein*, with Elsa Lanchester who portrays the bride, also portraying Mary Shelley.

In the original edition of the novel, Mary puts a quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost* on the title page. In that poem, Adam asks God, his creator,

*"Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?"*¹

I'll come back to that theme of the created monsters questioning their creation and cursing their creators.

But I want to first touch on the other theme, the theme of humans wanting to be like gods. In Greek mythology, the titan Prometheus brought fire to human beings, and was punished for it by the gods.

In the book and in the movies, Dr. Frankenstein is indeed a modern Prometheus. But instead of bringing fire, the scientist uses electricity to reanimate dead tissue.

And the movie *Frankenstein* is not subtle at all. When Dr. Frankenstein reanimates his creature, he exclaims, "Now I know what it feels like to be God!"

And a little bit later he is showing off his creation. He says,
"So far, he's been kept in complete darkness. Wait 'til I bring him into the light."

And in an incredibly poignant performance, Boris Karloff, in spite of wearing all the monster makeup and clunky costuming, longingly reaches up towards the light above him. He

¹ *Paradise Lost*, X, 743-45

looks like he is reaching toward heaven, almost as if he's reaching towards God, seeking things that his all too human creator is unable to give him.

"Wait 'til I bring him into the light," Dr. Frankenstein says.

And yet his creature is reaching towards a higher light longing for something more. The creature needs more than his creator provides or is even able to provide. The creator is trying to reach great heights but crashes. The creature is in a lowly state, but is longing for more.

It's almost like an illustration of Jesus' words in our Gospel lesson. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."² Dr. Frankenstein's grab for greatness will end up causing great destruction.

In 1818 when the novel was written, and in 1931 when the movie was made, a key theme was the danger of a mad scientist playing God. And certainly, in the movies, both Dr. Frankenstein, and later his teacher Dr. Pretorius put the "mad" in mad scientist.

But in the 21st century, we need to be cautious about running too far with this theme in an unnuanced way. In 1818 reanimating dead tissue with electricity was science fiction.

In the 21st century, electricity restarting stopped hearts is commonplace. Just down the hall in the we have an emergency electrical defibrillator that will do just that.

Today we would probably not say that applying electricity to a stopped heart is playing God. Rather it is using God-given knowledge to save and preserve life.

In fact, early in the book, Dr. Frankenstein reveals similar motivations. He says, "I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in the process of time... renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption."³

The problem with Dr. Frankenstein in both the book and the movies is not so much trying to play God. Rather the problem is that the scientist does not think through the ramifications of reanimating the creature. There are plenty of unintended consequences that play out in different ways in both the novel and in the movies.

But unintended consequences are not new in the history of science. Think of Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel who invented dynamite and made a fortune selling various armaments. But he later used his wealth from weapons to endow several Nobel prizes, including one for Peace.

Or think of Robert Oppenheimer who led the Manhattan Project and was instrumental in developing the Atomic Bomb. Later he tried in various ways to encourage people to put the atomic genie back in the bottle, all to no avail.

² Luke 8:14

³ *Frankenstein*, ch 4

Dr. Frankenstein's greatest mistake was NOT creating and reanimating dead tissue. Rather his greatest mistake was rejecting his creature. He was repulsed by what he had done. He shunned his creation. He was not a loving creator.

In the book there is an early confrontation with his monster. Dr. Frankenstein says, "Abhorred monster! Fiend that thou art!... come on, then, that I may extinguish the spark which I so negligently bestowed."⁴

In other words, 'I brought you into this world, and I need to take you out, to eliminate you.'

If Dr. Frankenstein is playing God, he is doing a very poor job of it. He is not a loving creator. Instead, he tries to destroy his creation.

It is ironic that one of Dr. Frankenstein's best known fictitious descendants comes from the 1974 Mel Brooks comedy, *Young Frankenstein*.

Commercial: Next year I'm planning to preach on movies from the 1960s and 70s. I plan to preach on *Young Frankenstein* a year from now in October 2023. And one of the great contrasts in *Young Frankenstein* versus either the 1931 movie or the 1818 novel is that young Dr. Frankenstein IS a loving creator. He's constantly seeking what's best for his creature at great risk to himself. More on that in 12 months.

But the original Dr. Frankenstein rejects his creature. And the creature suffers because of it. In the movie, that suffering is seen in poignant expressions from Boris Karloff's eyes and face, in spite of all the makeup he's wearing. But in the original novel, the creature becomes MUCH more educated, and erudite, and eloquent.

He confronts Dr. Frankenstein his creator. His life is suffering, and he wishes he were never created. He says, "Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?"⁵

And he realizes that he has been rejected. He says, "Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust?... Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred."⁶

It is absolutely tragic. The creature is not only created by Dr. Frankenstein. His monstrous nature is created by Dr. Frankenstein's rejection of him. And all he can do is curse his fate and curse the hands that created him.

At the end of both the 1818 book and in the 1935 movie, the monster destroys himself. It's a tragic end. He has cursed his creator. He has despaired of life. And in one work

⁴ *Frankenstein*, ch 10

⁵ *Frankenstein*, ch 16

⁶ *Frankenstein*, ch 15

goes to immolate himself on a funeral pyre, and in the other he blows himself up, saying to his bride, "We belong dead."

His creator has rejected him. And he rejects the life his creator has given him.

But we have a very different type of creator. God is caring and loving. God doesn't spurn us. Rather he does everything he can to love us and nurture us and be in relationship with us.

God not only gives us the gift of life. He gives us the gift of eternal life so that we may be in relationship with him forever.

And the response his love should call forth from us is not despair. And it is certainly not rejection. Rather it is worship. It is thanksgiving. It is praise.

[[10:30 version: A few moments ago we sang these words from the classic hymn written by the great Isaac Watts.]]

[[8:00 version: At the late service we will sing these words.]]

*I'll praise my Maker while I've breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers.
My days of praise shall ne'er be past
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures.⁷*

What a tremendous statement of the importance of praising God, not just in this life, but in the life to come.

We're studying the book of Revelation in our adult class on Sunday mornings this fall. And we will see scenes of people who have suffered for the sake of the Gospel. They have endured great difficulties in life.

But they don't curse their creator. Instead, they offer eternal praise. They sing, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"⁸ "To (them) be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"⁹

May we be thankful for the gift of life our loving God has bestowed upon us.

And may we praise him eternally.

⁷ Hymnal #429

⁸ Revelation 7:10

⁹ Revelation 5:13