

# My Daddy's Name is Victor: The Suffering of *Frankenstein* and Lab-Created Children

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ABSTRACT: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* depicts the dangers of a scientific ethos in which technological control over life is seized, even with partially good motivations. This essay explores the motivations of Victor Frankenstein and the dysfunction seen in his physically superior creature. It notes the similarities between Victor's own intention and that of the founder of IVF, as well as the similarities in the experiences between Victor's creature and children conceived through IVF, as evident in the report *My Daddy's Name is Donor* (2010) and the ongoing surveys done at the website "We Are Donor Conceived." It then draws some lessons about the dangers in bringing children into the world outside of the normal and natural biological way.

THE YEAR 2018 MARKED the two hundredth anniversary of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel that has become part of the mythology of the modern world, and rightly so. Shelley's tale has spawned countless interpretations in literature, film, comic books, television, and every avenue of popular culture. Although the ending of this story – an account of a scientist who wanted to produce life in a laboratory rather than reproduce it in a human relationship – is tragic, many a scientist has had no qualms about following in his footsteps and playing God. Indeed, Robert Edwards, the founding scientist

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of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), described his goal on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first IVF birth: “I wanted to find out exactly who was in charge, whether it was God himself or whether it was scientists in the laboratory – it was us! The Pope looked totally stupid.... It was a fantastic achievement, but it was about more than infertility. It was also about issues like stem cells and the ethics of human conception.”<sup>1</sup> The ethical question, as parsed from his words, seems to be about claiming divine power over life.

The story of IVF and its consequences remains largely unknown. Fortunately, in both Mary Shelley’s novel and in “My Daddy’s Name is Donor” (a groundbreaking study of young adults conceived by IVF), we have stories that show the danger to children brought into the world in this way. Unlike the halting and square-headed film version of the “monster,” the individual created by Dr. Frankenstein in the novel is like many of the children of IVF – an exceptional and gifted child who learns languages, philosophizes, and quotes Milton. Yet he suffers from being seen as a product with no relation to his human maker and thus has no way to enter the world whole. So, too, the children of IVF suffer. They sense that they do not know who they are and that they are indeed products of will rather than love. In a correlation that begs us to look at the cause, they are at heightened risks of legal problems, substance abuses, and depression.

#### The Desire to Be the Author of Life

There are a great many who have attempted to revise the lessons of *Frankenstein* so as not to imply that there are limits to permissible scientific action. In her 1996 article “Frankenstein, in a Better Light,” Lisa Nocks attempts to blame Dr. Frankenstein for the outcome of the story, but does so only insofar as there was something wrong with his manner of acting in withdrawing from family and friends in his work and then withdrawing himself from his creation.<sup>2</sup> Nocks argues that “Victor’s ‘monster’ is thus not a form of heavenly retribution for daring to ‘play God’ [note the scare quotes], as many have suggested. The text indicates that, whether there is a God or not, Victor is responsible for his own behavior, and ultimately for the deaths of those he loves. His struggle is not with his Creator but with his own ego.” For Nocks,

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<sup>1</sup> “God is not in charge, we are,” interview, *The Times*, London (24 July 2003), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Nocks, “Frankenstein, In a Better Light,” *Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems* 20/2 (1996): 137-55.

Dr. Frankenstein's problem is simply not taking "responsibility" for his action.<sup>3</sup> This has a certain plausibility insofar as Frankenstein does not take responsibility for what he has created, and in this respect his stance is something similar to the creation of life by daddy donors. The result is very much connected to the problems experienced by the children of IVF.

But this explanation is only half true. It does not really fit the tale that is told by Frankenstein himself in the story, a tale about a scientist whose goal is power over life and death. The problems created by his action warn us not to play God in the future. As Frankenstein himself tells the explorer Walton before recounting the production of the creature, "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow."<sup>4</sup>

Like Robert Edwards, the young Genevan Victor Frankenstein became obsessed with science as power. He came to think that the work of the sixteenth-century occultist Cornelius Agrippa was much more exciting than the real work of the hard sciences. When chastised by his father for reading this "sad trash," Frankenstein rebelled. "If," he recalled,

my father had taken the pains to explain to me, that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical while those of the former were real and practical; under such circumstances, I should certainly have thrown Agrippa aside, and, with my imagination warmed as it was, should probably have applied myself to the more rational theory of chemistry, which has resulted from modern discoveries.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, however, he threw himself into reading the works of other occultists such as Paracelsus and, amusingly, Albertus Magnus. Reports of their exploits in creating some sort of a robot were part of eighteenth-century lorewhom a number of occult texts were attributed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nocks, p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818), 3 vols., ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough ON: Broadview Press, 2012), I:80.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley, I: 68.

