

Frankenstein: The Message Vs. The Monster

The dynamic and complex relationship between writing and the cinema is particularly evident in the practice of film adaptation. Though there exists a wide range of different ways in which books have been adapted into films, it is common that in all film adaptations, there is a materialistic, melodramatic and glossy vibe that the written word lacks or strives against. No matter how “true” a film may stay to the book, it is still the film industry’s job, as a business practice, to appeal to the audience’s eyes, which forces them to incorporate aspects into the film that may have little relevance with the book or none at all in order to generate more widely spread appeal from the audience. This phenomena is well exemplified by director James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein*, adapted from Mary Shelley’s 1818 masterpiece novel, *Frankenstein*. Anyone can tell from watching *Frankenstein*, albeit a great film, that it is Hollywood in all ways; it was never Whale’s intention to grip the reader’s heart as Mary Shelley’s unforgettably emotional novel does. Whale did not use his techniques of filmmaking to teach the audience a lesson about love or isolation or to warn all men of the dangers of acting as God. Rather, he consolidated the enigma of a man-made monster and realized it could be a real hit as a classic monster horror movie. Thus, the mission of the film takes on a much more materialistic, horror-like and visual character in contrast to the psychologically and emotionally deep atmosphere of the novel. This is shown through the visual representation of Frankenstein’s monster, the characterization of Victor as a wacky scientist, the fast forwarding of time, plot modifications, and the historical time difference between the novel’s publication and the film’s creation.

All books must be packaged and compressed for its film adaptation to be successful. While novels can be sprawling and contain a myriad of themes and open-ended questions, films must most often find a way to make the book more cohesive for a two-hour screening. This inevitably involves gimmickizing a novel to a certain extent, through focusing on character appearances and what will excite and intrigue an audience than in exuding the deep emotional upheaval readers can get from certain novels, an experience so intensely personal and individual to readers that it is only reasonable to lack expectations for this to be fulfilled on screen. *Frankenstein* is a key example of this, primarily in the way it visually represents the monster. More than all else, *Frankenstein* is a very visual affair. Its use of makeup and costumes make it a very visceral and visually exciting movie, which helps contribute to overshadow the more emotional heart-rending nature inherent in the book. In James Heffernan's article, "Looking at the Monster: 'Frankenstein' and Film," he writes, "This stubborn visuality of cinema-or, rather, our habit of considering it predominantly visual-may help to explain why film versions of *Frankenstein* have drawn so little attention from academic critics of the novel" (134). He goes on to write, "By forcing us to face the monster's physical repulsiveness, which he can never deny or escape...film versions of *Frankenstein* prompt us to rethink his monstrosity in terms of visualization: how do we see the monster, what does he see, and how does he want to be seen?" (135). Heffernan's two points here elaborate on the fact that a film has an inherently more materialistic mission than books do. The visual aspect of *Frankenstein* forces the film to be approached very differently from the way a reader would approach the novel. In the film, Boris Karloff appears with green skin, evil,

demonic and evasive eyes never quite open, robotic and stiff body movement, ape-like throat guttural grunts for a voice, slick, greasy and stiff hair, and to cap it off, what appears as a large screw protruding from both sides of his neck. All in all, the monster is very scary in an extremely deliberately costumed way; there is a touch of pure entertainment in his appearance, and the audience can practically chuckle at the enthusiasm and fun Boris Karloff is having playing what he knows will become America's new horror mascot. The visual representation of *Frankenstein* being such an obvious "monster" changes the effect on the perspective of the audience drastically. His humanistic qualities Shelley hails in the books are voided by the plasticity and obvious fakeness of the monster's attire. This, coupled with the kooky scientist's exaggerated lab equipped with a labyrinth of unnecessary equipment and bolts of electricity railing through dramatically at the scientist's every move elevates the otherworldly and wacky vibe of the film. Consequently, our perception of and empathy for the monster as another human being we can relate to is hindered.

