

Background Daniel Cohen has created over one hundred books for young readers on topics like sports, nature, history, and science fiction. In this essay, Cohen examines the Frankenstein monster. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the monster's creator, began writing *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818 when she was only 18 years old. Frankenstein's monster has gone on to become an icon of popular culture. His image can be seen in movies, cartoons, and even cereal boxes.



Essay by Daniel Cohen

CLOSE READ
Notes

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–19, begin to collect and cite text evidence.
 - Underline adjectives used to describe the scientist and the sorcerer.
 - Circle what the scientist and the sorcerer are seeking to acquire.
 - In the margin, restate what you learn about Prometheus.

With the publication of Mary W. Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus*, in 1818, the mad scientist replaced the evil sorcerer as the master of monsters. In many respects the mad scientist and the evil sorcerer were very similar. They were not necessarily either mad or evil, at least not at first. Often they were brilliant, selfless, and dedicated to the task of acquiring knowledge—for the sorcerer magical knowledge, for the scientist scientific knowledge—that might benefit the human race.

10 But the knowledge they sought was forbidden to mankind. Often for the best of motives, both sorcerer and scientist released great evil upon the world, and their knowledge ultimately destroyed them. That is why Mrs. Shelley chose the subtitle, *Or, the Modern Prometheus*, for her book. Prometheus was one of the Titans of Greek mythology. He was supposed to have given the human race the knowledge of fire, but this gift angered the gods and they punished him savagely.

sorcerer:

Mary Shelley's scientist, Baron Victor von Frankenstein, attempted something no medieval sorcerer, no matter how powerful, could even aspire to—he sought to create life. Thus, Dr.

Frankenstein's creation is the first truly modern monster in fiction.

20 According to tradition, the idea of the Frankenstein monster was first put into words in Switzerland on a stormy evening in 1816. A group of friends decided to pass the evening by telling stories based on supernatural events. Among those attending this storytelling session were two English poets, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Also in attendance were Shelley's wife, Mary, and Byron's personal physician and friend, Dr. John Polidori. Dr. Polidori was reported to have told the tale of Lord Ruthven, who was to become the first famous vampire in English fiction. But surely the high point of the evening must have been Mary Shelley's story of Dr. Frankenstein and

30 his creation.

There had never been anything quite like the Frankenstein monster in legend or fiction, but there were a few creatures the monster might have counted among its ancestors. One was Talus, a sort of ancient robot of Greek mythology. Talus was said to have been made of brass by Hephaestus, a god of fire and craftsmen. The job of the brass man was to protect the island of Crete. He drove off strangers by throwing rocks at them, or by heating himself red-hot and clasp-
ing the intruders in a lethal bear hug. Talus was animated by a single vein of blood running from his head to his foot, where it was
40 closed with a nail. The powerful sorceress Medea put Talus to sleep and then cut the vein, allowing the vital fluid to pour out—thus killing the brass man.

2. **REREAD** Reread lines 9–19. In what way is Dr. Frankenstein similar to Prometheus?

3. **READ** As you read lines 20–49, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Circle the names of the mythical creatures mentioned in lines 31–49.
 - Underline a description of each creature.
 - In the margin, describe the duty each mythical creature was supposed to perform.

Somewhat closer to the Frankenstein monster was the golem, a creature of medieval Jewish legend. It was a clay figure said to be given life by some sort of magical charm. According to the legends, golems had been created by several famous medieval European rabbis. The golem was supposed to be a servant and protector of the Jews but it was untrustworthy. Rabbi Low, of sixteenth-century Prague,¹ had to destroy the golem he created when it went berserk.

50 Frankenstein's castle was located in the hills above the picturesque Bavarian city of Ingolstadt. Some have **speculated** that the inspiration for the Frankenstein story may have come from a German legend. There is a ruined castle outside of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, that contains the tomb of a medieval knight. This knight was supposed to have been killed by a ferocious man-eating, man-made monster that resembled a wild boar. But the legend itself is not at all clear and there is no way of knowing if this story or anything like it was ever encountered by Mary Shelley, although she was known to have traveled extensively in Europe.

speculate:

60 More likely Mrs. Shelley drew her inspiration for the story of Frankenstein from events of her own time. Science was becoming ever more important and it increasingly clashed with established beliefs and values. Frankenstein put life back into a creature that had been assembled from the limbs and organs of cadavers.²

¹ **Prague:** the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic.

² **cadaver:** a dead human body.

4. **REREAD** Reread lines 31–49. What is the writer's purpose for including the information on the Talus and the golem?

