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# The Gothic and The Gross

## *Frankenstein and His Friend's Attractiveness to Children*

Rebecca McKee

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* sent shockwaves through nineteenth century society with the horror contained in her novel. In the two hundred years since its publication, 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 children and toddlers, Frankenstein is now a beloved character inhabiting a land of imagination populated with monster friends. The domain of monsters is a gothic realm, where horror, mystery, violence, ghosts, and 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 where adults look like giants, where every shadow could be a monster, and where every nighttime noise could be a ghost. Everything is real to children. Embracing child-appropriate gothic elements in literature and film

allows children to confront challenging fears, enabling a cathartic release of tension. Monsters also represent a world where everyday rules like “don’t make a mess” 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, including Frankenstein’s monster and other gothic characters, is a healthy and enjoyable secret of childhood.

The softening of the Frankenstein monster from the vengeful murderer of Mary Shelley’s novel and the terror represented in James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein* begins with comic books during the early 1940s. Movie censors forbade horror films because they feared terrifying images were bad for national morale during World War II. Comic books satisfied the “appetite for horror” while escaping the notice of the censors (Murray 221). *Frankenstein* may have been the first horror story in American comics (Murray 220). In 1945, comic book artist Dick Briefer first makes the shift from frightful to funny by giving his Frankenstein monster a button nose placed above eye-height, suggesting deformity without inspiring revulsion. Similar to the makeup worn by Boris Karloff, the first actor to portray Frankenstein in modern film, the monster had a “flat head and an enormous frame [but] dressed in [child-friendly colors:] blue trousers, a bright yellow top and a huge red jacket” (Murray 25). The comic book Frankenstein character bridges the chasm between the abject horror that Mary Shelly imagines and the child’s imaginary monster friend who inspires laughter and courage.

Funny versions of the monster appeared with increasing frequency. For example, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* created a 1948 box office smash with its slapstick treatment of the horror film genre. Lou Costello displays childlike physical comedy when he accidentally sits on the monster’s lap, creating a hilarious scene that allows children to imagine themselves interacting with the Frankenstein creature. This adaptation introduced many people to the horror film genre. Using humor to soften the terror expanded the audience to include children as well as adults. Other funny versions of the character proliferated, feeding audience appetite for Frankenstein through television and animated film. *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 yet 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. These more child-friendly versions

of the Karloff-style creature paved the way for the commercialization of the Frankenstein image in “everything from breakfast cereal to action figures” (Horton 101). Frankenberry and Count Chocula cereals first appeared in 1971 and were devoured by monster-loving children. With all ages enthralled by the monster, Frankenstein’s place in society’s cultural fabric is more than secure—it is thriving.

With the acceptance of the Karloff-inspired creature, many other monsters soon joined the childhood sphere. Public television launched the preschool educational program *Sesame Street*, which introduced warm and fuzzy monsters who lived peacefully alongside adults, animals, and children. Animated cartoons used imaginative artwork to create both friendly and adversarial monsters in numerous children’s programs such as *Monster in My Pocket*, *Groovie Goolies*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Where Are You?*, and *Beetlejuice*. Cartoons featuring monster characters are still popular, with the newest, *Super Monsters*, appearing in 2017. With preschoolers as its target audience, *Super Monsters* features the children of some of the adult creatures who have previously captivated the world. These young monsters just want to master their special powers before they go to kindergarten—a goal every preschool child can appreciate (Petski). Gothic creatures populate the imaginary world of children, allowing growth in a safe way that mere reality may not provide.

While the realms of imagination do produce learning experiences, the education of real children concerns parents, teachers, and governments. Society’s best interests are served when children are taught to function in the real world as responsible and well-intentioned individuals. Some people are concerned that gothic elements in childhood play are harmful, leading to adverse outcomes for children and society as a whole. During the eighteenth century, Enlightenment theories on child-rearing discouraged imaginative play, instead promoting ideas of industry and piety for children. Enlightenment era authors such as Mary Woolstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Maria Edgeworth were inspired to write literature for children that expunged the gothic ideas of ghosts and terror (Jackson 1). Focused on educating and improving children, Woolstonecraft offered her book *Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* as a guide. Children were expected to favor instructive narrative over the “pleasures of a good shiver” (Jackson 2). Anna Barbauld wrote prolifically for children, but *Hymns in Prose for Children*, written in 1781, is her best-known work today. She states, “The

peculiar design of this publication is, to impress devotional feelings as early as possible on the infant mind" (Barbauld v). Barbauld's work seeks to turn children away from frivolous tales and toward religious devotion. Maria Edgeworth works in the same vein with her 1796 book, *The Parent's Assistant*, prefacing her work with "care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination" (Edgeworth 9). All of life is enhanced by imagination, yet eighteenth century authors deliberately sought to suppress creative invention in their audience. These authors worked to instill the Enlightenment ideals of self-improvement and industry in children's literature. Yet some of them, including Woolstonecraft, wrote gothic elements into stories for their adult audiences (Townshend 22). The notion that adults may enjoy gothic stories but children should not stems from the thinking of the eighteenth century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He put forward the idea that "nature wants children to be children before being men. Childhood has its way of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it." Writers of the Enlightenment era strove to guide a child's "proper thinking" by eliminating fright and imagination from childhood; their books were instruction tomes lacking laughter and delight. Far from promoting a child's "way of seeing," Woolstonecraft, Barbauld, and Edgeworth addressed miniature adults rather than children experiencing the feelings "proper to [childhood]" (Townshend 24).

