Don't Reanimate Corpses! Frankenstein Part 1: Crash Course Literature 205

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=SyyrwoCec1k
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/SyyrwoCec1k

John: Hi! I'm John Green. This is Crash Course: Literature, and "IT'S ALLLLLIIVVEEEE!"

Me from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! That's my favorite part of the movi-

John: No no no no, Me-From-The-Past. Don't you dare. That line is not in the book. And Frankenstein is the doctor, not the monster. Also, there is no Igor in the book, or the movie for that matter. His name was Frtiz. Let's move on.

[Intro]

=====Introduction (0:30)
So way before you actually *read* Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, you probably heard about it. I mean, the novel's almost two-hundred years old now, but we can't seem to get away from its story and its ideas. It's been adapted into plays and books and comics and more than one hundred movies, from your classic Boris Karloff pictures to *Blackenstein*, *Frankenstein Meets the Space Monster, The Erotic Rites of Frankenstein*. And, of course, 2013's *I, Frankenstein* which has a resounding 4 percent fresh on Rotten Tomatoes.com.

By the way, I wanted to blow Crash Course's entire budget on licensing *The Erotic Rites of Frankenstein*, but Stan said we couldn't!

Anyway, after all those experiences with the story, reading the novel is kind of surprising, because it opens not with the story of Victor Frankenstein, but with a series of letters from an Arctic explorer. Also, the monster, who as previously noted is not named Frankenstein - he doesn't have a name; that's really important actually - but he's a pretty articulate guy. I mean he reads *Plutarch's Lives* and *Paradise Lost*. He's better read than most of us.

So genre wise, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is kind of a triple threat. I mean it's often recognized as the first work of science fiction. It's one of the greatest horror novels ever. And it's often called the greatest capital "R" Romantic novel. I mean like Lord Byron Romantic not Danielle Steele romantic.

You know, the idea that like emotions like awe and terror and horror - the modern emotions - can be the center of an aesthetic experience. Also, Percy Shelley Romantic which reminds me to talk about Mary Shelley's biography.

=====Biography (1:55)
Mary Shelley's father was an anarchist author, and her mother was Mary Walstonecraft, a famous early feminist who died just 11 days after Mary was born. Her mother's death was a huge influence on Mary Shelley and if you're into biographical readings, then you can look at Frankenstein as a story of a monstrous and disastrous birth.

Anyway, when Mary was 14, Percy Shelley, one of the great lyric poets of the age, came to visit her father after being thrown out of Oxford for writing a pamphlet on atheism. Percy Shelley was already married, but two years later, when Mary was just 16, they eloped to the continent along with Mary Shelley's stepsister Claire Clairmont… are these names made up?

By then Mary was already pregnant with their first child. So, it's 16 and Pregnant, the British Romantic Literature edition. So a couple of years later…. oh it must be time for the Open Letter, 'cause my desk just moved.

=====Open Letter (2:44)
An open letter to Percy Shelley's heart.

Metaphorically, you were complex. I mean, after you fell in love with 16 year old Mary Shelley you repeatedly threatened to commit suicide even though you were already married to a different person named Harriet.

After leaving Harriet for this teenager, Mary, Harriet would go on to commit suicide while pregnant with Percy Shelley's child. And another woman who was in love with you, Mary Shelley's half-sister Fanny, also committed suicide.

But I want to talk about your literal heart Percy Shelley, because when you drowned in a sailing accident, your friends burned your body and were stunned to see that your heart did not burn. Somebody grabbed it from the fire, it traded hands a few times, it ended up with Mary. And it was eventually buried with Mary and Percy's son 67 years after Percy died.

And some people think the reason the heart didn't burn is because Percy Shelley suffered from calcification of the heart which turned his heart almost into a bone-like structure.

In short, you were literally, hard-hearted.

Best wishes, John Green.

=====*Frankenstein*'s Genesis (3:40)
So a couple years later Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Claire Clairmont, Lord Byron (with whom Claire was having an affair, although who wasn't having an affair with Lord Byron), and Byron's doctor were all hanging out in Geneva. And despite all the lakes and chocolate, Geneva was pretty boring, and also the weather was unrelentingly terrible so there was nothing to do all day except sit around reading creepy German ghost stories.

So naturally enough, a novel-writing contest ensued. It was basically like the most productive NaNoWriMo of all time. The doctor wrote a story that would later be a huge influence on Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. She was still a teenager. It's just not fair!

Anyway, in the introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel, Mary Shelley explained, "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea." She wanted to write a story that would "speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror."

The idea that art could awaken that horror and awe and connect us to the broader natural world was really key to the Romantics. But she couldn't figure out how to turn ideas into like a plot until she stayed up late one night listening to Percy Shelley and Byron discuss new developments in electricity and the possibility of the dead being brought back to life.

That night she went to bed and had a terrible waking dream. She wrote, "I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be." Uggh. it's so creepy.

Anyway, that's Mary Shelley's story of the creation of Frankenstein. Let's talk about now what she created, the upshot of which is: Don't re-animate corpses. Alright, Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble - Plot Summary (5:29)
So the novel opens with with the aforementioned boring letters that Arctic explorer Walton sends to his sister in England. Walton is sailing toward the North Pole when he sees a man cruising by on a

dog sled. The man is Victor Frankenstein.

Once upon a time, he was a nice Swiss boy with a couple of younger brothers, a dead mother, a best friend, and a cute cousin. But then he went to university and took organic chemistry and became obsessed with reanimating the dead which is why you should never go to college. Just kidding, go to college.

So eventually Victor figures out how to make dead flesh live and he assembles this huge creature out of dead bodies and farm animal parts , hooks up the juice, and animates it. Only he's so horrified that he runs away and conveniently develops a bad case of brain fever.