5. **READ** As you read lines 50–84, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Circle what the author believes inspired Mary Shelley to write her story.
- Underline reasons why body snatching was a flourishing trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

During the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries human bodies were not readily available for scientific study. Dissection of a corpse was considered both irreligious and illegal. The result was that doctors who wished to study the human anatomy had to employ the services of body snatchers who would exhume³ newly
70 buried corpses or cut down the hanging corpses of executed criminals and deliver them in secret to the laboratories. (While doctors couldn't dissect a body legally, it was considered perfectly proper to leave the corpse of a hanged man swinging until it rotted, as an example to other potential wrongdoers.)

Interest in medical science had grown enormously while the laws concerning dissection had not kept pace, so the body snatchers (the Resurrectionists or Sack-em-up Men as they were called in England) had a flourishing trade. If an adequate supply of corpses was
80 unavailable, some of the more enterprising body snatchers would murder some unfortunates in order to sell their bodies. The most notorious of these murderers were Burke and Hare, who operated in Edinburgh, Scotland, at about the time that *Frankenstein* was written. The practice was fairly common throughout Europe, and many respectable doctors simply closed their eyes to what was happening.

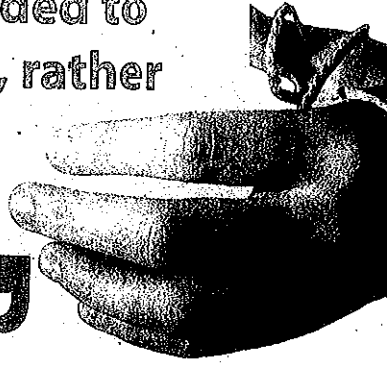
notorious:

³ **exhume:** to dig out from the ground.

6. **REREAD** Reread lines 60–84. How did the act of body snatching influence the writing of *Frankenstein*? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

7. **READ** As you read lines 85–102, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Circle phrases used to describe Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's book.
 - Underline phrases used to describe Frankenstein's monster in the 1931 film *Frankenstein*.
 - In the margin, write one similarity between the monster in Shelley's book and the monster in the film *Frankenstein*.

“He had not intended to create a monster, rather he had hoped to create a perfect human being.”



Dr. Frankenstein himself was forced to steal bodies for his experiments, and this was the first step in his crime. He had not intended to create a monster, rather he had hoped to create a perfect human being. But from the moment the creature opened its “dull yellow eye,” the young scientist was overcome with disgust and horror. He realized that he had made an abomination, not a superman.

The monster in Mary Shelley’s book is described as being exceptionally tall, yellow-eyed, and having skin like parchment. But few picture the Frankenstein monster as looking like that. Our image was fixed in 1931 with the appearance of the movie *Frankenstein*, starring a then unknown actor named Boris Karloff as the monster. Karloff’s monster was a masterpiece of horrific makeup. It had a flat head and the overhanging brows of a Neanderthal man. Its face was crisscrossed with crude stitching, and two electrodes⁴ stuck out of its neck. Like Mary Shelley’s monster, the movie monster was unnaturally tall, but it also wore enormous leaden shoes and walked in a stiff, almost mechanical way.

⁴ **electrode:** a conductor used to establish electrical contact with a non-metallic surface.

8. **◀ REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 91–102. In a small group, discuss the differences between the monster’s appearance in the book *Frankenstein* and its appearance in the movie *Frankenstein*.
9. **▶ READ** As you read lines 103–120, continue to cite evidence.
 - Underline phrases that describe the temperament of the monster in Mary Shelley’s book.
 - Circle phrases that describe the temperament of Frankenstein’s monster in movies.
 - In the margin, explain what would need to happen for the monster in Mary Shelley’s book to stop being miserable.

The monster of the book becomes tremendously evil, but it is an evil forced upon the creature by its unnatural creation. All mankind flees from it in horror, and the monster in revenge turns upon mankind and particularly upon its unfortunate creator. The monster of the book is also intelligent and highly articulate about its plight. At one point it says:

malicious:

110 “I am **malicious** because I am miserable. . . . If any being felt emotions of benevolence toward me, I should return them an hundred and an hundred fold. For that one creature’s sake, I would make peace with the whole kind!”

120 The first of the long series of Frankenstein films simplified Mrs. Shelley’s plot but retained much of the sympathy toward the monster. However, the creature’s intelligence is largely lost in the films. Instead of making long, soul-searching speeches, the monster can only mumble and grunt. In later films the monster loses even this rudimentary speaking ability. It is reduced to a stiff, stumbling, and thoroughly evil automaton, more of a mechanical man than anything else.

10. **◀ REREAD AND DISCUSS ▶** Reread lines 113–120. With a small group, discuss why filmmakers do not emphasize the monster’s intelligence. What effect might this have on viewers’ perception of the monster?

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence Summarize what you learn about Mary Shelley’s creation of Frankenstein’s monster and the way the monster has been perceived since its creation. Review your reading notes, and **cite text evidence** of Mary Shelley’s inspiration in the selection.
