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Vulnerable Monsters

A Comparison of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Richard O'Brien's Rocky Horror

Olivia Moskot

Richard O'Brien's film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), much like Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), continues to be culturally relevant and publicly celebrated year after year. Yet, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (or *Rocky Horror*) has received little scholarly attention as the persistently successful work of adaptation that it is. Furthermore, when discussing the many film and play adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, some scholars wrongfully cast *Rocky Horror* aside as a mere parody, or reduce the musical to the status of a "cult" flick. Shaun Soman is one of the few scholars who has thoroughly studied the musical's thematic ties to Shelley's *Frankenstein* and argues in favor of its validity as an adaptation. Through this paper, I will contribute my research pertaining to both *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in order to expound upon the benefits available to scholars who choose to view *Rocky Horror* as a serious adaptation rather than as a mere parody of *Frankenstein*. In establishing a viable connection between the film and the novel through the themes of horror, outrage, and, ultimately, vulnerability, I hope to show the relevance of—and possibilities that remain for—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the world of adaptation. Additionally, I will demonstrate that *The Rocky*

Horror Picture Show is fully equipped with substance worthy of additional academic attention.

The project is a large one, as it is not only academia that contests categorizing *Rocky Horror* as an authentic adaptation of *Frankenstein* but many members of the pop culture community as well. For example, blogger for bookish.com, Natalie Zutter, published an article in 2014 detailing her favorite *Frankenstein* adaptations, ranking them from least to most faithful. First on the list, scoring a measly one out of ten: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Zutter's review revealed that she was, as many viewers tend to be too distracted by the tights, lights, and guitars to see any substantial connection between *Rocky Horror* and *Frankenstein*. Zutter's post (which referenced a now inaccessible Tumblr blog as a reference) very briefly notes the most obvious shared point of plot before flippantly dismissing the film as a viable adaptation:

Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the fishnet-clad expat from "transsexual Transylvania," builds himself a muscular, sweet, dumb, golden boy sextoy in *Rocky*. But the *Frankenstein* allusions end there, unless you count Susan Sarandon's Janet, with her shrieks, as a sexually repressed Bride of *Frankenstein*... Even the song introducing *Rocky*, "I Can Make You a Man," can't really be applied to Shelley's text.

I will contest many of these sentiments later in this piece but have included the passage to demonstrate that the general dismissal of the show as adaptation clearly stretches beyond the world of academia. I assert, however, that even if one looks at the plot alone to determine *Rocky Horror's* validity, there are many connecting points beyond the shared laboratory scene.

Frankenstein is the tale of a scientist named Victor Frankenstein, who pushes the boundaries of scientific exploration of his time. In the 19th century, technological and scientific advancement were progressing at an alarming rate—raising questions in the minds of good conservative Brittons such as: Is this progression unnatural? How far is too far? And, will God be lost as traditional ways of life are abandoned? In the novel, Frankenstein creates a man and brings him to life in his laboratory. He then abuses and neglects his creation and eventually becomes determined to physically destroy him. His plight to do so, however, is unsuccessful. He dies, leaving a young man by the name of Robert Walton as a witness to his story. Walton, who may have

been tempted to walk a similar path of extremism before his interactions with Dr. Frankenstein, instead receives a timely warning.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is the story of an alien, transexual scientist named Frank 'n' Furter (Frank), who pushes the boundaries of scientific and sexual exploration of his time. In 1970s America, technological and scientific advancement were progressing at an alarming rate, raising the same questions in the minds of good, conservative Americans as *Frankenstein* raised within its own primary audience: Is this progression unnatural? How far is too far? And, will God be lost as traditional ways of life are abandoned? In the film, Frank creates a man for the sole purpose of gratifying his own lust and brings him to life in his laboratory. Frank's plan to continue his plight toward complete physical gratification is cut short, however. He is struck down by fellow aliens and his creature dies as well, leaving Brad and Janet as witnesses to his story. Brad and Janet, who may have been tempted to walk a similar path of extremism before their interactions with Frank 'n' Furter, instead, like Walton, receive a timely warning.

Laying the plot of each work one beside the other in this fashion allows audiences to recognize that they clearly share, at the very least, the same basic scaffolding when it comes to their plot. But, if *Rocky Horror* is an adaptation of *Frankenstein*, why are there so many obvious deviations apart from the primary skeletal structure? In order to answer this question, audiences must clearly understand the purpose and ultimate function of an adaptation.

