

The Lord's Apprentice

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On a dark and stormy night in 1816, the fiery young poet Lord Byron proposed to friends gathered in his home—Dr. John Polidori, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Shelley's young wife, Mary—that each of them compose a frightening story to while away the evening.

Although Polidori later wrote *The Vampyre*, that night it was 21-year-old Mary who produced the most powerful, potent tale—*Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus*.

That novel, probably the first true work of science fiction ever written, introduced a concept at once exhilarating and terrifying: that with knowledge, man could usurp God's powers to create life. But it took a motion picture, 1931's *Frankenstein* starring Boris Karloff, to fix the image of Mary Shelley's monstrous, hapless artificial human being in our minds.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of that landmark film comes *The Ultimate Frankenstein*, a magnificent collection of variations on the theme from some of the most imaginative authors in SF—including Philip Jose Farmer, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Melanie Tem and Loren D. Estleman. Now, thrill to such memorable works as...

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In short, *The Ultimate Frankenstein* takes the classic myth into wondrous and fascinating new realms.

The Lord’s Apprentice

We all know the story of the sorcerer’s apprentice, the young man who was studying under the sorcerer and tried to use his master’s magic to save himself trouble—and then found that he could not control the magic. The original poem was by the German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It was transformed into a charming composition by the French composer Paul Dukas in 1897 and was finally adapted, even more charmingly, by Walt Disney, who animated Dukas’s piece in his *Fantasia*.

The tale is a humorous one, especially since the poor apprentice is rescued by the sorcerer in the end, and we can laugh at the misadventure; but there is something deeply frightening about it, too, for it may well be thought that humanity plays the role of the Lord’s apprentice.

We have learned a great deal about the Universe and can do things that to our ancestors would have seemed like magic. Surely a Crusading knight of the 12th century brought into our time without warning and confronted with jet planes, television, and computerized machinery would have sworn it was all sorcery, almost certainly evil sorcery, and would have crossed himself and commended his soul to God for safety.

We might almost imagine ourselves to have usurped the creative powers of God, or to have attempted to borrow them, in order to establish our own mastery of nature; and, like the sorcerer’s apprentice, we find we are smart enough to use those powers but not wise enough to control them. As we look about the world today, do we not see that our technology has run away with us and is slowly and inexorably destroying the environment and the habitability of the planet?

Perhaps the clearest example of how humanity might dream of usurping God's powers is in the creation of an artificial human being. In the Biblical account of the creation, the formation of humanity is the climax of the entire story. Can created humanity then go on to create a subsidiary humanity of its own? Would this not be the ultimate example of the overweening hubris of the Lord's apprentice, and would he not deserve to be punished for it?

Suppose we consider the matter.

A variety of words have been used for such artificial human beings. There are, for example, *automaton* (self-moving), *homunculus* (little human being), *android* (man-like), and *humanoid* (human-like). In 1921, the Czech writer, Karel Capek, in his play *R.U.R.* introduced the term „robot”—a Czech word meaning *slave*.

The two terms that still survive for artificial human beings are, overwhelmingly, „robot”, and, to some extent, „android”. In modern science fiction, the two terms are distinguished in this way: a robot is viewed as an artificial human being constructed of metal, while an android is viewed as one that is constructed of an organic substance that gives the appearance of flesh and blood.

Oddly enough, in *R.U.R.*, the play in which Capek coined the word „robot”, the artificial human beings were, in point of fact, androids.

Yet despite the uneasiness human beings feel at the creation of artificial human beings (old science fiction stories used to intone, „There are some things human beings were not meant to know”) the dream of such a creation is as old as literature.

In the *Iliad*, the Greek smith-god, Hephaistos, is described as having young women of gold who assist him at his work, who can move about and who have intelligence. Perfect robots.

Again, the island of Crete was supposed to have a bronze giant, Talos, who circled the island's shores ceaselessly in order to fight off approaching enemies. In this case, Talos was surely a metaphor for the Cretan navy (the first that the world ever saw) whose bronze-armed warriors protected the island against invaders.

Such mythical robots were divine creations and could be used safely by the gods themselves or by human beings under the direction of the gods.

The time came, though, when human beings were pictured as the creators of pseudo-human life.

In Jewish legends, there is the case of robots called „golems” (from Hebrew words meaning „unformed masses” in the sense that they were not formed with the precision one would expect of God). Golems were made of clay and gained a kind of life by the use of the Holy Name of God. The most famous golem was supposed to have been formed in the 1500s by Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague. As is to be expected, it grew dangerous and had to be destroyed.

But the golem, too, is a pseudo-divine creation, dangerous enough but not entirely man-made. However, a secular science was slowly growing and there were rumors of medieval alchemists who tried to create life without the help of the divine at all. The most famous case was that of Albertus Magnus in the 1200s. Naturally, despite rumors, they didn't succeed.

The turning point came in 1771. In that year, the Italian anatomist Luigi Galvani was working with frog muscles, taken out of frogs' thighs and which were, presumably, dead. He found that an electric spark could make those dead muscles

twitch as though they were alive. (We still speak of something being „galvanized” when it is suddenly roused to action from a state of torpor.)

Electricity was still a new force, with properties that were largely unknown, and it was easy to believe that here at last was the very essence of life. It began to seem conceivable that a corpse, with the proper infusion of electricity, could be made to live again.

Research into electricity was (excuse me) galvanized, and in 1800 the Italian physicist Alessandro Volta produced the first chemical battery—the first device that could give a dependable electric current, rather than merely occasional sparks. The conceivable creation of life came closer than ever.

