"It's Alive!" But Why?: *Frankenstein*, *Job*, and the Question of Creation

Call out now! Does anyone answer you? To whom of the holy ones can you turn?
—Job 5:1

In 2018, Chinese scientist He Jiankui announced that he had created the world's first gene-edited babies, sparking outcries of condemnation across the globe. Though perhaps for a noble cause—to make embryos immune to HIV—his actions were widely criticized as reckless and unethical, with some critics likening him to Dr. Frankenstein (Ruwitch). This comparison was more than rhetorical: it exposed an age-old cultural anxiety that unrestrained scientific advancement without ethical oversight can lead to dangerous consequences. In an era shaped by artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and weapons of mass destruction, humans are increasingly assuming powers once reserved for the divine. As our tools grow more powerful, so too does the need to reckon with the consequences of their use. What does it mean to create life—and more importantly, what responsibility do we bear for what we create?

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the biblical *Book of Job* tackle this question through a focus on the suffering of the "created" and the subsequent silence or evasion of the "creator" figure. Both texts depict "created" characters—Frankenstein's creature and Job—who cry out to their makers, only to be met with hostility or mystery. In both cases, the result is not enlightenment, but abandonment or inscrutability. Through this silence, Shelley and the author of *Job* explore the limits of human wisdom, the moral obligation of creation, and the unsettling fact that suffering needs no justification. When examined together, these two works offer a meditation on the enigma of divine will and the dangers or transgressions of unchecked human ambition. In each text, the pursuit of knowledge, whether through scientific inquiry or theological reasoning, is presented as a doomed endeavor—something limited by the narrow scope of human understanding. In doing so, both works offer a critique of human

overreach—one that resonates today as society confronts the stakes of life-changing technologies.

To fully grasp the parallels between *Job* and *Frankenstein*, it is necessary to situate both within their respective historical and theological frameworks. *The Book of Job* is a wisdom text within the Hebrew Bible, likely composed in the 5th or 6th century BCE (Preston). The book mainly serves to "answer" the troubling question of theodicy: Why do the innocent suffer? Job is the epitome of a righteous man, yet he loses his family, health, and possessions. *Job* challenges the theology of retribution—the idea that you get what you deserve—and resists any simple answer, instead outlining a cosmic mystery that humans cannot comprehend.

Centuries later, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* emerged in the midst of Enlightenment rationalism and the Romantic inclination toward the sublime**.** Published in 1818, the novel responds to a world increasingly defined by secular discovery. Born in London in 1797, Shelley was raised in a household that rejected religious orthodoxy but was intellectually invested in questions of spirituality, morality, and science. Her father, the early anarchist philosopher and writer William Godwin, was raised in a devoutly religious environment: "William's father, John Godwin, was a dissenting minister and a devout Calvinist, and the prevailing tone of the Godwin home was pious and religious" (Powers 10). Although Godwin himself was a minister for four years, he abandoned the church completely in 1782, meaning Shelley was raised in a largely secular fashion. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was similarly not considered a religious thinker. Though there is more scholarship on her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley's engagement with Christianity, and despite her secular upbringing, Shelley was well-versed in biblical literature. Her diary, during a visit to Rome, details her reading of the Bible: "Sunday, March 7.—Move to our lodgings. A rainy day. Visit the Coliseum.

Read the Bible. Monday, March 8.—Visit the Museum of the Vatican. Read the Bible" (Marshall 235). Unsurprisingly, the works of both Shelley and her husband indicate a skepticism toward organized religion. Both writers were influenced by John Milton's seminal 17th-century epic, *Paradise Lost*. In fact, *Frankenstein* opens with an epigraph from it:

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
> To mould me man ? Did I solicit thee
> From darkness to promote me ? — (Milton)

