

## Deconstructing a Life of Byron

by Riley Lund

Mary Shelley originally wrote *Frankenstein* as a response to the challenge of who could write the best horror story. The man who issued this challenge was named George Gordon, better known by his title and penname Lord Byron, with whom Mary and her husband were good friends. Byron was made famous for his poetry, which was heavily drenched in the literary ideals and atmosphere of the time. He was simultaneously infamous for the amount of drama his personal life produced, which in turn was encapsulated in his writings through the type of character who starred in many of his works: the Byronic hero. A definite product of the Romantic period, Byronic heroes were essentially the then-defining personification of the term “mad, bad, and dangerous to know”; not unlike the man who first wrote about them. According to [Tvtropes.org](http://Tvtropes.org), Byronic heroes were defined through the extreme amount of passion that fueled their lives, casting themselves as victimized outcasts of a society that sees such individuals as deviants from the traditional order (“Byronic Hero”). They were magnetic, cunning, brooding, jaded, and, above all else, unwavering in their convictions, regardless of how violently their personal codes clashed with the morality of greater society. However, these same qualities could just as well drive such characters to commit horrible acts in the name of their own goals while still carrying the pretense of being a “heroic” character. Perhaps as a result of knowing the real Byron personally, and thus getting a front row seat to the kinds of things that resulted from such a lifestyle, Mary Shelly was likely influenced by this viewpoint to criticize the less savory aspects of being a Byronic hero in her writing—even if only subconsciously—without setting herself up for conflict with her decidedly like-minded companions. This can be best seen in the character of Victor Frankenstein, who, rather than exemplifying the archetype as a thing of admiration, demonstrates why being considered “Byronic” might just be only a stone’s throw away from borderline villainy.

To begin, Victor was raised in a good home with parents who loved him and supported him throughout his life. He was given practically whatever he asked for due to his father being a wealthy man, and in general experienced very little hardship in his youth due to the safe, stable environment he was brought up in, freely admitting, “no youth could have passed more happily than mine” (Shelly 21). This contrasts sharply with his creation, who grew up alone in the wilderness without any semblance of warmth or companionship. The creature had to learn everything on his own, from how to collect food to building fires to learning how to speak. Even when he could effectively communicate with other people, he was still violently rejected by others solely due to his looks, which only fueled the creature’s hatred of the world and his drive to exact revenge on the man responsible for his creation, directly saying to his creator, “I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (68). Basically, while the creature has a solid justification for his actions, Victor has absolutely no excuse for what he would grow up to be: a spoiled brat who couldn’t comprehend the idea of bad things happening to him as a result of his actions.

From an early age, Victor was influenced by the workings of the ancient alchemists, believing that matter could be transmuted in any way a person sees fit, effectively allowing humans to command the material world as gods—a downright blasphemous claim in society at the time. While the majority of the old philosophers’ teachings were soon replaced by modern sciences at the university, Victor never let go of the idea of playing the role of a god, believing that somehow he could defy the natural order by breathing life into an inanimate being through his own scientific abilities—“A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelly 33). Ignoring the sheer amount of flagrant abuses against the pre-existing churches that existed at the time, this would require him to break the rule of nature stating that only a living thing can give birth to another living thing. Victor would do this by stealing dozens of human corpses—a capital offense in that day and age—for the means of sewing together different parts of those to form his ideal creature, believing that “a churchyard was to [him] a receptacle of bodies deprived of life” (31). This was

all accomplished by isolating himself from other human beings, which no doubt strengthened his delusions of grandeur in the absence of others to reign him in before his ambitions could lead to his undoing.