Childhood's "proper seeing, thinking, and feeling," as Rousseau calls them, will also include natural fears such as abandonment, injury, loneliness, and death. Human fears inhabit the minds of children just as they do adults. Gothic mystery and minor horror are appropriate in children's literature and authors who avoid spookiness may overlook the reality of a child's inner life. Observing children's play is very instructive; natural human instinct is fully evident as children navigate real and imaginary worlds. Innocent games with dolls will sometimes include a funeral. A dark room becomes the lair of a ghost or monster. Shivery feelings of fear and mystery are part of the fun. The assurance of safety allows for increased optimism and confidence. Removing gothic influences from children's literature and play hinders the child's ability to achieve the release of tension that comes from experiencing fear and concluding the fright in safety. Oftentimes the excess emotion of terror is vented through laughter. Humor does the work of making monsters less frightening. Just as Harry Potter's teacher Professor Remus Lupin instructs Hogwarts students to repel frightening boggarts by dressing those

inhuman shapeshifters in funny hats (Rowling 135), adding humor to the fright allows children to laugh at fears, strengthening their ability to cope with future stresses.

When children face challenging feelings, such as fright, their coping mechanisms for scary situations are enhanced by confronting similar problems in the imaginary world. Gothic creatures, reimagined for an audience of children, allow for make-believe situations that youngsters can confront and overcome. Issues that plague little children include learning self-control, polite manners, and socially acceptable habits. The friendly monsters of the *Sesame Street* gang deal with some of the same issues that plague children. Cookie Monster has a voracious appetite, especially for cookies. His often uncontrollable urges to eat every cookie in sight is funny to a child because it's incongruous to see a big, blue, furry monster craving the same treats that mommy just baked. An appetite for sweets can feel overwhelming to a child; learning to control that desire is a true challenge for children (and for many adults, too). Cookie Monster's colleague, Oscar the Grouch, represents another childhood challenge. Oscar is always grouchy and rude. Children struggle to conform to the norms of good manners, especially when their emotions manifest as grumpiness. Exaggerating rudeness and treating it with humor allows children to forgive themselves and others for grouchy moments. Cookie Monster and Oscar the Grouch share another charm in the eyes of children—they are unapologetically messy. Cookie Monster's uncontrolled binges result in crumbs flying everywhere, peppering his blue fur with cookie dust. Oscar treasures trash, hoarding his mess in the garbage can he calls home. The parallels to a child's mess-making ability are clear. Kids love a good mess; they'll happily make and live in chaos if their parents allow it. Two benefits of embracing monsters in childhood play include accepting children's imperfect behavior and permitting their enjoyment of gross foods. Allowing tastes and behaviors to differ from societal norms eases the pressure on children to conform.

Creators of children's entertainment are aware of the appetite for grossness; it receives a lot of attention in books and toys. A friendly and happily gross version of Mary Shelley's original monster appears in Adam Rex's 2006 picture book, *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich*. Disgusting food in all its glory is both the problem and the solution to Rex's monster's dilemma. When he ventures into his neighborhood in search of lunch, his frightened neighbors behave like the villagers in the 1930s Frankenstein films directed

by James Whale. Rex's Frankenstein meets immediate fear and hostility from his neighbors. Unlike the villagers in Whale's film, these neighbors don't attack the monster with fire—instead they throw rotten food at the creature:

They threw tomatoes, pigs, potatoes, loaves of moldy bread. And then a thought struck Frankenstein as pickles struck his head. It's true, at first he thought the worst: His neighbors were so rude! But then he found that on the ground they'd made a mound of food. He piled it high and waved good-bye and shouted, "Thanks a bunch!" Then stacked it on a plate and ate a big, disgusting lunch. (Rex 6-7)

Rex's Frankenstein makes a meal of the grossest things imaginable, mimicking the enjoyment that some children get by eating things that disgust the adults in their lives. Children are amused by repulsive food and their gothic-creature friends are companions in the delights of monstrous munching. The joys of disgusting food are not new. The grandparents of today's children ate library paste in elementary school. The "five-second rule" proclaims that food is still good to eat for five seconds after it hits the floor. And little children think that anything coming out of their noses is fair game. Gross games like "see-food," which consists of showing a wide-open mouth full of thoroughly chewed food to unsuspecting companions, both delight and disgust the children involved. A toy substance called "slime" oozes from the container to the hand of a child, who delights in the gooey texture. Accepting and enjoying disgusting substances is a monstrous diversion that children embrace with gusto. Publishers of juvenile literature and manufacturers of toys cleverly supply gross delights for young audiences.