Currently, there exists a widespread and fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes a work as an adaptation. This is quite possibly the greatest barrier *Rocky Horror* faces as it fights for general recognition as the legitimate adaptation of *Frankenstein* that it is. True, *Rocky Horror* is hardly an exact replica of its mother text, but this is hardly grounds for its disqualification as adaptation. According to Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stram, who are both leading scholars in the field of adaptation studies, audiences should resist the urge to determine the validity of a work of adaptation based solely upon its fidelity to the original material's text or content. In the introduction of his book *Literature through Film*, Stram claims that to create an exact duplication of any work of art through a different medium is impossible and even undesirable. Hutcheon argues similarly in the first chapter of her own book *A Theory of Adaptation*. She asserts that adaptation is far more than a simple process of reproduction and instructs her readers that "[a]daptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 7). Hutcheon and

Stram, independently of one another, push audiences toward the same more nuanced and comprehensive method of evaluating works of adaptation, one which prioritizes capturing the unique moods and concepts of the original piece over strict commitment to duplication of story, characters, or text. The critically defined concept of adaptation demands that a work of adaptation encompass the heart and the soul of the original piece rather than allowing it to simply borrow the original work's body and imitate its movements. Adaptation understood in this way opens the door for academics and everyday audiences alike to accept the validity of the radically sexual, rock and roll, 20th century film known as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as an adaptation of the classic novel *Frankenstein*.

This could very well mean that an important part of an effective adaptation's work is to inspire a similar reaction from its audience that the original piece provoked in its own. Initially, reflecting with a contemporary mindset, audiences may be inclined to believe that *Rocky Horror* must have failed to achieve this goal. How could *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with its excessive immorality and seemingly senseless debauchery, provoke the same response as Mary Shelley's classic and beloved work of literature that modern readers have come to cherish and revere? To address this point, one need only turn to early reviews of Shelley's novel. Susan Tyler Hitchcock encapsulated a handful of reviews that exemplify *Frankenstein's* general reception. Originally, critics said that *Frankenstein* indicated "'no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality'" (75). It was called "'[a]n uncouth story . . . leading to no conclusion either moral or philosophical'" and "'[n]onsense decked out with circumstances and clothed in language highly terrific'" (74-75). Any viewer of *Rocky Horror* can see the transferable potential of these reviews from the 1818 novel to its 1975 cinematic adaptation. Applying the definition of adaptation provided by Hutcheon and Stram, adaptations such as Kenneth Branagh's Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Paul McGuigan's *Frankenstein* (starring James McAvoy and Daniel Radcliffe), which are traditionally interpreted as being truer renditions of the original *Frankenstein*, begin to lose their claim to authenticity. The original *Frankenstein* frightened and outraged its audiences. Therefore, in order to capture the spirit and effect of the original piece, any adaptation of the novel should shock and unnerve its audiences. Adaptations that merely replicate the original *Frankenstein's* plot with updated costumes and upgraded digital effects will fail to affect desensitized audiences of the 20th and 21st century.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show revives the scandalous mood of the text on which it is based simply by taking its most prevalent points and turning the volume up. Shaun Soman leans on Stram's concepts to explain that "*Rocky Horror* engages in a hypertextual process of 'selection' and 'amplification' to emphasize issues of gender-bending and 'playing god' within *Frankenstein*" (22). Simply put, Soman is indicating that O'Brien likely picked out (or selected) the most prominent parts of Shelley's original story and exaggerated (or amplified) these points until he was sure that modern day audiences would feel the intense, and even sensational, controversy embedded within them. Victor Frankenstein's character horrified and outraged primary audiences for a variety of reasons. For one, Soman points out Frankenstein assumed a role reserved for women in that he created and gave birth to new life in his womb-like laboratory. Audiences today, however, hardly notice the crime against gender Shelley has boldly committed. But even the most desensitized, radicalized viewer can not miss O'Brien's protagonist's obvious disregard for gender stereotypes and expectations as he confidently struts onto the stage, clad in a corset and stilettos, claiming his unique sense of gender and sexuality through rock and roll music. This is just a single example of Stram's "selection" and "amplification" techniques in action (Soman 23).

O'Brien goes through the process of selection and amplification numerous times through his film, putting the thrill back into this 19th century thriller. But if the story of *Frankenstein*, regarded primarily by most contemporaries as a celebrated horror novel, has lost its horror, then how does it continue to grasp the attention of readers hundreds of years later? What has prevented it from falling into the ranks of other once beloved and now forgotten tales? Christy Tyson, John F. Knowlton, Nel Ward, Dan Ward and Nicholas A. Salerno have raised those very same questions about O'Brien's work of adaptation. While each of these scholars attempt to answer this question with some semblance of sincerity, excluding Dan Ward, who "thought the film unredeemable and as pointless as a 'pet rock'" (62), none of them identify the real elixir of life sustaining O'Brien's work. Interestingly, it is the same elixir that supports Shelley's *Frankenstein*—vulnerability.