The poet, George Gordon (Lord Byron) was interested in the science news of the day and was well aware of the existence of the phenomenon of galvanism. One of his best friends was another great lyric poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the two together were spending time in Switzerland, in 1816, along with some others. Accompanying them also was Shelley’s young mistress, who had just married him after the death (by suicide) of Shelley’s first wife.

His wife was Mary Wollstonecraft, whose mother and namesake was a famous feminist, and whose father was William Godwin, a philosopher and novelist. Mary Shelley, as she is now best known, was 19 years old at the time.

In the course of the conversation one night, Byron suggested that each of them write a kind of ghost story, presumably making use of „modern science” for the purpose. What he was suggesting was that they write what we would today call a „science fiction story.”

The proposal came to nothing—except for Mary Shelley. Inspired by the possibility of the electrical creation of life, she wrote *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, which was published in 1818, when she was 21 years old.

Notice the significance of the title. In the Greek myths, it is not the Olympian gods who create human beings, but rather Prometheus („forethought”—a personification of intelligence), a Titan of an older generation of gods, who did so. Not only did Prometheus form human beings out of clay (as God did in the book of Genesis—since in those old myth-making days, clay was the universal material for the making of pottery and the gods were divine potters) but he brought humanity fire from the Sun, thus making technology possible.

The hero of *Frankenstein* was the Swiss scientist, Frankenstein, who aspired to be a new Prometheus in that he would create a new kind of living being, by galvanizing dead tissue. He did this, but the results were so horrifying to him that he abandoned the created being, referred to only as „the Monster,” and left him to his fate.

The Monster, indignant at this callous treatment, killed everyone in Frankenstein’s family including Frankenstein and, at the end of the story was making his way off to the mysterious Arctic.

Notice the „sorcerer’s apprentice” aspect of the story. Frankenstein could create life, but he couldn’t control his creation. While one can’t be sure what was in Mary Shelley’s mind, there might also be a comparison with the original creation. God created humanity but surely he has lost control of his creation, for humanity sins incessantly. It may even seem that God has abandoned his creation in disgust and left us to our own devices.

The important thing about *Frankenstein* is that it is the first tale in which life was created without any divine intervention, but purely by material means. Because of this some critics have called it the first science fiction novel.

It is important to remember that the novel was written by a 21-year-old woman, immersed in the conventions of the romantic era of literature. It is florid and rhetorical and contains endless descriptions of her travels. Despite all this, it has remained popular ever since it was written.

There is no question, though, that to most people it is popular because of the motion picture that was made out of it in 1931. I myself saw the film decades before I read the book, and I was astonished at the differences between the two.

In the movie, a criminal brain is put into the body, something which is not in the book and which, if it had been left out of the picture, would have done it no harm.

In the book, the Monster is a cultivated and intelligent being, quite capable of speaking with the full romanticism of any other character in the book. In the movie, the Monster is capable only of grunts. Furthermore, in the movie, although Frankenstein was originally killed as in the book, the movie-makers chickened out and revised it before release, tacking on a happy ending—for Frankenstein at least.

As for the Monster, instead of its escaping to the Arctic at the end, it is killed in the picture, though it was later brought back to life in a number of sequels of which only *The Bride of Frankenstein* had value.

Despite the infelicities of the picture, *Frankenstein* remains the most successful horror picture of all time, rivalled only by *King Kong*, which was made in 1933.

The success of *Frankenstein* came as a triumph of the makeup artist, for Boris Karloff, who played the role and achieved instant and life-long stardom as a result, was a frightening Monster without being utterly grotesque or revolting. In fact, Karloff played the Monster so skillfully that it was impossible not to be sympathetic towards him. He clearly meant well and it was only out of ignorance of the world that he killed a little girl. He thought she would float on water as the flowers did.

In this, the movie followed the book, for in the book, the Monster was entirely innocent to begin with. Brought to life through Frankenstein's action, the Monster was cruelly abandoned entirely because of his peculiar appearance—which was not his fault. Indeed, the Monster is so miserably treated in the book, that one can't help feel that the slaying of Frankenstein is justified. (Again, one can't help but wonder if, in Mary Shelley's mind—and remember she was brought up by a father who was a rationalist philosopher, ungiven to unthinking pieties—there is the thought that God has been treating humanity miserably all through history and that he has added insult to injury, if his human followers are to be believed, by placing all the blame on the victim while holding himself entirely guiltless.)

It is interesting that in *King Kong* the monster is also presented sympathetically. In fact, so sympathetic is he that in the final, never-to-be-forgotten scene where he fights the airplanes from his perch on top of the Empire State Building, and succeeds in snatching one, killing an American pilot in the process, the audience *cheers*. This was supposed to have caught the movie-makers entirely by surprise

and forced them to cut out a few scenes in which King Kong was shown in an unsympathetic light.

It is not to be supposed that the ivory skulls of movie-makers saw the significance of making millions out of “villains” that are presented three-dimensionally and with a certain sympathy. Incredible numbers of films have since been made in which the pictures of good and evil are presented in such stark and unrelieved contrast that no one over the mental age of twelve can find any enjoyment in them. That, however, is to be expected.

Please read *The Ultimate Frankenstein*, then, as an allegory, and ponder on its significance to human history, on how it affects humanity’s situation right now, on whether indeed „there are some things humanity was not meant to know”; whether there is some way of working our way out of the unfortunate position of the Lord’s apprentice; whether having achieved the cleverness to develop our technology, we can also achieve the wisdom required to make the proper use of it.

