

The Monstrous Outcomes of Playing God

In literature and mythology, the lines between gods and monsters are frequently blurred, highlighting the complexity of human nature and the moral dilemmas that arise when individuals wield power or make significant choices. Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* serves as the prime example of how these two seemingly contrasting roles can overlap and coexist within a single character. Over the course of the novel, the audience watches Frankenstein achieve god-like qualities, creating life amidst his ambition and self-confidence. However, once Frankenstein's creature is created, the audience watches as these godlike qualities end up leading to something monstrous within Victor himself. The audience observes as Victor's obsession with his creation turns to ignorance, and how the abandonment of his creation shows his failure of responsibility and struggle with moral ambiguity. Victor Frankenstein's character embodies the dichotomy of god-like creator and monstrous neglecter, showcasing the complexities of human ambition and moral responsibility.

Victor Frankenstein's status as a god-like figure emerges from his defiance of the natural order by employing scientific experimentation to reanimate lifeless tissue into a living being, a feat akin to "playing god" and creating life itself. From a young age, Victor is seen with an innate fascination for creation, specifically when we look at his obsession with alchemy as a child. Victor states that under the guidance of famous alchemists such as Agrippa and Magnus that he "entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life" and that "the latter soon obtained [his] undivided attention" (Shelley, 42). It is not until later in Victor's life that we truly understand just how serious he was about this statement. As Victor attends college, the audience begins to take note that he plans to combine his studies of alchemy from his earlier years with his current education on the sciences and philosophy. He

says, “so much has been done...far more will I achieve treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (Shelley, 49). Frankenstein’s defiant statement articulates how Victor Frankenstein’s unrelenting ambition and determination to surpass the scientific achievements that have come before him begins ensuing a god complex, or the idea that he has the ability to be god-like. It is Victor Frankenstein's journey from his childhood fascination with alchemy to his determination to pioneer a new way to unfold the mysteries of creation that drives him to challenge the very boundaries of life and science.

Similar to the mythological Prometheus, who defied the gods to bestow fire upon humanity, Victor Frankenstein's ambition to create life through scientific means can be viewed as a god-like endeavor aimed at elevating humanity by pushing the frontiers of scientific understanding and knowledge. In Victor’s words, “No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (Shelley, 55). This illustrates the idea of Victor’s god complex, and how his self-confidence and ambition are becoming unleashed. It foreshadows the moral and ethical dilemmas he will face and sets the stage for the consequences awaiting him due to his actions as he grapples with the responsibilities of creation and consequences of playing the role of “God”. In fact, it is only three pages later upon the awakening of his creature that we see Victor say that “the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley, 58) because he came to realize the true role he was to play. It is this awakening that creates the first instance of moral ambiguity within Victor, the idea that he actually does not know what to do with the power he holds as a creator. As Victor's initial ambition leads him to create life and

eventually grapple with the consequences, we begin to witness the transformation of the once-idealistic scientist into a character embodying the very monstrosity he seeks to defy.

The unwavering pursuit of knowledge and the obsessive dedication to his experiment compel Frankenstein to forsake his family, friends, and ethical principles, setting the stage for the monstrous qualities he begins to display. The audience watches as Victor's thirst for knowledge does not only come from eagerness to know things, but to create something entirely new. Victor reflects on his resentment of his ideas in the scientific field regarding barriers on the mysteries of creation, saying "I had gazed upon the fortifications and impediments that seemed to keep human beings from entering the citadel of nature, and rashly and ignorantly I had repined" (Shelley, 41). This shows that Victor believes his ignorance to these ideas early on in his life was foolish of him, fueling his coming obsession with the creation of the creature. Further, this pronouncement highlights the theme of the limits of human knowledge and a future warning of what happens when a person exceeds those ethical limits. When creating the monster, Victor says "a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Shelley, 55). This demonstrates that in Victor's fixation on creating the monster, he appears to concentrate solely on those who would soon owe their existence to him, neglecting the family and friends who already know and love him. It is Victor's relentless pursuit of knowledge and his obsessive dedication to his experiment not only lead him to forsake his family, friends, and ethical principles but also cast a foreboding shadow over the fateful consequences that will inevitably unfold when his creature awakens.

Frankenstein's immediate repulsion and subsequent abandonment of his creation exemplify a callous neglect of his duties as a creator, portraying him as a figure of monstrous cruelty rather than compassion. When approached by the creature later in the story, the creature

laments saying “you, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing?” (Shelley, 103). This exposes Victor’s callousness, rendering him the true monster for he had not only forsaken his monster, but abandoned his responsibilities as a parental figure. The creature continues to plead with Victor, saying “remember, that I am they creature; I ought to be they Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (Shelley, 103). This cry was one of innocence betrayed, a soul condemned without cause due to his abandonment. In his abandonment of the creature, Victor Frankenstein had unwittingly started becoming the embodiment of monstrosity, a fact made more tragic by the profound suffering of the forsaken creature.

Victor’s evasion of his creature and responsibility culminates in a tragic cascade of events, as the creature’s vengeful actions serve as a testament to the dire consequences of his creator’s negligence. The brutal murder of Victor’s younger brother and the false accusation that Justine killed him sends Victor into a frenzy, yet he never takes responsibility for the fact that the creature he created is the actual guilty party at hand. Instead, he becomes self-obsessed with the idea that he is the true murderer, saying “I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer” (Shelley, 96) and that “I, the true murderer, felt the never-dying worm alive in my bosom, which allowed of no hope or consolation” (Shelley, 89). This is a prime example of how Victor’s decisions to avoid responsibility are based on how he internalizes the situations he faces, rather than taking the time to properly interpret them. Later, the audience sees Victor talk to his creature and accuse him of murder, to which his creature responds with, “Listen to me, Frankenstein. You accuse me of murder, and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature” (Shelley, 103). This presents yet another instance of Victor shirking responsibility, transforming himself into a monstrous hypocrite; he would readily kill his

creation in a fit of anger for committing the same act that brought him grief. Ultimately, Victor's relentless avoidance of responsibility, coupled with his readiness to accuse the creature, paints him as a monstrous figure in his own right.

In essence, Victor Frankenstein can be seen as a god-like figure in his ability to create life and defy natural laws, but he is also a monster in his actions and moral failings. Toward the end of the novel, Victor becomes minutely aware of his own monstrous qualities in his quest for godliness, stating that "...I might, with unfailing aim, put an end to the existence of the monstrous image which I had endued with the mockery of a soul still more monstrous" (Shelley, 187). This realization and the duality of Victor's god-like and monstrous qualities are central to the novel's themes and serve as a commentary on the ethical and moral implications of scientific advancement and the consequences of neglecting one's creations. The novel explores the idea that playing god without taking responsibility can lead to monstrous outcomes, both internally and externally.

Reference

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. 1831. 3rd ed., Penguin Classics, 2003.