The themes of both horror and outrage certainly tie *Rocky Horror* and *Frankenstein* together, but the real heartstrings that attach one to the other is the film and the book's shared exploration of vulnerability. It is vulnerability that provides gravity to the chaos of both works. In *Frankenstein*, although Victor has the illusion of familial support (as well as societal support as an

intelligent, middle-class, white male), he is rendered vulnerable through his crimes against God. By usurping the power of giving and taking away life, Victor has broken one of the greatest unspoken moral laws of his time and, consequently, he discovers just how thin the chords of his safety net always were. He is vulnerable to the relative and ever evolving moral standards of his time. He is unable to obtain the mental, emotional, and practical help that he desperately needs, which was readily available to him before he crossed the ethical boundaries drawn by the moral conservatives of his day. He feels that he is powerless to speak about what he has done and what he has become.

Many members of the LGBTQ+ community confront a similar loss of community and consequential vulnerability when they reveal their sexuality. The history of homosexuality is deeply saturated in oppression, vulnerability, and violence. In the midst of the upbeat catchy rhythms and rhymes he sings, O'Brien's Frank 'n' Furter, who acts as an adapted Victor Frankenstein, reminds viewers of this history through the small pink triangle on his lab coat just above his heart. The pink triangle was "the insignia that identified homosexual inmates in the Nazi concentration camps" (320). Modernly, some members of the queer community wear the triangle as a symbol of gay pride; it cannot be separated from its loaded and painful history, nor is it intended to be separated from it. The "historical memory, refracted in the symbol of the pink triangle, has mobilized vigilance against contemporary oppression from queer bashings to antigay initiatives" (Jensen 320). So, as Shelley's Victor Frankenstein felt the need to force himself into secrecy after crossing conservative lines, O'Brien's Frank 'n' Furter wore the pink triangle to signal the experience of a similar vulnerability. On the surface, Frank 'n' Furter may seem to be shamelessly pursuing a shocking lifestyle, however, it is important to remember that Frank 'n' Furter's earthly abode is tucked away in the wilderness—hidden away from mainstream society. He is also, ultimately, killed for his lifestyle choices. The pink triangle foreshadows this fate. Just as Shelley was highly aware of the conservative sensitivities that rendered the progressive spirits of her era vulnerable, O'Brien shows the same quality of mindfulness. In order for the vulnerability in Shelley's *Frankenstein* to transfer effectively to O'Brien's adaptation, it had to be relevant to the vulnerabilities facing modern audiences:

As the American gay rights movement faced growing signs of conservative backlash in the mid-1970s, it drew ever more direct analogies to Nazi persecution as a means of galvanizing political support inside the community and outside of it. (Jensen 329)

Seeing as O'Brien's *Rocky Horror* debuted in 1975, his costume choices demonstrate acute cultural awareness. It also affirms that O'Brien is making conscientious decisions rather than merely throwing wigs and pearls at his characters to see what would stick. Though his show may be bright and flashy, O'Brien is clearly invested in creating meaning in his work, just as Shelley did in her own.

Furthermore, O'Brien and Shelley's creators are not merely subjected to the experience of vulnerability, and neither allow their scientists to escape it. Shelley's mad doctor is brilliant but naïve; he is set up to experience security and safety both in his family and in his society in general, but the shame and isolation he experiences as a result of his outrageous behavior leads to his eventual demise. O'Brien's Frank 'n' Furter is in a similar position of perceived security, as he is the leader of his people. However, even in an alien society, his lifestyle is deemed "too extreme" by his subordinates and he is killed. On the car ride that begins Brad and Janet's journey to Frank's castle, the radio plays the resignation speech of former United States President Richard Nixon. Nixon was a wealthy white man who, for a short time, held the most powerful position in the world, and, though he would have liked to have maintained that position, he was accused of obstruction of justice. One could say that, like Frank 'n' Furter, his subordinates deemed his lifestyle too extreme. His resignation speech playing in Brad and Janet's car alludes to the usurpation of Frank 'n' Furter by his followers and conveys the message that vulnerability inevitably accompanies the lives of all beings, regardless of how much power they appear to have. If any of Shelley or O'Brien's characters were set up to avoid some of the more crushing realities of vulnerability, it would have been Victor Frankenstein and Frank 'n' Furter. They were at the top of the totem pole and, still, they were taken down. But neither Shelley nor O'Brien stopped there. They went on to demonstrate that vulnerability can strike the lowest as well as the highest of all beings and confirmed that vulnerability tends to discriminate against the socially marginalized.

