

# Dreadful Doctor

## Experimentation, Empathy, and the Frankenstein Complex

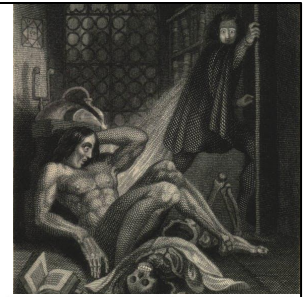
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Over the past two centuries, Frankenstein has been adapted to stage, screen, television, graphic novels, and even videogames. Mary Shelley's novel was first published in 1818, adapted to the stage in 1823, and film in 1910 by Thomas Edison's studios. Better known is the subsequent Universal Pictures version of 1931 that propelled the mad scientist and lumbering, brutish Creature into global cultural icons. The story was further distorted in 1950s and 60s when Hammer Studios shifted the setting to Victorian England, putting an indelible gothic horror stamp on most variants to follow. The Showtime premium cable series, *Penny Dreadful* presents a palimpsest narrative that draws from the novel, 19th century penny dreadful serials, Grand Guignol theatre, and a number of movies that include but exceed Universal and Hammer. Its three seasons draw on these sources to present a richer and more nuanced character arc for Victor. It is one that rearticulates his motivations, obsession, and even suggests how he might mature and grow as a scientist and a man. In the novel Victor began as a dreadful doctor--so focused on what he might do, that he gives little thought to the results when his object becomes subject and a thinking, feeling being. *Penny Dreadful* goes beyond previous narratives by showing its audience a Victor whose experiences as a vampire and witch hunter open his eyes to the losses and desires of others, and ultimately to the agency and independence of his creations.

# A Novel character...

- “M. Kempe was a little squat man, with a gruff voice and repulsive countenance; the teacher, therefore, did not prepossess me in favour of his doctrine.”
- To banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death.”
- A new species who “would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.”
- “How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form?”



Mary Shelley gave her readers a young, precocious, privileged budding intellectual who read broadly in multiple languages, natural philosophy, and somewhat rebelliously, from alchemy and the occult. But he also mastered contemporary science, improving on the instruments of his professors and extending the work of Franklin and Galvani with electricity. Shelley's Victor is brilliant and arrogant, yet also surprisingly superficial. Rather than reflecting on the sublime, Victor responds to aesthetics: one of his professors, Kempe, repulses him so much that he initially dismisses his reading lists, experience, and advice. Victor is also aware that his work is transgressive, so it is easy for him to choose to work in isolation, with neither mentor nor a moral compass. Although Victor's vision is one of pouring light into a dark world, he slips into ego, imagining how the new species he will create will not only be grateful, but perhaps even worship him. Yet when his creation comes to life, Victor recoils in revulsion from the Creature's thin, stretched, parchment-like skin, black lips, and dull, watery eyes. He has created life, only to reject it because it isn't pretty. In the novel the Creature calls Victor out for failing in his responsibilities as father and creator, invoking both Lucifer and Adam, while also pleading for a mate.

# Simplifying for Stage

- Richard Brinsley Peake's 1823 *Presumption: or, The Fate of Frankenstein*
- Stripped away the intellectual, philosophical context
- Substituted conventional moral lessons about hubris
- Simplified characterizations: "mad scientist" and (often mute) "brutish creation"
- Added an assistant
  - Lester D. Friedman and Allison B. Kaveney, *Monstrous Progeny: A History of the Frankenstein Narratives* (2016)



Unfortunately, much of this depth--the intellectual and philosophical overtones of the novel--are lost in translation during the transition to stage and later, film. In 1823 Shelley's work was adapted by Richard Brinsley Peake as *Presumption: or, The Fate of Frankenstein*. Peake's play set the stage for most performances that followed including those of film and television. However, while the play made the story popular, it also simplified its events, characters, and themes. Lester Friedman and Allison Kaveney point out that the play was performed for a larger, more general and less educated audience. As such, it presented more "conventional moral lessons about overweening hubris...moral transgressions, and contrition." The play added an assistant (Fritz, Hans, Igor), a frightened servant who provides comic relief (82). Victor and Creature are also flattened in the first step toward becoming the now-iconic "'mad scientist' and his brutish creation" (82). The Creature, unfortunately, is stripped of his Miltonian shadow and becomes a mute, visual rather than intellectual threat.