Rejected by his creator, the monster wanders into the wilderness, where he seeks shelter and then eventually learns to read and write. The monster returns to Victor and he's like "look I've done so much book learning" but that doesn't convince Victor that the monster is not a monster.

So the monster becomes a real monster. He kills Victor's youngest brother and then when Victor rejects the monster's request for a mate, the monster kills Victor's best friend and then his cousin- to whom Victor is getting married, because, you know, that's what they did back then.

The creature flees to the Arctic and then Victor pursues him which is how he ends up on Walton's ship where he dies. The creature, who they've found, is so distraught that he says he's going to die too. And then Walton has to turn the ship around and never achieve his sublime goal, and everything's terrible.

Because this is what happens when you major in Organic Chemistry like my brother, Hank, instead of something healthy and good like film or history or literature.

=====*Frankenstein* and Prometheus (7:06)
Thanks, Thought Bubble. So *Frankenstein* is fundamentally a story about creation, about new and terrifying ways to bring light and life into the world. And in that sense, it's loosely tied to two other creation stories, which Mary Shelley acknowledged in the text.

The first, is right there in its subtitle, "The Modern Prometheus," which is taken of course from Greek mythology. Prometheus is a Titan, he's best known for giving fire to Mankind - an idea that Zeus of course hated. I don't know why Zeus thought we couldn't be trusted with fire… come on, Stan, please stop having my head blow up.

Anyway, to punish Prometheus, Zeus has him chained to a rock and he has an eagle show up every day to peck out Prometheus's liver, which then grows back every night, until Hercules stages the ultimate prison break.

Read one way, this myth is a cautionary tale. If you overreach yourself, if you share secret knowledge, you're going to get you liver pecked out everyday, but that's not how the Romantics read it. To them Prometheus was a hero. They saw Prometheus as a figure who never gives up even when faced with incredible suffering.

But "Frankenstein" has a more ambivalent relationship to the myth. I mean you can definitely read the novel as a story about what happens when humans overstep. After all, that's what Mary Shelley says when she tells the story of her dream, that Frankenstein's creation would be horrifying because "supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world." My God, she could write a sentence!

And Victor Frankenstein is certainly punished for his actions, right, I mean he see's the murder of his friends and family and then he dies a tragic icy death at the ripe old age of 25. Which for the record, high school students, is not old.

But you can also read "Frankenstein" another way. As a celebration of ambition and super-human effort. I mean, why is that whole Arctic explorer frame a thing? Frankenstein only begins to tell Walton his story when Walton suggests that he is willing to risk his own life and that of his crew for knowledge.

So it seems like Victor's trying to share his own experience as a cautionary tale. But then, at the end, when crew demands that Walton turn back *so that everyone doesn't die*, Victor is furious. "Oh! be men, or be more than men," he says. "Return as heroes who have fought and conquered, and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe." But Walton defers to the crew, writing his sister, "Thus are my hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed."

So I don't think the novel is arguing that like the heroic human life is one that lives in a quiet bubble of ignorance. That kind of ambivalence—We shouldn't overreach! Wait, except at sometimes maybe we should!—is typical of the novel and it's also typical of Mary Shelley herself. She once wrote in her journal, "I am not a person of opinions because I feel the counterarguments too strongly."

=====*Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost* (9:51)
The other creation myth with which *Frankenstein* is intertwined is of course the Biblical one, as recounted by John Milton in the very good, very long *Paradise Lost*, which we aren't reading in Crash Course Literature because I didn't wanna. One thing to pay attention to in books is what books the characters are reading and it's no coincidence that the monster conveniently reads *Paradise Lost*.

Plus the novel's epigraph comes from Milton in a scene in which Adam says to God: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay To mould me Man, did I solicit thee From darkness to promote me?" It's essentially the same thing as when you say to your parents "I didn't ask to be born!" but of course that doesn't make as good of an epigraph.

So in this interpretation Victor is playing God and the creature is the sinning Adam. But it's hardly so simple I mean Victor refers to the creature as a devil and the creature seems to support this at times.

Plus, In the middle of the book they have this intense argument about moral philosophy—you know as you do with monsters, Godzilla was into Immanuel Kant, King Kong, of course, huge fan of Thomas Hobbes - anyway, the monster says, "I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded."

It's hard out there for a monster and it's important to remember that God did not expel Satan for no misdeed. But part of what makes this so rich is that both *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost* defy easy reading. I mean, *Frankenstein* allies the creature with Satan but that doesn't mean the creature is all bad. There are readings of Milton's poem that perceive God as sort of a stick in the mud and Satan as the really interesting character who struggles undaunted despite his exile from heaven.

Anyway, that was the view the Romantics took and part of why the poet Robert Southey referred to Byron and Percy Shelley and their circle as belonging to the Satanic school of Romanticism.

But anyway, all these allusion to Milton bring up some pretty tough questions: I mean Does Victor see himself as God? And if so is he a good God? Does the monster deserve his exile? Is he inherently sinful or is sin something that God allows to enter, as in Milton's poem?

Just as we wonder whether Victor and Walton should be praised or damned for their pursuit of knowledge, we have to wonder that about the monster as well. Whether we're talking about mad scientists or the monsters they create or Arctic explorers, seeking knowledge is a way of becoming human. Both in the best and worst senses of the word.

And to me the great question of the novel is: Who's more human - Victor or the monster he has created? Next week we'll continue our discussion of *Frankenstein* by examining those questions through different lenses. Until then, thanks for watching.

=====Credits (12:24)
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Thank you again for watching and as we say in my hometown, "Don't forget to be awesome".