

Frankenstein, the Monster, and Us

Sunday, October 28, 2018

How many of you saw the movie *Frankenstein* when we showed it last week? How many have seen it at another time or seen another re-telling of the story? And who has read the book? If you only know the movie version, you don't know the story! The only thing the two have in common is that they are both about a scientist named Frankenstein who creates a new being and isn't happy with the result. The book has no stormy castle, no assistant Igor, and no random or accidental killings. And the creature – Shelley never refers to him as a monster – only Victor Frankenstein does that – speaks as an eloquent and well-read philosopher. No grunting!

The book is amazing – especially when you remember that Mary Shelley was 18 when she began it and 21 when she published it. I hadn't read it when I decided to celebrate the 200th anniversary of its publication today. If I had known how rich it was, I would have spent this whole month preaching on the issues Mary Shelley raises – should there be limits to what scientists can create? What care do parents owe children? What care do children owe their parents? Should women be educated and allowed to travel freely as men do? On what basis should we judge others? Does a beautiful face reflect a beautiful heart and a hideous face a hideous heart? Who is a monster and how does someone become a monster?

These are too many questions for one sermon, so I'm only going to reflect on the final one today. But I'd like to invite you to read the book and in January have a time when we talk about it.

Here is a brief summary of the story: a young man named Victor Frankenstein has been raised in a loving family which includes his two younger brothers and an adopted sister of his own age. He is a student of natural philosophy – what we would call the sciences and leaves his family in Geneva when he is 18 goes off to college to study it. In what we would call his sophomore year, he comes to understand the principle of animating life – he never explains it because he doesn't want others to follow his tragic path – but it has something to do with electricity. He gathers body parts from graveyards – no evil brain in the book - and builds a body which, before it is animated, he sees as beautiful. In telling his story, he says, “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful... his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness.” But when the spark of being animates his creature, Frankenstein can no longer see the beauty – all he sees is the creature's dull yellow eyes, shriveled complexion, and straight black lips. The creature is horrible to him.

Frankenstein flees from it into the night and a little time later, so does the creature, taking with him some clothes of Frankenstein's to protect him from the cold. Things happen – I'm not going to go into them all, but a few years later Frankenstein and his creature meet up in the Alps. This is the central section of the book where the creature tells his story and explains himself. And though he doesn't change his father's heart, - as he calls Frankenstein – his words may change a reader's heart.

For the creature grapples with the same questions which come to each of us: "Who am I?" "Where do I come from?" "Where am I going?" But he does it from a basis of having been rejected from the beginning – from birth we may say – and having been rejected over and over on the basis only of his appearance. Even a family whom he has spent a year secretly helping attacks him when he presents himself to them hoping they will see in his heart his loving gestures and attempts to tell them his story. No one can see beyond his hideous features. And so in his first act of violence, he burns down their house – knowing though that it is empty since they have already abandoned it in terror.

So his speech to Frankenstein is poignant and human in its sufferings and questions. Here is the opening as he persuades his creator to hear his story:

"I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and that which thou owest me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember 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. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous."

So the questions come – was the creature evil from its creation? If not from birth, did it become evil at some time? Or does it just do evil things because of its circumstances? And who does worse things – the creature or its creator? For Victor is no paragon of virtue. He stays silent and lets a young woman be hanged for a murder he knows she didn't commit, because he is too afraid of what people will think if he says he created the being which did commit the murder. Though the creature cares for the family living in poverty, when Victor spends time in a cottage in an impoverished village, he looks down on the people there as "benumbed by want and squalid poverty" and not grateful enough to him for the "pittance" – his word - of rent, food, and clothes he gave them. And though Victor's family loves him and cares for him, he neglects them and ignores them, focusing only on his own scientific goals and his own wants and fears.

In many ways Frankenstein and his creature are doubles of one another. A theatrical production of the story which played in London a few years ago

highlighted that with the actors playing Frankenstein and the creature switching roles every performance. The creature is hideous to look at, but a blind man in the book, unbiased by its appearance, is struck by the sincerity of his words and receives him as an equal. Had he been raised lovingly, might there have been no story of murder and revenge? And if Victor were not the handsome son of a wealthy and prominent family, might his actions have been perceived differently and met with different consequences?

These questions come to us still. And especially in this week filled with monstrous events – the president wanting to send troops to the border to turn away refugees fleeing violence connected with our history of interference in their countries; pipe bombs mailed to critics of the President; two people killed in a supermarket in Kentucky on Wednesday almost in a fit of pique because the shooter couldn't accomplish his intention of shooting people a black church; and yesterday's shooting of congregants in a synagogue – all that physical violence as well as the emotional violence offered to transgender people with the news that the current administration is seeking to define gender as fixed at birth. What monsters have we created? What monsters do we need to look at? And how can we change the story?

Clearly those who are performing this violence see those whom they attack as fundamentally not like them, not human – somehow monstrous. But from our viewpoint they themselves are the monsters, so along with asking how could they do these things, we need to ask, how did they get to this point? What shaped them into monsters? And how can we look at and deal with the monsters we've created?

There are no easy answers to those questions of course. But there are ways to start. We can educate ourselves on our history and on the economic and social factors which are dividing us. We can vote for people and policies who promote the good of the whole – not ones which benefit the already wealthy and powerful. We can try to create spaces where those who see each other as monsters can meet and realize we are all human. These are big things. But we can start small. You could head into Boston this afternoon to join the rally for Transgender Rights at City Hall Plaza. You can attend the story time I'm organizing with the Scituate Library on December 7 for the National "I Am Jazz" Day – when across the country children and adults will read and talk about the picture book story of Jazz, a girl in a boy's body. You can get involved in Scituate Against Censorship – the group working to keep parents from banning other books like *Monster* – interesting title there – from the school curriculum. And all the books on their list are by or about people of color. We could try hosting potluck suppers to learn to talk across difference.

And we can read *Frankenstein* and learn the book's lessons for ourselves. For with all its questions and the issues it touches on, at its heart is the idea of compassion. Mary Shelley even uses "compassion" as a verb – which I've never seen before– but that's how important it is to her Unitarian philosophy of life. So let us "compassionate" also, letting love flow from us, holding others accountable for their actions, not as evil monsters but as human beings doing things which are evil, and attempting to see beyond outward appearances to hear the story within.

At the end of the book, as Victor Frankenstein is dying on board a ship which has rescued him, he is able to draw upon his courage and compassion to stop the sailors from mutinying against the captain. We hear in this speech the person he might have been had he been able to make these qualities the center of his being. And his words not only encourage the sailors to persist with their journey, but may encourage us to persist as well in these difficult times: He said, "*Did you not call this a glorious expedition? And wherefore was it glorious? Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea, but because it was full of dangers and terror, because at every new incident your fortitude was to be called forth and your courage exhibited, ... For this was it ... glorious; for this was it an honourable undertaking ... Be steady to your purposes and firm as a rock.*"

Let us be steady to our purposes and strong as a rock, drawing on the deep compassion within to compassionate with others, that we may recognize and cherish the humanity of all people.

- Pamela M. Barz