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From Prometheus to Zombies: The Cultural Phenomenon of the Living Dead

Katie Kooiman

Mary Shelley's famous Gothic novel *Frankenstein* is also known by its longer title of *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*.¹ As the extended title suggests, Shelley's inspiration for the novel came from the story of Prometheus in Greek mythology. According to the myth, Prometheus is the god of fire and is known as a master craftsman because of his connection to fire and to the creation of mortals.² The legend of Prometheus developed throughout the Greek writings of Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Ovid. However, their interpretations of the Prometheus myth have been combined and changed through history—in the writings of Shaftsbury in the eighteenth century, by Byron in his play *Prometheus*, and in the poem by Mary Shelley's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, titled *Prometheus Unbound*.³

Although these other writers were influential in Shelley's formation of *The Modern Prometheus*, they all differ from the Creature found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in that they do not show the fragmenting and devastating effects that language can have in the life of a newly created being. The Creature within Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is vulnerable not only because he is experiencing life for the first time alone, but also because he finds himself to be the "Other" within a society that quickly rejects him based on his appearances and language. Throughout the novel, *Frankenstein* does not use language to love and guide his Creation; rather, *Frankenstein* uses a limited amount of hurtful language to reject his Creature. *Frankenstein's* absence in Creature's life as his maker is reflected in Creature's lack of knowledge in language or even symbols. The negative and fragmented influence of language within Creature's life is what causes him to never see the meaning of his life.

Despite the differences in Shelley's *Frankenstein* in comparison to the other forms of the Prometheus myth, it is important for readers of *Frankenstein* to know the elements of the original story to observe how the Greek myth has changed based on culture. Within the play *Prometheus Bound* by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus, one finds a representation of Prometheus that would have been close to the way that the ancient Greeks

viewed this myth. As “one of the greatest tragic playwrights of his generation,” Aeschylus is known as the “Father of Greek Tragedy” as he was writing before both Sophocles and Euripides.⁴ Aeschylus, with his strong influence on Greek drama and tragedy, brought his own interpretation to his *Prometheus Bound*, as he rejected traditional Greek religion and showed Zeus as a tyrant. Conversely, in Hesiod’s poem about Prometheus, Zeus is written as a “god of justice.”⁵

There are many ways that characters within the Prometheus myth have been portrayed, however in Aeschylus’ influential tragedy, Prometheus’ tragic flaw is his love of humanity. Prometheus steals fire from Zeus because of this love, but Zeus punishes him by commanding him to be chained and have his liver plucked by an eagle every night.⁶ Even though Prometheus’ fate is tragic, he is shown to suffer on behalf of his creation. Already in this beginning scene, Aeschylus’ Prometheus is different from Mary Shelley’s Prometheus because in Mary Shelley’s narrative, Frankenstein does not love his creation. Instead of helping his Creature, Frankenstein is at once ashamed of what he has done; in fact, he is filled with “breathless horror and disgust.”⁷ Ironically, Frankenstein feels the most guilt about himself as he sees reflections of his own imperfection in his Creature.

Additionally, the Greek tragedy portrays a different version of the gods in *Prometheus Bound* because in both Zeus and Prometheus the reader sees a higher being who is actively involved in the lives of humanity, though that engagement is often displayed through anger. Nonetheless, Shelley displays a different view of Creator and God in that Frankenstein leaves his own Creation. Creature is left on his own as the “Other” in society without anyone to care for him because Frankenstein has rejected him. Shelley’s detached Creator demonstrates both a verbal and physical absence in his Creature’s life—an indication of her culture’s impact on the Prometheus myth. Shelley’s text is written in an era in which the idea of a God-guided Creation ceded to a widespread belief in the power of scientific progress.

Responding to Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Percy Shelley wrote his four-act poem, *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* starts similarly to *Prometheus Bound* in that Prometheus is chained to the Caucasus Mountain. However, as the title suggests, Percy Shelley’s poem differs

from Aeschylus' play in that it describes Prometheus' journey to freedom rather than bondage. What is important in this study of Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is the way that he incorporates science into this Greek myth. As shown in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the modern society rejected the traditional beliefs of faith as truth. Instead, science and objectivity were idealized because they could be proven. The influence of science is shown in *Prometheus Unbound* in that Percy Shelley "associated electricity with love, light, and life."⁸ Both Mary and Percy Shelley viewed electricity as something that is life-bringing, a view that could be linked to the scientific discoveries during the time when they were writing. Yet, Mary Shelley does not explain how Frankenstein brings his Creature to life; in referencing the creation of life she writes, "I see by your eagerness and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be; listen patiently until the end of the story, and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject."⁹ Although Mary Shelley's narrator does not share how life is formed from death, readers suspect that Mary Shelley's inspiration came from the scientific discoveries of her time.