This intertextual framework is essential to a biblical reading of *Frankenstein*, tying Shelley's novel to both the Genesis creation story and Milton's retelling of it. In "Or, The Modern God: Biblical Allusions in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein," Robert Kawashima argues that *Frankenstein*'s central religious source is the Old Testament when regarding creation and knowledge—rather than the more common association with *Paradise Lost*. "Not only does Frankenstein's ambition to bestow life upon a creature of his own making mimic the God of Genesis, this Creature will eventually read John Milton's retelling of Genesis 1–3, Paradise Lost, thanks to which he will, in effect, come to see himself as a modern Adam" (Kawashima). Shelley, who had lost a baby herself and whose mother died in childbirth, was likely haunted by the idea of creation. As Charlotte Gordon notes in her introduction to *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*, "If men could control life and death, [Shelley] would not have suffered these tragedies…She was also concerned about what would happen to God, or the idea of God, the mysterious, even mystical power behind nature" (xiv). These personal losses deepened Shelley's preoccupation with the concept of creation, compelling her to confront its moral quandaries and spiritual repercussions through fiction.

This theological background enhances our understanding of the Creature, who interprets his existence biblically and aligns himself with Adam. The Creature thus seeks an audience with

his creator as Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. Like Job, the Creature knows that he is innocent, "…guilty only of being disgusting or grotesque. That is, he was initially capable of caring for others. It was society itself, beginning with Frankenstein himself, who turned him into the Monster by rejecting him" (ibid). Fittingly, Adam—the figure of original creation—also appears in *Job*. At the end of Elihu's fourth discourse, he presciently describes God's omnipotence and draws a parallel between Job and Adam: "Then [Elohim] said to Adam: / 'Revering the Lord is wisdom, / And turning from evil, understanding'" (Job. 28:28). This reaffirms that true wisdom lies in moral humility, not assuming divine insight. Thus, invoking Job who initiated a lawsuit with God, the Creature demands a fair trial from Frankenstein: "Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve" (Shelley 91). Both characters desire a relationship with their creator, like God in Genesis, yet they do not find the fulfillment of Adam's direct communication with God.

In both texts, this appeal to justice is positioned as more noble than the pursuit of actual knowledge, which is exposed as limited and perilous. In *Frankenstein*, the danger of intellectual overreach is made explicit: Victor Frankenstein is consumed by his desire to become a "modern Prometheus," proclaiming, "The world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover" (Shelley 26). Much of his characterization is defined by his insatiable scientific curiosity: "I ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge" (33). Frankenstein believes that scientific knowledge is boundless: "In other studies you go as far as others have gone before you, and there is nothing more to know; but in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder" (39). However, Frankenstein's quest to uncover the "secret" of life ultimately does not elevate him—instead it isolates and destroys: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge…" (41). Frankenstein's pursuit places

him in the role of God, and the language Shelley uses on Frankenstein's behalf invokes a limitless, infinite perception of human knowledge—which is his initial transgression. Frankenstein creates life, but without wisdom or compassion, and immediately recoils from the consequences. His is not only a scientific failure—it is moral and existential. In this sense, Shelley presents a world in which the pursuit of mastery over nature ends in alienation, guilt, and death.

Interestingly, this theme of dangerous knowledge also runs through the Creature, who seeks out language, literature, and human society. Unlike Victor, his knowledge is driven out of necessity and basic longing. He learns of the human experience through the texts *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch's Lives*, and *Sorrows of Werter*, but this insight brings despair. With each revelation about the human world, the Creature is made more aware of his difference. Therefore, Shelley puts forth two cautionary tales: one of a man seeking to become God, and another of a creature seeking to become man.