Beyond the visual representation of *Frankenstein* but also key to its overall image is the monster's ability to speak. Hearing Boris Karloff's voice emanate from his costumed human being self equipped with green mask-like makeup makes a very blunt and direct impression on the audience that never occurs in the book. The physical and audible representation of the monster's voice voiced by the most famous horror actor of its time inevitably makes our relationship and connection to the monster much less significant. In Caroline Picart's article, "Visualizing the Monstrous in *Frankenstein* Films," she makes a meaningful point when she writes, "The tense dialectic binding word

and image, which is at the heart of the novel, becomes radically reworked, particularly as we now see the monster before we see him speak-the chaos of his physicality takes center stage, and he can no longer, as in the novel, deprive us of the sight of his mangled and mismatched body, in order to enable us to occupy the ‘visual’ space of the blind de Lacey” (21). Here, Picart discusses the main difference between the film and the book of *Frankenstein*: the visual, concrete, materialized image of the monster. The visual representation of the monster has a far greater impact on our reception of him and allows us to view him more as a monster because we see his dormant physical form before he is rejuvenated into a walking, talking being. Thus, the *visual* aspect of the monster, instead of his personality and self-expression through speech, is much more highly influential in the film than in the book. As readers, the dialogue, or whatever means of communication the monster is capable of throughout the novel, allows the reader to see the monster grow up and mature in a sense. This of course pulls at our heartstrings and arouses sympathy for the monster. This sympathy is negated in the film by its approach of honing in on the monster’s physical character, something all readers are blind of. This has a huge impact on how the audience receives the monster and strongly affects their ability to sympathize with the monster’s heart and feelings. An actor wearing a hyperbolized Halloween-like green grotesque costume, plays into the audience’s interpretation of the monster’s character in a much more materialistic, visceral and obvious way, in stark contrast with the deep psychological and emotional ride our feelings for the monster take on throughout the reading of the book. Because the reader can never physically hear the monster’s voice, we are able to perceive him as a being of high intelligence and wealth of

thought. However, in the film he is presented much less like an insightful, helpless and frustrated soul and much more like a savage ape. In fact, in the mere seventy-minute film, the monster never speaks at all, and manages only to groan and grunt in reaction to being threatened with fire or his life. In only one mere three-minute scene is the monster heard vocalizing without tones of rage and fear. This occurs in the middle of the film when he stumbles along a village girl who asks him to play. He is heard voicing feelings of pleasure and surprise at the young girl's lack of horror at his appearance and her willingness to share her flowers with him. Unlike the film, the novel is chock full of these heart-wrenching moments that ignite the unavoidable shame and pity in the reader for the monster's tortured soul. In the film, we only get a glimpse of what makes Shelley's novel so emotionally and psychologically powerful, for if the film were to endow itself with her same mission, it would suffer as a suspenseful, entertaining and visually thrilling horror film.

The historical difference between the novel's publication and the film's release is critical to understanding why the film took the route it did and hyperbolized on some of Mary Shelley's ideas while all-together leaving our or only subtly touching upon others. In 1931, the year James Whale released *Frankenstein*, many underlying and extremely taboo elements of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel were more readily accepted or at least embraced and glorified in a slightly grotesque way. This includes, of course most obviously the creation of life from the dead, otherwise known as parthenogenesis. Whale takes this extremely unchristian element of the novel (though one may argue the novel too acknowledges the evil in Frankenstein's act by showing the bloodshed it caused) and

glorifies it to an extreme point. This is exemplified approximately thirty minutes into the film in dialogue between Frankenstein and his professor. Frankenstein says: “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!” Moritz, his professor replies, “Henry - In the name of God!,” to which Frankenstein retorts, “Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!” Here, Frankenstein displays the thirst for god-like power all mankind develops that Shelley warns vehemently against and whose effect is displayed by the destruction Frankenstein's monster causes. Picart explains this further in her essay when she writes, “the myth of male self-birthing... has undergone various filmic transformations that hyperbolize, exaggerate, or radicalize this myth. These filmic transformations and their constant attempts to rewrite or reframe the ‘Frankenstein complex’ are significant in so far as they reveal the hidden gendered assumptions that undergird these popular film versions. Hence, these filmic adaptations constitute... an evolving ‘dystopian shadow myth,’ which lays bare many suppressed anxieties we have towards technology” (30). Here, Picart discusses Whale's and all other Frankenstein filmmakers' need to essentially “taboo-ize” the book and make it more radical to fit the time frame of when the movie was made, 1931, in comparison to the book's more conservative era of 1818. By putting Henry Frankenstein's complete obsession in wielding his power to create life from the dead at the forefront and core of the film, the film manages to be more controversial and entertaining in contrast to the book's much more complex and subtle weaving of the conflict of science vs. nature. This consists of exaggerating parthenogenesis and hyperbolizing on the ungodly aspect of the monster's creation. Whale successfully