<sup>6</sup> Massimo Polidoro, "How to Make a Monster! The Legend of How to Make Artificial Life: From the Golem to Pinocchio," *Skeptical Inquirer* 34/6 (2010): 22. "In the fourteenth-century [sic] philosopher, theologian, and scholar Saint Albertus Magnus

His goals in study were not just power in general, but power over life. His goals were “the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life.” Eventually, however, the former’s power to turn base metals to gold was abandoned and it was the latter’s power of rejuvenation and provisional immortality that stood out: “but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!”<sup>7</sup> Lurking in the background were other desires such as “the raising of ghosts or devils,” which “was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought.”

Motivated more than ever to peer into the secrets of life and conquer them by the death of his mother, Frankenstein proceeded to study at the University of Ingolstadt, the legendary home of the anti-clerical secret society known as the Illuminati, which was founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt. At Ingolstadt Victor Frankenstein encountered M. Krempe, a natural philosopher who heaped scorn on his occult reading and encouraged him to study chemistry, a suggestion that Victor did not receive enthusiastically since the masters of science of the day did not seek “immortality and power” as the ancients did. But he was convinced to give them a try by M. Waldman, a scientist who argued that although the hands of modern chemists may “seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible, [they] have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.”<sup>8</sup>

The promise of “almost unlimited powers” was indeed received with joy, especially given Professor Waldman’s encouragement: “The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind.”<sup>9</sup> The notion of an invisible hand that turns all scientific exploration and development to good ignores the fact that it may

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was the first to use the word android to define living beings created by man through alchemy. According to legend, Albertus was able to build a real android made of metal, wood, wax, and glass. He gave it the power of speech and used it as a servant at the Dominican monastery of Cologne.”

<sup>7</sup> Shelley, I: 69.

<sup>8</sup> Shelley, I: 75-76.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley, I: 76.

also produce great evil. While young Victor rejoices that Waldman has no “dogmatism,” the reality is that he preaches a dogma particularly welcomed by his pupil. His studies are now guided by the question of “whence” proceeded “the principle of life.” And that question led him first to the causes of death and then a long period of observation “in vaults and charnel houses” to observe the decay of flesh, a period that is suddenly capped by the vision of a “sudden light” that allows him, through a series of experiments to discover “the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.”<sup>10</sup>

This discovery does not cause Frankenstein to ask any questions of if but only about “the manner in which I should employ it.” That he will employ it is a given, and it only takes him a little thought to determine that he will indeed bring life to “an animal as wondrous and complex as man.”<sup>11</sup> After determining that he will create an eight-foot tall giant, Frankenstein gets to work “collecting and arranging materials” and then sets off to work, rhapsodizing as he goes about the “torrent of light” that he will bring “into our dark world.”<sup>12</sup> What motivates him is the idea that he will indeed be bringing a “new species” into being that “would bless me as its creator and source,” such that “many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” and they would owe him a gratitude more complete than any father could claim.<sup>13</sup> These lofty thoughts are pursued alongside his work in the “unhallowed damps of the grave” and “tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay.” The former phrase indicates some later sense of the unholiness of his work and the latter gives an indication that he has mixed in non-human parts with his creature. Victor Frankenstein certainly considers himself to be another God bringing to life a new race.

#### The Creator’s Gift of Life and His Own Flight

When, after two years, he succeeds in bringing life to the inanimate body he has stitched together, his reaction turns from the pride of a creator to “breathless horror and disgust.”<sup>14</sup> He immediately rushes out of the room and hides in his bedchamber, only to be pursued by a “miserable monster” who

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<sup>10</sup> Shelley, I: 78-79.

<sup>11</sup> Shelley, I: 80.

<sup>12</sup> Shelley, I: 80.

<sup>13</sup> Shelley, I: 80-1.