Where things start to really fall through for Victor is whenever he is faced with the prospect of consequences. Beginning with his obsession with the idea of creating life, Victor never once stopped to think about the ramifications of his experiments. In his pursuit towards achieving something considered to be something many believed only the divine should have any authority over, Victor somehow completely neglected to imagine what would happen in the event that his experiment was successful, apparently believing that the end results justified the means. As the story showcased, this results in Victor being completely disgusted with what he had created, which led to his abandonment of the creation to a cold, harsh world. This would directly lead to the creature being shunned and hated wherever it went because of its looks and perceived monstrosity, which in turn resulted in the creature embracing the role others gave to him. Victor's rejection of the creature would come back to haunt him in the form of his little brother William's murder, which would also lead to the death of the family maid Justine via prosecution and execution. Furthermore, despite knowing for sure the real culprit behind his brother's murder, Victor never once tells anyone the truth, choosing instead to just stand by helplessly as an innocent is killed senselessly while he mopes about a situation he could dissolve with relative ease. The only time Victor seems to understand the consequences of his actions is when he believes that creating a mate for the creature would result in the two having offspring; however, it still doesn't justify the fact that he blatantly disposed of the female creature without realizing that he would face the original creature's wrath as a result. (And thus risk the lives of his loved ones further)

Throughout the entire story, Victor never once truly acts to help anyone other than himself, starting with him essentially abandoning his family just as his own mother died so that he could attend university that year. Although his family obviously cares for him, the few times he takes

his blood kin into consideration is when something horrible happens to them, and even that tends to result in him leaving them yet again so that he may alleviate “his” pain, such as when he voices the belief that “none ever conceived of the misery [he] endured”, or when he travels to the Alps immediately after Justine’s execution (60). Victor never once viewed his creation as an equal, instead repeatedly demonizing it to the point that the creature is equated in Victor’s mind with pure evil itself—all too quick to outright ignore the creature’s plight while reinforcing his own suffering. And when it came time for the creature to exact its final revenge of Victor, he automatically assumes that the creature will come gunning for him rather than, say, his newly-wedded wife, which he might have prevented had he took a minute to consider that the creature always attacked Victor through his loved ones and saw no reason to quit doing so. In short, Victor never takes responsibility for his actions, believing that everything that went wrong after his creation’s birth was all due to the actions of the creature rather than himself; never mind that it was his abandonment of his creation that led to every proceeding horrible event as a result.

Everything that happened throughout the novel can be traced back to Victor’s actions in some way, making practically every horrible thing that happens to him largely self-inflicted. He gave life to a creature that he immediately abandoned because he considered it a monster, refusing to take responsibility for what he created because it failed to live up to his own unobtainable ideals. As a result, the creature would live a miserable life devoid of love or companionship, spurring it to take out its hatred on Victor’s friends and family. Although Victor is given several opportunities throughout the story to make amends and end the nightmare before it gets any worse, he continually rejects the notion that he is to blame for everyone’s suffering, which results in even more misery falling on him and his family in a never-ending cycle that only ends when Victor finally dies. Only then does the creature end his crusade, proving that it was indeed Victor who, despite being the novel’s “hero”, was the source of the novel’s drama—none of it being the good kind.

Although this analysis is hardly the only interpretation to be brought out of *Frankenstein*, the actions Victor takes throughout the book and Mary Shelly's own personal experience with Lord Byron can hardly be considered coincidental after putting two and two together. The amount of drama surrounding the original Byronic hero and his historical aversion to dealing with the aftermath of his actions—such as the callous treatment of his mistresses and children sired through them, as was the case with Mary Shelly's own step-sister—provides an uncanny mirror with the character of Victor, who likewise demonstrates exactly how the same qualities that made him relatable to the intellectuals of the Romantic era can also be the source of how everything turned out for him. In that sense, it can be said that a Byronic hero is ultimately a self-fulfilling trope: a refusal to admit being wrong even when all evidence declares otherwise and the determination to right those wrongs solely on the hero's own terms, trapping him in a self-destructive cycle that only ends when his passion—and life—leave nothing left save for a beautiful corpse.

Works Cited

"Byronic Hero." *TvTropes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Mar. 2015.

<<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ByronicHero>>.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton and, Inc, 2012.

Print. Norton Critical Editions.