Frankenstein and Frank 'n' Furter's creations provoke sympathy and empathy from their prospective audiences precisely because of the intense reality of their vulnerability. First, they represent the vulnerability that

accompanies physical appearance to which every person in this world experiences and can relate. For both creatures, appearance has a major impact on how they are received both by their parental figures as well as how they are received by society in general. Both Frankenstein and Frank are deeply affected by the appearance of their creations. When Frankenstein's monster is first brought to life, he immediately regrets that he failed to produce a being who was aesthetically pleasing. He laments, "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God" (Shelley 25). Frankenstein's monster, like all mortal beings, is unable to control his appearance. He cannot change his features into such that they would earn the affection of his creator or the world around him, and—even if he could change his physical nature into one that was more appealing—he would not be able to escape the unfair influence that appearance has over the way one is treated. When Frank 'n' Furter introduces Brad and Janet to his own creation, he also demonstrates a preoccupation with his creature's physical appearance as he exclaims, "You see, you are fortunate for tonight is the night that my beautiful creature is destined to be *born*" (O'Brien; emphasis added). This time, unlike in Shelley's novel, the creator is successful in making a true work of art. Frank's creation, Rocky, is the picture-perfect encapsulation of masculine beauty stereotypes in 1970's America. This, however, does not make Frank 'n' Furter's creature any less vulnerable. Rather than being terribly ugly, Rocky is strikingly attractive and he, consequently, faces the same amount of discrimination and maltreatment, just in a different form.

As alluded to above, the relationship between creator and creature in both of these tales can be read as the relationship of a parent to his or her child, and physical appearance contributes to this dynamic in uncomfortable, dark ways. This parent-child relationship, in the case of both *Frankenstein* and *Rocky Horror*, is unhealthy and deeply abusive. For Victor's creation, appearance provokes verbal abuse, neglect, and eventual intent to do physical harm from his father figure. In the case of Rocky, appearance provokes sexual abuse and a complete loss of freedom as symbolized in the scene in which he is chained to the bed of his father figure. To make sure that audiences consistently remember the parent-child relationship between creator and creature, O'Brien costumes Rocky in nothing but a set of golden short-shorts

that are fashioned in such a way that viewers cannot help but connect their form to that of a diaper. Frank sexualizes his “child” in a way that triggers the audience’s intrinsic knowledge of the desperate vulnerability inseparably connected to the act of child molestation (Soman 23).

What’s more, the vulnerability experienced by both creatures, enhanced and directly connected to physical appearance, extends outward from their familial relationships to their societal relationships. Victor’s monster is rejected by the family in the cottage, whom he had come to love with deep sincerity, and he fails to find a single person in the world to befriend or accept him. Rocky, on the other hand, is taken advantage of by Janet (who is, arguably, recovering from her own sexual trauma). While she could have acted as a friend to Rocky without turning their encounter into a one of sexual exploitation, she perpetuates the cycle of sexual abuse by engaging in sexual intercourse with a man who was clearly half child. Here, pertaining to the matter of vulnerability experienced by the scientists’ creations, there is a sort of call response taking place between Shelley and O’Brien’s works. Shelley’s monster is rendered deeply vulnerable by his ugliness and O’Brien’s creation is rendered deeply vulnerable by his beauty. Shelley’s newborn being’s vulnerability is completely betrayed by his “father” who hated and abandoned his “child.” O’Brien’s newborn being’s vulnerability is exploited by his “father” who pushes a cheap imitation of love onto his “child” through forced physical intimacy.

These observations, pertaining specifically to vulnerability, only scratch the surface of the material in both Richard O’Brien’s *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The unexplored vulnerability matters because it is vulnerability that acts as the heart of each piece, providing truth, life, and longevity that horror and outrage never could. With the passing of time, Shelley and O’Brien’s works would have fallen apart and out of the public eye completely if their monstrous creations had not been stitched together with everlasting threads of vulnerability. Readers and audiences are not simply entertained by these works, they are nourished by them—facing their own weaknesses and complexities vicariously, from a safe distance. Additionally, this study of vulnerability helps audiences understand that an authentic connection between *Rocky Horror* and *Frankenstein* exists. Beyond the shared plot points, horror, and outrage, it is ultimately the vulnerability that makes it undeniably clear that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is more than a ridiculous parody or castaway spoof of *Frankenstein*. The benefits of

acknowledging a true relationship between the two works are invaluable to the world of academia; especially to scholars who are invested in vulnerability studies. Finally, if the binding connection between *Rocky Horror* and *Frankenstein* is established through vulnerability, then it follows that the two pieces provide a window into the transformation of vulnerability from the year 1818 to 1975 and onward. With so much material yet to be unpacked, there is no reason that either Shelley's or O'Brien's monsters should not rage forward for many years to come. As long as there are members of our society who continue to reach inward—past the parts of themselves that are both ugly and beautiful, bold and curious, terrifying and terrified—toward their vulnerable, human cores that lie beneath, Frankenstein's monster and Frank 'n' Furter's beloved Rocky will rock on.

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