Animated films like Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie* also supply a continuous stream of gothic-inspired children's entertainment. Brimming with disgusting details and weird humor, *Frankenweenie* tells the tender story of a boy, Victor, who loves his dog. Because Victor's father doesn't accept his son's peculiarities, the dog dies in an accident. The heartbroken boy succeeds in reanimating his pet. Mary Shelley's character, Victor Frankenstein, brought a dead man back to life out of all-consuming ambition. Burton's Victor does it out of love. Ultimately, Victor's parents let go of their narrow view of the "normal child" and fully accept their son, the gothic darkness that he enjoys, and the undead pet that he loves. Burton's film teaches that the results of extreme experiments are happier when they are done from love. *Frankenweenie* is also a lesson for children in how to deal with loss. Sparky,

the dog, dies twice; the second time Victor is willing to let him go but the adults around him revive his pet. Victor is rewarded with the happiest of endings because he faces grief with new maturity and is able to endure loss. The lessons taught by recasting the Frankenstein myth into a children's story exhibit the kind of benefits that gothic tales can bring about. *Frankenweenie* capitalizes on the appetite children have for the disgusting and gross. Burton's film, which both parodies and pays tribute to Whale's film, works as a retelling of the *Frankenstein* myth that appeals to both children and their parents. Adults enjoy the parallels to the 1931 original, while children are captivated by this new version of the myth and pleasurably repelled by its nauseating details. Exhuming dead pets for reanimation and shaping a kitty's poo into classmates' initials are some of *Frankenweenie's* nauseating details that fit right into the world of monsters.

Frankenstein's successful reinterpretation into children's entertainment owes much to the 1931 film, which featured a lonely, confused creature searching for companionship. James Whale's second Frankenstein film, the 1935 film *Bride of Frankenstein*, adds another layer of vulnerability and sympathy to the creature's story as we see him rejected by the Bride, his last hope for a friend. In their essay "Growing Up Frankenstein: Adaptations for Young Readers," Karen Coats and Farran Sands point out that all children have "a deep-seated fear of rejection and abandonment by their caregivers" (Coats 245). Psychologist D.W. Winnicott suggests that "isolation is one of the 'unthinkable anxieties' for a child's developing ego" (Coats 245). *Frankenstein*, as written for adults, makes fear of being alone all too real. Adapted for children, the story enfolds scary ideas like loneliness into a package that children can comprehend. They may even gain comfort in the idea that if someone who looks like Frankenstein's monster in children's literature is "lovable, then there is hope" for little humans, too (Coats 245). Whether a child feels like a Frankenstein or a grouch, the realms of imagination provide creatures and situations where young ones can confront their own challenges and fears.

Among other anxieties in children, Winnicott states that they may suffer from vague feelings that "their bodies are fragmented assemblages of parts rather than coherent wholes" (Coats 245). The fear that their bodies could fall to pieces might further explain affinity with Frankenstein, who is assembled from disparate cadaver parts. Modern society's matter-of-fact acceptance of medical transplants may also contribute to some of the fears that children

harbor. When the Universal and Hammer series *Frankenstein* movies were made, the idea of harvesting anatomy parts for use on another body was abhorrent. Now doctors who harvest hearts, lungs, or kidneys from the bodies of fatal accident victims are heroes, not mad scientists. Faces have been recently transplanted—as have hands, arms, and legs. Television programs discuss the operations in detail, and children listen, but they do not always understand the procedure, the reasons for the operation, or the results of the surgery in the lives of transplant recipients. When examined from a child's perspective, a transplant is a very gross and dark idea. But adults don't see it that way because we understand the idea from the standpoint of medical necessity. Perhaps it's the kids that have it right. It is gross. It is also very cool, even miraculous. Gothic stories of patched-together body parts, like *Frankenstein*, are weird and messy and a little disgusting and that's why we love them. When elements of those stories appear in real life, we are delighted by the reality of life imitating art.

Gothic horror operates on many levels of fearsomeness. Adult horror films and literature will differ from those suitable for young children. Elements of gothic horror have always existed in children's entertainment, perhaps because fright excites us and allows a cathartic release of tension. Overcoming terror teaches us to cope with strong feelings. Experiencing fright within the pages of a book or while watching a film allows the adult and the child to experience fear in a safe way. That is not to say that all horror movies are good for children. Adult caregivers must responsibly choose appropriate media for each child's consumption (Wells 24). Exposure to adult-level horror may lead to real trauma that can harm the child's ability to understand reality or to process anxiety (NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital). 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 the human body and all its parts. 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 film. Like all human beings, children are gothic creatures. *Frankenstein* is a vehicle to recognize and accept the darkness within. Children can follow their monstrous friend into the fright of gothic horror and emerge with new confidence to confront commonplace fears. Stepping into the dark, one foot at a time, ultimately leads back into the light.

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