<sup>14</sup> Shelley, I: 84.

grins, makes inarticulate sounds, and attempts to interact with his “creator.” Frankenstein flees the creature and eventually falls into a feverish sickness for several months. After waking again, some four months later, Frankenstein has no thought for the creature’s whereabouts or condition and only brings him to mind when, after his younger brother William is found dead, he glimpses in the dark Geneva night a figure whom he believes to be the creature and immediately suspects him of killing his brother. Victor’s immediate reaction is to regret his action and long for the death of the creature.

Here is where Nocks’s point is valid. Victor takes no responsibility. He does not even think about it until he is confronted by the creature, who demands that he “do your duty towards me” and “Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”<sup>15</sup> The creature demands that he be heard first of all, and this prompts a new thought: “For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator toward his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness.”<sup>16</sup>

The creature’s tale of hiding in the country outside of a cottage and (rather improbably) learning to read through listening to the DeLacey family inside, of learning what love and life is by observing them, and of attempting to gain sympathy by approaching the elderly father and then being driven out by the children is a moving one. What bothers the creature is that he does not know what he is: “And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly there are other problems for the creature. He looks different and has no money or title. But what echoes in all of his misery is the question of his origins and of his lack of relationship: “But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses.... What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans.”<sup>18</sup> The questions would be repeated later in his tale, becoming greater as he became educated (reading Plutarch’s *Lives*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*): “Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.”<sup>19</sup>

Like Adam, the creature had come forth from the hands of his creator, but

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<sup>15</sup> Shelley, II: 118-19.

<sup>16</sup> Shelley, II: 120.

<sup>17</sup> Shelley, II: 136.

<sup>18</sup> Shelley, II: 137.

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, II: 143.

unlike Adam he did not know his maker. He was fundamentally alone, and he did not know what he was for:

But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the sever situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone.<sup>20</sup>

So it is that the initial reception of the blind old man DeLacey is described as “rais[ing] me from the dust,” a welcome into human community that was quickly dashed by the other family members who come in and are surprised to see the odd giant with their father.<sup>21</sup>

So it is that the creature demands that Victor create another for him, a female of the species presumably, so that he can have someone like him. Victor hesitates, but after a long period of pursuit by the creature and the murder of his childhood friend Henry Clerval, begins work anew. Worried, however, that the creatures will be a terror to humanity, Victor stops, destroys his work and returns to Geneva to marry Elizabeth, the cousin who had come to be raised by his father in her childhood. The creature returns and carries out an act of fitting revenge, killing Elizabeth on their wedding night. The book ends with Victor pursuing the creature to destroy him and dying on board a ship. The creature boards the ship and looks sorrowfully over his creator, telling some of his tale to Robert Walton, the ship’s captain to whom Frankenstein had told his own story and his creature’s tale. The creature tells his tale of woe and tells Walton that he will go and destroy himself, “ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames.”<sup>22</sup>

#### The Children of IVF

It may seem offensive to compare the children of IVF to Frankenstein’s “monster.” But it might be helpful to ask the question of what he was like. The

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<sup>20</sup> Shelley, II: 143.

<sup>21</sup> Shelley, II: 148.

<sup>22</sup> Shelley, III: 305.

creature was meant to be beautiful by Victor but is perceived as horrific. Was he? Our evidence is somewhat limited, and the declarations by individuals of his monstrosity may just be because of his great size. We know that the creature is quick to learn and takes in Plutarch, Milton, and Goethe after learning to read (no Dick and Jane books here). Unlike the Boris Karloff-inspired pop image of the creature, he is agile, quick, strong, and capable of surviving on a much meaner diet and in a much colder climate than ordinary humans can. He is, in short, from one perspective, more well-made than most of us.

And yet, his problems come from his lack of relationship. Like those of the creature, the 2008 study “My Daddy’s Name is Donor” and subsequent studies done by “We Are Donor Conceived,” the results of creation outside of the normal means are, even for those in families with a mother and father, difficult.<sup>23</sup>

Subjectively, the 2019 report gives not only words like “relieved” but also “shocked,” “surprised,” “confused,” “devastated,” “deceived,” “angry,” “heartbroken,” and “like a science experiment.” Forty-eight percent of participants agreed with the statement “the method of my conception causes me to feel distressed, angry, or sad” while only 35% disagreed and 17% were neutral. The exchange of money in their conception particularly bothers many of them.<sup>24</sup> The 2008 report offers this comment in its executive summary:

We learned that, on average, young adults conceived through sperm donation are hurting more, are more confused, and feel more isolated from their families. They fare worse than their peers raised by biological parents on important outcomes such as depression, delinquency, and substance abuse. Nearly two-thirds agree, “My sperm donor is half of who I am.” Nearly half are disturbed that money was involved in their conception. More than half say that when they see someone who resembles them they wonder if they are related. Almost as many say they have feared being attracted to or having sexual relations with someone to whom they are unknowingly related. Approximately two-thirds affirm the right of donor offspring to know the truth about their origins. And about half of donor offspring have concerns about or serious objections to donor conception itself, even when parents tell their children the truth.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval D. Glenn, and Karen Clark, co-investigators, *My Daddy’s Name is Donor: A New Study of Young Adults Conceived Through Sperm Donation* (New York NY: Institute for American Values, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.wearedonorconceived.com/uncategorized/we-are-donor-conceived-2019-survey-results/>.

<sup>25</sup> Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark, pp. 5-6.



Those who were donor-conceived struggled with identity issues, but also with delinquency, depression, trouble with the law, and substance abuse. The problems do not seem to be simply solved by greater openness, but are merely ameliorated by them. Like Lisa Nocks's suggestion that it is merely a question of "responsibility," the suggestion that simply being more responsible does not seem to cut off the ill effects. In the 2008 study, those children whose parents had kept their origins a secret, thus allowing the children to discover the truth accidentally, were significantly more likely to report depression, substance abuse, and legal troubles than non-IVF children, those who had been raised by parents who were open about their origins still were more likely to report substance abuse issues (18 percent vs. 11 percent for children raised by their biological parents) and problems with the law (20 percent vs. 11 percent).<sup>26</sup>

What many of these children of IVF are haunted by is that they are merely what pro-choice people refer to as products of conception and thus not like others. And they are particularly bothered by the fact that, like the creature, they feel "wretched, helpless, and alone." This is true not just of those who were conceived by single mothers, but also those in families with mothers and fathers. Lynne Spencer, an adult who was donor-conceived, wrote a master's thesis on the experience. In it she reflected on her adult discovery that her parents, who were married, had relied on donated sperm. What bothered her was this question: "If my life is for other people's purposes, and not my own, then what is the purpose of my life?"<sup>27</sup> She describes the sensation of being "inanimate" and not existing "in part." Further, "I don't matter, who I am doesn't matter and needs to be repressed. It's only what I represent that matters...that I am someone's child, but I'm not a person in my own right."<sup>28</sup> According to the survey by Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark, 25 percent of donor-conceived children agree strongly that "I don't feel that anyone really understands me," while only 13 percent of adopted children and 9 percent of children being raised by their biological parents agree.<sup>29</sup> For those who have now been conceived using genetic material of three or more people, the feelings of being a science experiment or a product as well as the desire to

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<sup>26</sup> Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark, 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Lynne W. Spencer, *Sperm Donor Offspring: Identity and Other Experiences* (BookSurge Publishing, 2007), p. 2, cited in Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Spencer, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Marquardt, Glenn, and Clark, p. 39.

know both what and who they are will no doubt be even greater.

#### The Lessons

Robert Edwards's quest to show who was in charge has led to dramatic results. But it is not clear that this creator has shown that his new way of getting children, even if better and less obvious than that of Frankenstein, has created creatures any more grateful for his action or those of the donors who have helped his project along than those with ordinary fathers. The kind of sorrow, rage, depression, and violence we see in the brilliant, talented creature of *Frankenstein* is present in significant amounts in the lives of donor conceived adults much more than in those of adopted children and children in intact biological families. This is the case even though most of them are neither hideous physically nor driven from society in the way the creature was. Many of them are even living in families with a father and mother who love them. We can see from this a hint of the truth that simply using technology with loving motivations or intentions does not mean that the consequences will not be felt. Not all parts of life are socially constructed, and the desire to be brought into the world in a normal human way may not be something that can be excised, no matter how much a society lauds it. The fact that not all donor conceived children will have these consequences does not make it any the less urgent for those in public policy to think about the greater likelihoods of dysfunction. After all, we all know that not every smoker will get lung cancer, yet we do not thereby seek to put hedges around smoking and indeed to attempt to convince young people not to start as a society.

The greatest and most obvious lesson we can learn both from Mary Shelley's novel and from the lives of children created via IVF is that being the master of life in the sense of Frankenstein or being "in charge" in the sense of Edwards is much less important than giving life in the manner of an ordinary man who loves his wife and provides a home and support for his children.