# Universal Pictures

- Frankenstein (1931),
- Bride of Frankenstein (1935),
- Son of Frankenstein (1939),
- The Ghost of Frankenstein (1942),
- Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (1943),
- House of Frankenstein (1944),
- House of Dracula (1945),
- Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (1948)



Speaking of visual threats, it was Jack Pierce's superb makeup that transformed Boris Karloff into the iconic flat-headed, bolt-necked, lumbering Creature who looks and acts nothing like his counterpart in the novel. This image is still held in copyright by Universal. In the Universal cycle, the Creature appears to die at the end of each film, only to rise in the next, linking the series together where the revolving scientists cannot.

# Universal Monster

- Frankenstein (1931),
  - Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive)
  - The Creature (Boris Karloff)
  - Assistant Fritz (Dwight Drye) - sadist; error: abnormal brain



*Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale and starring Colin Clive as Henry Frankenstein and Boris Karloff as the Creature, was released in 1931, at the height of the Great Depression. Whale's two-year experience as a prisoner of war during World War I helped him present a more sympathetic Creature, but his not-Victor has become iconic in his own right as the crazed experimenter proclaiming "It's Alive! Alive!" Henry's arrogance shades toward wealth and class-based privilege rather than intellectual superiority alone. He is also aloof, emotionally distant, and insulated from anyone other than his family and servants. Yet Whale also distances him from his creation--it is Fritz's torture of the Creature with fire that sets him on his murderous rampage, not Frankenstein denying him a mate.

# Universal Family: Bride and Son

- Bride of Frankenstein (1935),
  - Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive) - manipulated; redemption
  - Doctor Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger) - manipulator, evil
  - Henry and Elizabeth; Pretorius and the Creatures
- Son of Frankenstein (1939),
  - Baron Wolf von Frankenstein (Basil Rathbone) - need to redeem his father
  - Ygor (Bela Lugosi) - murderer, driving Creature
  - Apparent destruction of Creature; Family leaves castle



As with the novel, Frankenstein begins to show some sympathy for the Creature when he pleads for a companion. Although Henry hesitates, he does not explain it as a fear of the two procreating or raining ruin down on mankind. Perhaps it is because of the murders of the villagers in the first film (and his own near-miraculous escape from death). It takes the manipulation of Dr. Pretorius and the kidnapping of Elizabeth (at Pretorius's bidding) by the Creature, to compel Henry to create the Bride.

The actor Colin Clive died in 1937, leaving Basil Rathbone to continue the series by playing the son of Heinrich von Frankenstein, Wolf, in the Son of Frankenstein in 1939. Deviating from the novel, here the local Monster is established history. Wolf evolves Victor's role--he is compelled to redeem his father's reputation by resurrecting his work, the recovered Creature. And once again, the assistant becomes the catalyst for murder, this time manipulating the Creature to kill the local villagers. Once again, the assistant and Creature appear destroyed, leaving Wolf and his family to run back to America while the villagers cheer. The rest of the Universal films flatten the transgressive scientist even further into sociopath who easily murders while creating life, which leads us to the Hammer cycle.

# Hammer Studios

- The Curse of Frankenstein (1957),
- The Revenge of Frankenstein (1958),
- The Evil of Frankenstein (1964),
- Frankenstein Created Woman (1967),
- Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed (1969),
- The Horror of Frankenstein (1970) (non-Cushing),
- Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell (1974)



In the United Kingdom, Hammer Studios flipped things about by keeping the actor Peter Cushing as the Doctor in 6 of its 7 films, either as Victor Frankenstein or Victor under a pseudonym. The screenwriter for 1957's *Curse*, Jimmy Sangster said in interviews that he had never seen the Universal films, but had returned to the novel for his inspiration. His Victor is not a romantic and is much darker, a characterization that perhaps drew on British anxieties regarding their new "impersonal" National Health system or the release of information about Nazi medical experiments in a time of anxiety over the threat of nuclear war.

# Hammer Studios

- The Curse of Frankenstein (1957)
  - Victor is a murderer, adulterer
- The Revenge of Frankenstein (1958)
  - Brain transplants, "new body"
- The Evil of Frankenstein (1964)
  - Reawakening the Creature
- Frankenstein Created Woman (1967)
  - Soul transfer, male in female body
- Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed (1969),
  - Blackmail drug thief
  - Brain transplant
  - killer
- The Horror of Frankenstein (1970) (non-Cushing),
  - Womanizing, murders father
- Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell (1974)
  - Asylum; murder for parts; composite Creature

Where Colin Clive performed Frankenstein as a man torn between his drive to discover and love for his family, Peter Cushing's portrayals for the Hammer films are invariably a cold, arrogant, sarcastic "man of science" whose experiments are restrained by neither morals nor ethics. Cushing's portrayals in these films only rarely display empathy, typically after someone has been killed by a Frankenstein creation and he is now in danger of being punished by the authorities.