According to Cartwright and Baker, a scientist named Giovanni Aldini "created a sensation when he showed that the limbs of all manner of dead animals jolted when electrified."¹⁰ In addition, there was another account from one of Aldini's experiments that describe the movements of a dead corpse: "the jaw began to quiver...and the left eye actually opened."¹¹ Throughout both of their writings based on *Prometheus*, Mary and Percy Shelley show life that is caused and created by science rather than a divine God. After Mary and Percy developed the idea of the living dead within their stories, many other aspects of culture such as film and television shows expanded on this idea of a deformed monster or "Other" living within society.

In postmodern society, the idea of the living dead is represented most predominantly in popular culture through depiction of zombies. Even though representations of vampires have also had a great amount of influence in popular culture over the past fifty years, the images of the zombies are more meaningful because they represent "what it means to be a human in a postmodern world."¹² Because of the rejection of objectivity of truth by the postmodern movement, people are invited to view all

of life as a carnival; individuals can “play” the daily game of reinventing themselves. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism is related to the postmodern cultural phenomenon of zombies because as “parodies of human beings, zombies reveal the most base and terrifying aspects of humanity, yet they also expose the human body as ridiculous and absurd.”¹³ People within postmodern culture identify with the way that the zombie presents the human body because, like the carnivalesque view of life as a carnival, the absurdity of the zombies justifies humanity’s continual reinvention of the self.

As a reflection of the obsession with zombies and the living dead, many television shows about these monsters have developed and gained popularity. One of these television shows is called *The Walking Dead*. This American television series, created in 2010, follows the life of the lead character named Rick Grimes. Rick awakens from many months of being in a coma to find that he is in a post-apocalyptic world that has been overtaken by zombies. Although Rick’s main battle in this television series is to protect himself and his family from the zombies, he also seeks shelter from the dangerous humans throughout the show as well. The popularity of *The Walking Dead* reveals society’s fascination with zombies. However, the creator of the show, Robert Kirkman, states that it is “about us” and “about how we respond to crisis.”¹⁴ Viewers of *The Walking Dead* may be attracted to the ways that people in a post-apocalyptic world might respond to crises and learn how to rebuild society after the removal of all social structures

While all structure is taken away in post-apocalyptic worlds like that of *The Walking Dead*, the characters are left begging for the existence of a God who can bring order to the disorder of the world. In a similar way, Creature’s greatest desire is that his master, Frankenstein, would accept him and bring order into his meaningless life. Frankenstein’s search to understand the meaning of life is represented in his search for meaning within language. However, the language that Creature learns does not bring him acceptance. Rather, through language, Creature learns why he is rejected by humanity, an insight that leads him to reject the meaning of life.

Borrowing inspiration from the Greek mythology of Prometheus, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* began the cultural phenomenon of the living

dead. The idea of the living dead is found within zombies, but it is also found in any person or being that finds itself to be the outside or “Other” within a society. Although the myth of Prometheus influenced Mary Shelley’s story about Frankenstein’s creation, her monster of Creature is unique in that he is shaped by his language as well as Frankenstein’s lack of accepting language. Throughout *Frankenstein*, people do not accept Creature because they are frightened by his appearance—not because he acts in the way of a monster. Rather than being afraid of Creature, the characters within the story should be afraid of Frankenstein because Creature is only a reflection of his fallen creator. However, it is for this reason that Frankenstein cannot accept Creature; he sees the “Other” that he has rejected within himself. The way that humans learn to accept the “Other” within society is by facing their own brokenness first and discovering that all people—the living dead included—continue to reach towards a creator who will save them.

Notes

1. M.K. Joseph, "Introduction" in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (Oxford World Classics, 2008), 4.
2. Mark Cartwright, "Prometheus," Ancient History Encyclopedia, April 20, 2013, <https://www.ancient.eu/Prometheus/>.
3. M.K. Joseph, "Introduction" in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (Oxford World Classics, 2008).
4. Donald L. Wasson, "Prometheus Bound," Ancient History Encyclopedia, February 2, 2018, https://www.ancient.eu/Prometheus_Bound/.
5. Ibid.
6. Donald L. Wasson, "Prometheus Bound," Ancient History Encyclopedia, February 2, 2018, https://www.ancient.eu/Prometheus_Bound/.
7. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (1818 Edition)* (Millennium Publication, 2014), 45.
8. John H. Cartwright and Brian Baker, "The Response to Science in Romantic Literature 1790-1840," in *Literature and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*, edited by Mark A. Largent (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 141.
9. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (1818 Edition)* (Millennium Publication, 2014), 45.
10. John H. Cartwright and Brian Baker, "The Response to Science in Romantic Literature 1790-1840," in *Literature and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*, edited by Mark A. Largent (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 144.
11. Ibid., 144.
12. Jasie Stokes, "Ghouls, Hell and Transcendence: The Zombie in Popular Culture from "Night of the Living Dead" to "Shaun of the Dead,"" *All Theses and Dissertations*, 2010, 3.
13. Ibid., 26.
14. Michael J. Totten, "The Walking Dead in an Age of Anxiety," City Journal, December 23, 2015, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/walking-dead-age-anxiety-13688.html>.

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