extracted the taboo and intriguing aspect of the book and made it the most forefront theme of the film which enabled him to position the film as a modern and controversial horror movie for his time, despite basing the film on a book written one-hundred-thirteen years earlier.

Another major difference between the novel and film versions of *Frankenstein* is their delivery of time. In the novel, a huge number of important events and experiences take place in the lives of Victor and his family that mold him as a scientist and end up feeding his obsession for creating life out of the nonliving far before the monster is actually finished being created. In the movie, however, Whale decides to fast forward all this potentially too boring for a horror movie background information and instead focuses on the story post-creation of the monster. This gives more weight to the monster and changes our focus from Victor to the monster and his role in the story. In Seymour Chatman's article, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't" Chatman expands on this point when he writes, "all narratives, in whatever medium, combine the time sequence of plot events, the time of the *histoire* with the time time of the presentation of those events in the text, which we call 'discourse-time'" (3). To help better tell a tale, films take liberties with time and present an order of events that may rapidly speed up or slow down. This helps the audience understand the story in a more deliberate and manipulated way, while a novel is much more likely to spell out events with historical precision and care to detail. Such is the case with *Frankenstein*. The movie, unlike the book, fast-forwards through many events and background history of Victor, the scientist's life, and decides to focus primarily on the chain of events that follow the creation of the monster,

making the film much more centered on the life of the monster from his perspective than from Victor's, like the book. The movie has occasional segments that flashback to Victor's former life, but these serve to grip the audience's attention and add another dynamic to the book rather than show the audience pertinent information that the book does. This contributes to the film's intention of creating a horror film centered on the man-made monster.

Lastly, possibly the most crucial element of the film that emphasizes its business mission is the ending of the original *Frankenstein* and all its following prequels. Completely contrary to the novel, each film version ends with the so-called death of the monster. In the 1931 film, the monster is finally captured and seized by the angry village after a wrestle with Victor Frankenstein. After setting a pack of dogs on the monster, the monster is forced into an old wooden windmill into which he drags the knocked-out Victor. After Frankenstein narrowly escapes, he is thrown out of the building by the monster and is presumed dead. This ignites the rage of the torch-wielding villagers and triggers them to set fire to the entire windmill in which the monster is still hiding. The film ends with what appears to be an intense and painful death for the monster. Of course, the audience is not permitted to *see* the monster's demise. All this is deliberate of Whale to create cause for a prequel. This is evidence that even at the time of the making of the first film, it was already Whale's intention to open up the film for prequels. To do so, he could not have the monster die, as is the case in the novel. Rather, each following film begins with the monster's unbelievable rise from whatever death trap he was set in from the preceding film. Beyond simply setting up the film for infinite prequels, Whale takes

away the mortality of the monster's character. It is precisely this mortality of the monster that enables the audience to feel sympathy, empathy and self-awareness for the creature. By painting the monster as some invincible terror, Whale successfully alters Mary Shelley's mission in her novel, and succeeds in molding *Frankenstein* into an immortalized horror classic.

All in all, the 1931 film *Frankenstein* is a materialistic, entertaining and visceral adaptation of Mary Shelley's 1818 psychologically and spiritually turbulent masterpiece. The disparity between the novel and first film is huge primarily in its approach to characterizing Frankenstein's monster. Director James Whale used the enigma of a man-made monster as a catalyst to create a classic horror film that would entertain all audiences and took out the heavy emotional aspect in order to succeed in making a focused and consolidated horror film. These differences can be attributed to the overall film industry's materialistic and visceral approach to horror films in contrast to the more intellectual spirit of a great novel. Both the film and novel stand on the highest pedestal in their own differing veins of meaning and serve as a benchmark example of the most crucial difference between any text and its film adaptation.

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