In 1957's *Curse*, Frankenstein's desire is to discover "the source of life itself" to "build a man with a perfect physique, the hands of an artist, and the mature brain of a genius." To achieve this end he kills such men for their parts: the brain of a scientist, hands of a musician, and so on. Moreover, he takes no responsibility for others--when the maid with whom he has been having an affair becomes pregnant, she becomes a problem, one he ends using the Creature. Unfortunately, after the Creature is destroyed in a vat of acid, Victor is the only one left to blame for the series of murders. The cold, calculating Victor only views others as materials to be used and discarded.



# Redeeming Frankenstein

- Young Frankenstein (1974)
  - Gene Wilder as American grandson, Frederick Frankenstein
  - Peter Boyle as the Creature
  - Director Mel Brooks
  - An homage to 1939's *Son of Frankenstein*



Monster movies go in cycles, from horror to comedy or camp near the end. Universal went from Colin Clive to Abbott and Costello. Hammer went from shock and gore to tired sexploitation. To be fair the mad doctor and his lumbering creation are old world horrors who fade in comparison to the flesh-eaters of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) or Tobe Hooper's *Leatherface* in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).

So the old world horror in *Young Frankenstein* (1974) turns to comedy, but also evolves the scientist significantly. This film is an homage to the Universal Picture series, picking up somewhat after 1939's *The Son of Frankenstein* as Gene Wilder plays the American **grandson**. As with the earlier work, Wilder's Frederick Frankenstein is driven to redeem his grandfather's reputation by replicating his science. But more importantly, Frederick is a surgeon and empathic: he immediately attempts to teach and nurture his creation, even though he has been gifted with an "abnormal brain." Later, after the Creature has been driven into a rampage, Frederick not only captures him, but also risks his mind and body, using himself in a dangerous procedure to heal the Creature. Frederick "reverses the traditional view of Frankenstein as a dangerous, egotistical researcher"(F,K 83) -- he is supportive and benevolent, everything that the Creature in the novel asks of his "father."

# Forty Years of Frankenstein

- The Bride (1985)
  - Charles Frankenstein (Sting)
  - Eva (Jennifer Beals)
  - Creature/Victor (Clancy Brown)
- Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1994)
  - Director Kenneth Branagh
  - Victor Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh)
  - The Creature (Robert De Niro)
  - Elizabeth/the Bride (Helena Bonham Carter)



Between *Young Frankenstein* and *Penny Dreadful*, Victor and his analogue appear in a great variety of films and television miniseries. Most of these stories tend to retread the obsessive doctor--some return to the novel for inspiration, but most fail to evolve Victor in any significant way.

In 1985 director Roger Corman explored the creation of the female creature in *The Bride*. Sting plays Charles Frankenstein in the vein of Cushing's Hammer performances--an arrogant and controlling aristocrat. When he creates his woman he proclaims ownership, becoming jealous and possessive, and eventually, driven by lust, attempts to rape her. He is stopped by the Creature.

Kenneth Branagh returned to the novel to direct *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). His Victor is a fairly faithful rendition; his motivation made more explicit as his mother dies while giving birth to William rather by scarlet fever. Branagh tinkers with the bride--the Creature *literally* steals Elizabeth's heart on their wedding day, forcing Victor to construct a composite corpse Bride. He and the Creature fight for her, unsuccessfully.

In the novel, Frankenstein destroys the female Creature before completion. Whale reanimates his *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), but she cannot speak and rejects Karloff's Creature by screaming. Of the Hammer Horror series, Terence Fisher's *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1967) introduced a female Creature. Foreshadowing *Penny Dreadful*, she slowly regains her memory but cannot control her body--it is controlled by a man's vengeful spirit. Ultimately, she can only reassert herself by committing her second successful suicide. Arguably Corman's *Bride* (1985) displays her greatest agency, but

Branagh's interpretation draws from the rest to display her agency through a particularly graphic form of deconstruction.

# Post-2000

- 2004: Frankenstein (TV miniseries)
  - Victor Frankenstein (Alec Newman)
- 2004: Frankenstein (USA TV movie)
  - Based on Dean Koontz's novels
  - Victor Helios (Thomas Kretschmann)
- 2007: Frankenstein (BBC)
  - Victoria Frankenstein (Helen McRory)
- Victor Frankenstein (2015)
  - Victor Frankenstein (James McAvoy)
  - Igor (Daniel Radcliffe)
  - Told from Igor's perspective



In a similar fashion, the 2004 BBC miniseries also returns to the novel, its innovation is to tie the death of a beloved family dog to Victor's experiments, and first successful reanimation. That the dog whines in pain before expiring should have warned Victor away from continuing his efforts.

