Frankenstein The Novel And The Film Essay, Research Paper

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein: Myth for Modern Man

How can we think of Frankenstein and ignore the film classic of 1931?who can forget the remarkable appearance of Boris Karloff as the unnamed monster? Yet the celebrated film does not follow the novel by Mary Shelley. Although the scene of a futuristic laboratory entrances movie audiences with the mad Dr. Frankenstein and his faithful assistant Igor, the scene is derived from twentieth century imaginations and interests, not the novel itself. In the novel, however, Dr. Frankenstein?s goal is to create a new kind of person: a sovereign self, in control of its environment, and its own biology and mind, that will be eternally grateful to him.

Mary Shelley’s monster continues to repel and to appeal to a wide audience. Rapt audiences still regard dramatic interpretations of the novel, Frankenstein as some of the most innovative film pieces of their time. Yet film interpretations distort the novel. For good reason, the novelist chose not to begin her story with the chilling event of the dreary night in November. Instead of a major event, the book opens with a series of letters from Robert Walton. It is not his zeal for the voyage of discovery, but his obsession with fame, a metaphorical way to live on, that drives him to the unknown in hopes of being credited with expanding mankind’s knowledge and control of the universe. Similarly, Victor Frankenstein is drawn to the mysteries of experiments with the unknown. Early in his education he read about alchemists and early natural philosophers and becomes so impressed with the power of electricity that he makes it his mission to harness it to procure man?s place among the gods. But unlike the familiar films, no faithful Igor helped him rob graves or assisted him in an extravagant, futuristic laboratory. In the novel Frankenstein tells no one of his experiments and worked alone on his “filthy creation” in the “cell at the top of the house.? Specifics concerning the actual experiment are omitted, no account of the actual process of locating, obtaining, and transporting body parts appears in the novel. Sorry–there is no dramatic graveyard scene with him waiting to snatch a newly buried corpse.

The important framework is missing, and so are Victor’s status as a student (he is not a doctor), the isolation of the experiment, and the articulate creature who comes to life and seeks love from his creator. In a number of films the mad Dr. Frankenstein wildly exults, “It’s alive! It’s alive!” when actually, the horror of the creature prompts Victor to remain unwell for months. The grotesque appearance of his creation stuns and frightens the young student to deathly state of health. In the film version of Frankenstein Victor is transformed into a mad scientist, the altruistic young student disappears for the sake of dramatic effect. And rather than living in the attic of a boarding house the film depicts a large, elaborate laboratory with one faithful attendant. The 1931 film shows Frankenstein and his assistant eagerly waiting to rob a fresh grave. With the emphasis on grave robbing and technical effects, Victor’s burning desire to benefit the entire human race seldom is heard. In the novel the necessity of focusing on death itself forms an important part of Victor’s study–he believes that only by examining death can he re-create life, and in doing so overcome the human condition.

In Shelley’s work Victor advises Captain Walton to ?Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow? (39). Remove Walton from the story and no audience remains for the important lines; the wider implications of the scientific experiment fail to affect the viewer. The parallel stories, one of attempting to discover the secret of life and the other of forcing nature to open her secrets to man, disappear from the film. The events on screen remain remote from the viewer. The absence of Walton diffuses the warning to consider the final (although not immediate) effects of scientific exploration and experimentation. The reader discovers the dangers inherent in defying the natural order, while the movie audience watches a droll ugly thing lumbering about the countryside.

The film creates an image of the creature as a silent, malevolent being because a thoughtless young scientist creates a powerful object, yet provides no measures for guidance and control. Victor seems unfairly persecuted by the dreadful fiend he created. His initial dreams of benefiting mankind and creating a race which would be grateful to him are emphasized, rather than focus on his own disdain for that which he brought to life. In the novel the reader?s sympathy shifts for the monster when he confronts Victor with a demand for reasons for his abandonment and hatred. Even more startling is the being’s extraordinary range of ideas, precise vocabulary, and concept of justice and obligations. The

articulate figure challenges his maker: Both reader and Frankenstein recognize the justice of the creature’s demands. Slowly, reader sympathy shifts from antagonism toward the “fiend” to recognition of its deplorable state, abandoned and unprepared for any role in the world. The creature had committed no crime, yet his creator shunned him. The being, nameless as an object with no legitimate place in creation, deserves an answer. Movie directors ignore the dramatic potential of such a scene. As the narrative unfolds reader response shifts from the need to allow the creature to speak to a sense of pity, perhaps outrage, for the injustices he suffered. Do we ever respond this way to a Frankenstein film? No because the monster is merely a mistake, poor Igor gave him the abnormal brain instead of the good one. Mary Shelley does not leave the monster?s murderous nature to a simple error in brain selection; instead it is the result of his neglect. This is not the monster that roams the countryside in search of its next victim, instead it is a miserable, lonely thing that has no place in society whatsoever, and not place in the heart of his creator. The monster of the novel is a victim of human arrogance and denial, while the monster in the film hates his state of being and the people who reject him.

The power of the myth of an unattended scientific creation, left to destroy innocent lives, assumes importance in the final decade of the twentieth century. The book questions the morality of Frankenstein’s attempt to cheat death, one that our society can easily identify with. Did he have a right to create and abandon the creature? In her novel, Mary Shelley anticipated the problem of a destructive force created by man, a force with no genuine means of control. Although her story served as a springboard to a host of horror movies, the dramatic presentations omit the basic intelligence of the creature, its initial benevolent impulse, and its ability to recognize good or evil. Even the altered movie endings–with a mob scene presenting the monster’s death in a great conflagration, violates the intent of the author.

Until a big-budget film is made from the monster?s point of view, modern audiences will forever be inclined to consider the monster to be a murderous beast with bad brains, and Dr. Henry Frankenstein (as he was called in the Karloff version) to be the man gone mad with the desire to play God.

this essay is 3 pages and uses references to boris karloff’s film and mary shelley’s novel, frankenstein. its worth a B in my AP class, an A- in most other classes.