

**Shelley Got it Right:
"Frankenstein" and the Horrors of Bioengineering**
Kris Marks / May 06, 2002

Some 150 years before anyone had ever heard of a gene or imagined such a thing as cloning, an amateur writer named Mary Shelley wrote about many of the medical, moral and social issues that today surround human cloning and bioengineering. The author was not a doctor or a scientist of any kind and would have been poorly educated about those fields in comparison to her male counterparts since she was a woman raised in the latter part of the 18th century. Shelley was not even a real writer, only authoring two books of any significance in her entire life -- and one of those she wrote for a friendly competition with no intention of ever publishing it. But that 1818 story, "Frankenstein," became a runaway hit with the public (a popularity that survives to this day), inspired dozens of films, and still serves as an eery prophecy about the state of medicine in the early part of the 21st century.

Most filmed versions of Shelley's work have kept the story's original premise but twisted the plot and elements to the point of being almost comical to today's jaded movie viewers. But Tristar's 1994 interpretation of the story, "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein," sticks close to its source material and stands tall as the best Frankenstein (and one of the best horror movies) ever set to film. A close examination of the Kenneth Branagh-directed picture shows it to be essentially a moral statement that condemns medical tinkering and shows what can happen when men start to consider themselves gods who create and destroy life at a whim.

The film's protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, was originally inspired to research reanimation after his mother died unnecessarily while giving birth. Like so many modern families who spend literally tens of thousands of dollars to clone

some beloved family pet, Victor's work was driven purely by his own self interests instead of by a love for science or interest in the potential benefit for humanity. The doctor let his emotions eclipse common sense and never stopped to consider the impact such research could have on the world.

Critical to the reanimation of human life, Frankenstein discovers, is the placenta that surrounds an unborn fetus inside the womb. He gathers the vile substance from doctors around the city who collect it as women give birth and then send it back to him one bucket at a time. This compares to the modern scientific belief that fetal stem cells are the key to generating new organs for amputees and growing new nerves for paraplegics. That theory did not exist during Shelley's time, of course, and (remarkably enough) was not made public until several years after the 1994 film was released.

Once the technique was perfected on a dead frog, Dr. Frankenstein successfully reanimated a human being -- or human beings, since the creature he brought to life was made up of body parts stolen from fresh graves and crudely sewn back together. The final creation was successfully brought to life, but much to Victor Frankenstein's horror it was not what he had expected. His creature's superhuman strength, initial inability to communicate, and dangerously fierce temper led the doctor to regret ever beginning his experiment. When finally presented with the opportunity to kill his creature, Frankenstein was faced a moral dilemma all too familiar with scientific ethicists of today: does a man-made creature have a soul, and if so, is that a new soul or the soul that belongs to one of the corpses that contributed organs to the new beast? And if the creature does have a soul, does it have the same right to exist as any other human being? Frankenstein's Monster was easy enough to create, but killing

it

was a whole separate matter.

Victor Frankenstein's ability to bring life to dead flesh caused him to acquire a god-like attitude about himself. Before the end of the film he took the body of his own dead wife/adopted sister and bloodily butchered it, chopping his love apart and stitching her back together with the body of another, all with the sole intention of bringing her back to life for his own satisfaction. Just like his behavior when creating the original monster, the doctor never stopped to consider the kind of life she would live once breath returned to her body. After he reanimates his wife, her horrified facial expressions and subsequent fiery suicide spell out the moral in black and white: let the dead rest in peace and never try to manipulate nature for your own gratification.

Although human cloning has not yet been successfully accomplished, Mary Shelley's classic book and the most recent movie based on it are both ominous predictions about some of the issues that are likely to arise from such an event. The story illustrates a fact we should all be aware of: the minds of men are finite and incapable of predicting every possible outcome of their own actions, no matter how well-intentioned those actions may be. Nature and its cycle of life and death are best left in the hands of the Creator, not His corrupted and imperfect creations.