Also released in 2004, the USA TV movie is so poorly written that it might be mistaken for intentional camp. In this version, our scientist, under the name Victor Helios, (sure, let's go with a sun god here), uses New Orleans as his arena for DNA experiments while working toward the creation of a master race meant to supplant humanity. Victor is now portrayed as a sexual sadist, casual murderer, and a cyborg, now focused on taking control of the world.

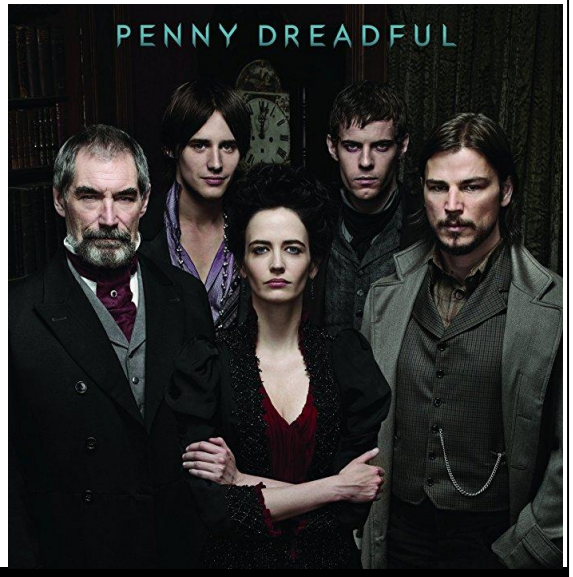
Victoria Frankenstein, played by Helen McRory in 2007 for the BBC is a geneticist who accidentally creates life while trying and failing to cure her son.

More recently James McAvoy's performance in 2014's Victor Frankenstein is almost equally that of crusading action hero and a radical scientist. This Victor is driven by his guilt for the death of his brother when he was a child. He is a genius, rejected by his father, but somewhat redeemed by saving Igor, a hunch-backed medical prodigy, from servitude in the circus. Oh, right, and he cures the hump, tipping the hat to both Universal films and Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*. Similar to Son of Frankenstein, Victor is manipulated by a British nobleman who wants his creations to become factory-slaves. Victor ultimately rejects his patron thanks to Igor's dedication.

# Penny Dreadful (2014-2016)

Palimpsest, Remix, or Mashup?

- 3 Seasons
- Showtime (Premium Cable)
- Characters inspired by:
  - Mary Shelley
  - Robert Louis Stevenson
  - Bram Stoker
  - Oscar Wilde
  - Spiritualist, Mediums
  - Alienists, Witches



*Penny Dreadful* ran on Showtime for three seasons beginning in 2014. Over the course of its 27 episodes it gathered characters based on the works of Mary Shelley, H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, and Oscar Wilde. Our steampunk Scooby Gang hunt vampires, witches, and finally, Dracula. We get the occult, Satanism, and even a pair of werewolves in the mix.

# Penny Dreadful: Season One

Victor expands

- Scientist as vampire hunter
- Creation of Proteus
- Reunited with Caliban/John Clare
- Death of Proteus
- Death of Van Helsing



Victor becomes involved in the story when Lord Murray calls on him to use his scientific expertise to analyze the body of a vampire. Unlike the novel, but as with so many films, Victor is an expert in many fields--chemistry, pharmacology, biology, anatomy, and even some electrical engineering. He is also addicted to narcotics--morphine. Victor continues his work on the side, successfully creating a man, Proteus, who seems to be regaining his memories. That is, until Victor's first-born returns and in Grand Guignol fashion, thrusts his hand through Proteus's back, splitting his torso in twain. The Creature, Caliban and later John Clare, cows a terrified blood-spattered Frankenstein and demands a mate--explaining the pain caused by his birth and Victor's abandonment of him. To heighten Victor's fear, several episodes later, the Creature returns to remind Victor of his duty to him by killing Dr. Van Helsing, with whom Victor had started to bond as a mentor.



# Penny Dreadful: Season One

Victor expands

- Vanessa's Ives's possession
- Lord Murray's loss of Mina to the master vampire
- Brona's death (Ethan's loss)

"I believe in a place between heaven and hell, between the living and the dead, a place of everlasting rebirth."



