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Darker and Edgier:

Existential horror from Mary Shelley to H.P. Lovecraft

Beneath the best horror stories—the ones that stick with a person, haunting their thoughts long after reading—there lies an inescapably troubling existential thesis: whatever monster chased our protagonist, whether to a horrific demise, or to hard-won survival, is not merely fictional. It is a metaphor for a real-life horror, of the unknown, or of the darkness in humanity that we fear to mention. We're haunted because we know the monster *does* exist. Perhaps *we* are the monster ourselves. The best writers weave true horror through their work in many forms, hiding it around every corner and leaving many levels for interpretation.

For Mary Shelley, the deepest horror is humankind's feeble position the universe. Shelley's classic *Frankenstein* follows its protagonist from the height of scientific achievement to ultimate ruin at the hands of his creation in a powerful indictment of scientific progress without moral responsibility. From an alternate perspective, the novel functions as an allegory for the tragedy of Deist philosophy, the idea that a God created humans and the universe only to disregard them forever after. The horror of *Frankenstein* cannot be shaken because its true subjects are inextricable parts of human existence, questions we must confront as a society and as individuals about the meaning of our existence without obvious interference from a

benevolent higher power. These dual themes of scientific caution and religious criticism resurface again much later, but transformed, in the writing of H.P. Lovecraft, Shelley's intellectual descendent. Lovecraft, abandoning the Deist undertones of *Frankenstein*, exposes his readers to a harsher, more tragic horror in reality: the complete cosmic indifference of a universe without any creator at all.

Readers of *Frankenstein* may ask themselves the obvious question: who is the monster? Dr. Frankenstein's creation, or Dr. Frankenstein himself? The first, orphaned by its creator without explanation: "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" (105-106). The second, a callous, solitary scientist, unable to stand the sight of his own creation (58). On the first level of analysis, the novel casts human arrogance as the villain. Cold scientific progress without moral responsibility brings about the ruin of those who would pursue it. But what if Dr. Frankenstein represents not a modern Prometheus, as the novel's full title suggests, but God the creator himself? Seen in this light, *Frankenstein* is not the horror of a mad scientist's abuse of knowledge. It is the horror of a being whose creator has abandoned it to its own survival, that is, humanity under a Deist worldview. We become not Frankenstein, ruined by his own ambition, but the *monster*, created and abandoned without knowledge or purpose.

Which of the two interpretations is the valid one is more a question of who is narrating at the moment. When the monster tells his tale, his first-person narration gives full voice to the suffering and injustice of his experience: "Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but... [he] had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator.... I was wretched, helpless,

and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition” (132). Likewise, despite Frankenstein’s failings, his narration is ultimately worthy of sympathy, at least to Robert Walton, the narrator of the frame story, who describes Frankenstein as a “glorious spirit” immediately after his passing (220). It is wrong to say either one or the other interpretation is singularly correct. Thus, Shelley’s masterpiece conveys a multi-layered thesis on the human condition. We identify with both Frankenstein *and* his monster, so we *are* both Frankenstein and the monster: unbounded creators capable of great and terrible power, left to scrape out our own survival in a hostile life that is nonetheless, as Thomas Hobbes would say, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” *Frankenstein* is an indictment both of a Deist God who left humanity to its own poverty, war and disease, and of a humanity *become* God, reiterating upon its creations the irresponsibility that left the human condition so fraught with injustice.

The solace of Shelley’s vision is that at least humanity *has* a creator and an intelligent design. No doubt emboldened by the philosophical challenges to religion in Enlightenment writings by Shelley, David Hume, and others, H.P. Lovecraft dispenses with the tropes of Deism to paint the human condition in an even bleaker light. Far from having the unbounded creative power of Dr. Frankenstein, protagonists in Lovecraft’s fiction are at best the accidental discoverers of hideous truths over which they have no control, often driven to insanity before coming close to fully comprehending their implications for the wider universe. This outlook is best exemplified in the infamous opening paragraph of “The Call of Cthulhu”: “We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying

vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age” (Lovecraft 124).

Lovecraft further enacts this rearrangement of Shelley’s dark worldview by answering Shelley’s references to Milton and Christian creation myths with his own obscure pantheon of elder gods: massive, incomprehensibly powerful beings with no regard for the life or death of insignificant humans. The pantheon of supreme alien beings reappearing throughout Lovecraft’s body of work functions as a radical satire of traditional Theism. For proof of this we need look no further than Lovecraft’s “‘blind idiot god, Azathoth, Lord of All Things,’ who sprawls at the center of Ultimate Chaos ‘encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers’” who stands in contrast to more typical mythologies of a universe governed by benevolent, or at least rational beings (Mariconda 27).

Critics often note that characterization of Lovecraft’s pantheon is riddled with inconsistencies between separate stories. For example, Lovecraft’s prose poem “Azathoth” seems to describe the same blind idiot god mentioned above as simply “a man who travelled out of life on a quest into the spaces whither the world’s dreams had fled,” making no mention of any “amorphous dancers” (Lovecraft, “Azathoth”). One could contend that the self-contradictory nature of Lovecraft’s mythology is not an accidental flaw of his writing, but an effective parody of contradictions in real historical creation myths. Where Shelley draws direct comparison between the monster’s story and Christianity through allusions to *Paradise Lost*, Lovecraft paints a mocking parody of the universe’s gods as chaotic, indifferent, malicious and many-tentacled elder beings—better still, ones who take many (even contradictory) forms in the human

imagination, much like the central figures of religious belief for which Lovecraft held contempt.

Common to the horror tales of both writers is the lingering horror of staring human frailty in the face and lamenting the fullness of its tragedy. From the mouth of *Frankenstein's* monster comes a conclusive statement which could easily be mistaken for a passage out of Lovecraft: "Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death — a state which I feared yet did not understand" (Shelley 123). Though separated in time by most of a century, the two writers are bound by an intellectual current of mourning for the potential of human discovery. That the fate of humanity is to linger always alone between death, chaos, and the infinite pain of human existence, is a thesis worthy of true horror.

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