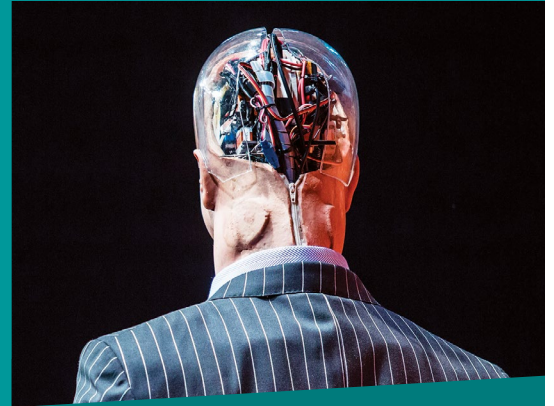


# Frankenstein: Giving Voice to the Monster

Essay by **Langdon Winner**



This summary of the essay includes targeted passages from the text for you to read on your own.

## BACKGROUND

This essay was written to honor the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*. When it was first published in 1818, the author wasn’t named. So, most people wrongly assumed a man had written it. Today, *Frankenstein* is considered a ground-breaking work. Shelley is given credit for launching a new type of literature—science fiction. In her novel, Shelley explores what happens when a scientist, Victor Frankenstein, uses human remains to create new life—the monster—but then fails to take responsibility for his creation.

## NOTES

## SUMMARY

The author of this essay points out that human-made creatures that come to life are an old idea. It is also an idea that is common to many cultures around the world.

For example, notes the author, there is a Greek myth about a statue that becomes a living creature. Similar creatures can be found in Jewish folk tales, Viking myths, and Chinese writing from long ago.

Plato and Aristotle were two ancient Greek philosophers. Both warned of the trouble that could result if these types of creatures ever became free to roam the world.

The author explains why so many stories from long ago—and today—tell about the creatures people make that come to life. These stories, says the author, prompt readers to think about important questions: What does being alive mean? Who or what is a human being? What responsibilities, or duties, do we have as members of society?

*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley is the key to answering these kinds of questions, says the author. The story of Frankenstein is a big part of popular culture. It’s in movies, TV shows, ads, and more, so some people do not think it is a serious book. However, says the author, the story forces us to think about our lives. It causes us to wonder: What might happen if we could make creatures that were like us—and had feelings like us?

The author emphasizes that *Frankenstein* compels us to think about tough questions. For example, there is always a relationship, or connection, between the maker and the maker's creation. What should that relationship be? What responsibilities to society do the creators, or makers, have? If makers fail to fulfill their duties, what should happen?

These kinds of questions are very important because of modern science and technology. Today, people are trying to make things that have the same abilities—or even more abilities—than humans. Shelley's *Frankenstein* brings up serious issues, or concerns. In this novel, we learn how makers may not be able to control their creations. We learn how human-made creatures can make their own decisions. We learn that the best plans of makers can fail and that their creatures can act independently, free from the control of their maker.

**Read this passage from the selection to find out one reason the author thinks *Frankenstein* is an important book.**

#### TARGETED PASSAGE

8 As she addresses issues of this kind, the genius of Mary Shelley is to give voice not only to Victor Frankenstein, his family, friends and acquaintances, but to the **creature** that sprang from his work and after a time learns to speak, read and form his thoughts, eager to speak his mind about his situation. I do not know whether this is the first time in world literature that one finds a serious dialogue between an **artificial** creation and its creator. But first instance or not, it is a **literary device** that Shelley uses with **stunning** effectiveness.

**creature:** the monster Victor Frankenstein creates

**artificial:** unnatural; human-made

**literary device:** an element used in fiction, such as plot, character, and dialogue

**stunning:** spectacular; astonishing

#### Reading Check

What does the author say Shelley's "genius" was? Why does the author think this was so effective?

#### SUMMARY (continued)

In one scene in *Frankenstein*, the nameless monster has a long talk with his maker, Victor Frankenstein. By sharing his deepest thoughts and feelings, the monster shows how irresponsible Frankenstein is for abandoning and neglecting him.

The monster's words serve as a timeless warning to the world. The monster says he will obey his maker, Frankenstein, but only if his maker is good to him.

He tells Frankenstein that it would be wrong for him to kill his own creation. The monster demands that Frankenstein treat him well and carry

out his duties as his maker. If Frankenstein does this, the monster says everyone can have peace. But, if Frankenstein does not, the monster says he will kill and destroy.

In this scene in the novel, the monster keeps talking to Frankenstein. He says his biggest wish is to be accepted as part of human society. He tells Frankenstein that a creator's duties do not stop when they are done creating. The creator's responsibilities never stop. The creator has to help a creature fit into society.

However, Frankenstein strongly disagrees with the monster's words. Frankenstein does not think he has any duties to the monster. Then, in fear of what the monster might do, Frankenstein starts to change his mind. Finally, Frankenstein seems to accept his duties as the monster's creator.

Unfortunately, it was too late for Frankenstein to change his mind or his actions, says the author. The events in the book have a powerful message, explains the author. The book warns us how a desire for power can make us ignore the responsibilities that come with that power.

Too often, says the author, people act like Victor Frankenstein. They do not accept their responsibilities until it is too late—or they may never accept them. The results are trouble and disaster.

The author points out that Mary Shelley's ideas were brilliant. No one in the 1800s expressed these ideas. Shelley alerts all her readers, then and now, to trouble ahead. As science and technology keep advancing, she warns us of the dangers and disasters that could result.

**Read this passage from the selection to find out how ideas and warnings in *Frankenstein* apply to our world today.**

### TARGETED PASSAGE

15 One could offer a great many historical and **contemporary illustrations** of what I would call “Frankenstein’s problem.” An appropriate, highly practical, obviously troubling set of developments at present are found within a particular **domain** of scientific inquiry and application, a zone of works not all that dissimilar from the one the fictional Victor Frankenstein explored—today’s **realm** of advanced computerization, smart algorithms, **artificial intelligence (AI)** and robotics....

**contemporary illustrations:**  
modern-day examples

**domain; realm:** area or field of study

**artificial intelligence (AI):**  
computers and other machines that act like humans

#### **Reading Check**

What does the author mean by “Frankenstein’s problem”? What examples does the author give of this problem in today’s world?

**SUMMARY** (continued)

Many scientists and other experts warn about the possible dangers of AI. The author quotes from three such experts. The first one warns that AI might destroy everyone. This expert worries about who will keep AI in check and whether AI can be kept under control at all.

The second expert thinks that AI will be helpful to people at first. However, over time, AI will get too powerful.

The third expert warns that AI machines might become smarter than people. If they do, this expert thinks people might disappear completely.

Because of these worries and warnings, people now study AI, robots, and new technology very closely. They are especially focused on how these technologies could impact, or affect, people and society. The author thinks we all owe Mary Shelley many thanks. Through her book, she makes us aware of the trouble that could result when science and technology keep advancing. She warns us that we have to act with great care and responsibility every time we create something new.

**TURN & TALK**

With a partner, discuss your thoughts about robots, artificial intelligence (AI), and new technologies in general. What responsibilities do you think modern-day creators of new technologies have to society and to their creations? What should they be doing—and not doing?