This second murder, coupled with his experience hunting the vampires drives him beyond fear to desperation. He asks Ethan, the American gunslinger, to teach him how to use a pistol--the goal is to kill his creation. Yet when he has the gun pointed at the Creature, he chooses not to shoot.

Over the course of several episodes Victor has seen the suffering of people he has come to respect and care for. He has helped care for Vanessa Ives while she was deamonomically possessed; he witnesses Lord Murray's grief over the loss of his daughter, Mina, to the master vampire. When the Creature, John, says "go ahead, pull the trigger, it would be a blessing," Victor instead puts his hand on John's shoulder; he is overcome, for the moment at least, and forgets his fear in a moment of empathy with John's loneliness. Of course, this tender moment is interrupted by Ethan, who asks Victor to help Brona, his lover who is dying of tuberculosis.

Victor tells her: "you have nothing to fear, you are stepping through a door is all."

"I believe in a place between heaven and hell, between the living and the dead, a place of everlasting rebirth.

"There is a price to pay for such passage. I know that you will pay it easily."

Victor smothers her, a mercy killing, but one that also provides the body he will use for John's mate.

# Penny Dreadful: Season Two

Victor becomes more complex

- Changed by the hunt
- A daughter or a lover
- Jealousy
- Obsession
- fear



Victor cannot be easily redeemed.

He and John work together to reanimate Bona, now renamed Lily. Victor is initially faithful to their project, he undertakes to work with Lily as he had with Proteus so that she will be able to join John. However, in the course of teaching her to speak, read, dress, and behave in society (shades of *My Fair Lady*), he falls in love with her.

Lily helps this along by seducing him one stormy night.

But as Lily becomes ever more independent, both Victor and John continue to objectify her, acting not so much as if they are the husband, but more as if they own her. Lily rejects them both. She emphasizes her agency and strength by beginning a relationship with Dorian Grey, and, eventually, working toward a violent, feminist revolution.

When love-sick Victor confronts Lily and Dorian, he goes far beyond the jealousy of Sting's portrayal of *Charles* or Branagh's as Victor over their respective brides--instead he turns to murder...or perhaps attempted murder would be more appropriate. When Lily denies Victor, she also tells him that he was "sublimely malleable." In rage over the loss and insult, Victor **shoots** Lily and Dorian, only to discover they are both immortal and (as with Victor's fears in the novel) have dark designs on the human race. Victor is left a broken man, in a dirty, disordered lab, desperately seeking a vein to shoot up.



# Penny Dreadful: Season Three

Victor comes to understand both the Creature and the Bride, John and Lily

- Bedlam asylum
- Jekyll's experiments and serum
- Dorian, betrays Lily
- Lily is also Brona, with her memories (Sarah's death)

"there are some wounds that can never heal, scars without which we do not exist."



The arc of the final, third season of *Penny Dreadful* begins with Victor telling Henry Jekyll of his experiences: "I've conquered death and created monsters" but cannot present his work to the Royal Society. He remains obsessed with Lily; he works with Jekyll on a plan is to tame her, domesticate her - but Victor says "if we prove incapable of helping her, we destroy her." While Victor talks about her danger, the cure he and Jekyll devise would also **erase her memory and render her compliant, serene, and dependent** on Victor.

A living trophy wife.

But as with John (the Creature), when he has Lily chained in Bedlam, prepared for the treatment, he chooses to free her instead. Lily fights for her life by telling Victor that he cannot love her because he not only makes her "beg for the barest scraps of dignity," and because his plan will "execute" her -- unmake who she has become, the synthesis of Brona and Lily's experiences. Lily explains Brona's loss, the death of her daughter Sarah, and tells him that "there are some wounds that can never heal, scars without which we do not exist." When she asks Victor to apply his treatment, to "please take her from me," Victor finally realizes that she is a person, not his object, not his experiment. He frees her saying "it is easy being monsters, let us try to be human."

# Next?

Victor: "it is easy being monsters, let us try to be human."

Has the Frankenstein Curse been broken?



Victor has learned over the course of his three reanimations to perfect his science, to reduce the trauma of the process. But more importantly, in recognizing the agency and autonomy of his "creations," John and Lily, Victor has finally begun to fulfil his duty as father.

Penny Dreadful embraces the emotional intensity of Shelley's Victor, but also evolves him as a scientist and as a man. Harry Treadway's Victor expresses sympathy and emotional awareness for both of his children, he understands their loneliness and loss. As a scientist, when he decides to let Lily go, remember that she remains a radical and a danger, he shows that he has also learned when not to pursue the experiment, when to establish an ethical boundary.