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The Children’s Monster

(INTRO)

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* sent shockwaves through nineteenth century society with the horror of her story. In the 200 years since, stage and film adaptations have pushed the limits of each generation’s tolerance for terrifying images. In addition to appearing in increasingly terrifying movies produced by Universal Pictures and Hammer Studios, the Frankenstein creature has also undergone a metamorphosis from monstrous threat to beloved playmate of even the littlest children. Moving from true horror in film to comic books for teenagers and cartoons for toddlers, Frankenstein is a beloved character who now inhabits a land of imagination filled with monster friends. The domain of monsters is a gothic realm, where horror, mystery, violence, or gore may appear at any moment. Critics have contended that gothic elements are detrimental to a child’s mental and emotional development. I refute that idea, with the notion that gothic, scary images are part of a child’s everyday life. Little children live in a world of human giants, where every shadow could be a monster and every nighttime noise might be a ghost. Everything is real to children. Embracing child-appropriate gothic elements in literature and film allows children to confront challenging fears and experience a cathartic release of tension. Monsters also represent a world where everyday rules like “don’t eat bugs” and “wipe your nose” are

ignored. Monsters get to be gross, and children love a good revolting mess. Accepting the gothic elements in children's entertainment is a healthy and enjoyable secret of childhood.

(A major section)

The softening of the Frankenstein monster from the terrifying horror presented in Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* begins with comic books during the early 1940s. Movie censors forbade horror films because they feared it was bad for national morale during World War II. Comic books satisfied the "appetite for horror" (Murray 221), while escaping the notice of the censors. Frankenstein may have been the first horror story in American comics (Murray 220). In 1945, Dick Briefer's Frankenstein monster first made the shift from frightful to funny by giving the creature a button nose placed above eye-height, suggesting deformity without inspiring revulsion. The monster had a "flat head (like Karloff) and an enormous frame and dressed in [child-friendly colors:] blue trousers, a bright yellow top and a huge red jacket (Murray 25).

Funny versions of the monster appeared with increasing frequency; *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* created a 1948 box office smash with their slapstick treatment of the horror film genre. Lou Costello's childlike physical comedy as he accidentally sits on the monster's lap is a hilarious moment that creates an opening for children to imagine themselves interacting with the Frankenstein creature. This adaptation introduced many to the horror film genre; softening the frightfulness with humor expanded the audience to include children as well as adults. Funny versions of the character proliferated: *The Munsters* TV series (1964-66) featured a Karloff-inspired Dad in a family of monsters, and *The Addams Family's* (1964-66) character Lurch is an inarticulate, less terrifying version of Frankenstein. The stop-motion animation feature, *Mad Monster Party?* (1967), is a colorful gathering of dozens of movie monsters including

Frankenstein, Dracula, and King Kong, among others. These more child-friendly versions of the Karloff-style creature paved the way for commercialization of the Frankenstein image in “everything from breakfast cereal to action figures” (Horton 101). In 1971 Frankenberry and Count Chocula cereals first appeared and were devoured by monster-loving children. With all ages enthralled by the monster, Frankenstein’s place in the cultural fabric is not only secure, it thrives.

Young children’s fascination with the myth of Frankenstein led to a marketing bonanza for toy companies that continues today. With the acceptance of the Karloff-inspired creature, many other monsters soon joined the childhood sphere. Public television introduced the preschool educational program *Sesame Street*, which introduced warm and fuzzy monsters who lived peacefully alongside adults, animals, and children. Cartoons featuring monster characters still proliferate, with the newest, *Super Monsters*, appearing on Netflix in 2017. Targeting preschoolers, *Super Monsters* features the children of the world’s most famous monsters. The young monsters just want to master their special powers before they go to kindergarten ([www.deadline.com](http://www.deadline.com)).

#### (Conclusion)

Gothic horror operates on many levels of fearsomeness. Adult horror films and literatures will differ from those suitable for young children. Elements of gothic horror have always existed in children’s entertainment, because frightening us also excite us. Overcoming terrors teaches us to cope with strong feelings. Experiencing fright within the pages of a book, or while watching a film, allows the child to experience fear in a safe way. Beyond coping mechanisms, embracing monster characters allows children to domesticate their own inner monsters; they can celebrate

the weirdness of childhood and revel in the grossness of bodies, bugs, and goo. The atrocity of a reanimated dead body, be it man or pet, delights rather than revolts. The gothic parts of our psyche find acceptable expression through literature and films. Children are small gothic creatures. Frankenstein is an outlet for the darkness within to be recognized and accepted.

#### Works Cited

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