A parallel logic appears in *The Book of Job*, through a theological rather than scientific lens. Job's friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—attempt to explain Job's suffering through rationalization and the logic of retribution: He *must* have sinned to deserve his fate. However, the central purpose of the text is to dismantle this presumption. In the deity's first discourse, when God finally responds to Job's pleas for an explanation, it is not with answers but more questions:

> Where were you when I laid earth's foundations?
> Tell me—if you truly know wisdom!
> Who set its dimensions? Do you know?
> Who stretched the measuring line? [38:4-6]

There is no real clarification or justification of God's reasoning. The point is that there doesn't need to be—thus exposing the limits of human comprehension. Just as Victor overestimates his ability to control life—"Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare

a frame for the reception of it, with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour"—Job's friends overestimate their clarity and grasp of divine justice (Shelley 41). As a result, God ultimately rebukes them, saying, "I am angry at you [Eliphaz] and your two companions, for you did not speak about me in honesty as did my servant Job" (Job. 42:7-8). In both instances, hubris is condemned, especially with respect to concepts beyond human bounds.

Nevertheless, it is not only knowledge that is questioned in these texts—it is the silence of the creator. There is a refusal or failure of the creator to provide solace to the created. Frankenstein abandons his Creature, leaving him to navigate on his own a world that abhors him. This moral failure then drives the Creature to turn to violence in response to the pain of relentless rejection. Shelley writes with a compassion that allows readers to look past the "monstrous" aspect of the character and instead see him not only as a victim of societal cruelty but as a victim of Frankenstein's negligence—thus his actions become an accumulation of the trauma of abandonment. *Frankenstein* suggests that creation comes with an ethical obligation, one Victor spectacularly fails to meet. The novel argues that to create life is to assume some form of responsibility for it, not only in form but in care and attention.

What unites this to *Job* is that God does not answer Job's pleas with comfort, apology, or explanation—only majesty and cosmic distance. The God of *Job* does not view Job as an equal participant in their moral relationship, but as a mortal subject microscopic in the universal scale. In both narratives, the burden of existence is left for the created to bear alone. The creator cannot or will not bridge that chasm between power and compassion. The existential loneliness is evident in the cries of both the Creature and Job, who offer near-identical laments asking for an end to their respective suffering:

> Your hands formed me and made me,

> Put me together — then destroyed me!
> Mind now, it is you who made me like clay,
> And will return me to the dust! (Job. 10:8-9)

> Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands" (Shelley 91).

Both voices echo a desire to be heard and acknowledged, or at least granted the dignity of an adequate response. They don't ask for mere solution or survival—they ask for meaning: "Enlighten me and I'll silence myself; / Just inform me where I've done (you) wrong!" (Job. 6:24). Cries of pain can thus be read as moral indictments. Creation, both texts suggest, is not a neutral act. It creates a sacred contract between the maker and the made. When this is broken, there is not only agony but ethical transgression.

Still, it should be noted that *Job*'s God does not remain indifferent. After rebuking Job's friends' faulty reasoning, "[God] added double to what Job had had" (Job. 42:9-10). This restoration does not necessarily negate his suffering, but it does affirm that the relationship between creator and creation is not severed. God's action signals a willingness to reengage and bless, making *Job* the only one of the texts to imagine a possibility of reconciliation.

These questions of creation have startling relevance today. In an age of AI, gene editing, and nuclear weapons, the figure of Frankenstein's creature looms large in the cultural consciousness. The creature has evolved from the grotesque patchwork of human parts into the autonomous algorithm, the genome edited to perfection, and the machine intelligence that may surpass its maker. Each of these modern-day "creations" comes with a profound anxiety about the consequences of unbounded innovation. The dilemma of divine knowledge is exemplified in modern debates around superintelligence; humanity now confronts the unsettling possibility that we may no longer understand—let alone control—what we have made. Even our historical development of nuclear power, which emulated an almost divine power to destroy en masse, led

to one of the greatest cultural anxieties of the 20th century, a fear that still permeates all global conflicts today. The devastating bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki elucidated the horrifying breadth of human potential. Our capacity to destroy entire populations in an instant mirrors the inscrutable whirlwind of God in *Job*. In a sense, a creation like the atomic bomb is humanity's Behemoth, the primeval creature terrifyingly described by God in His second discourse. The conundrum of the responsibility of creation is present here, made famous by J. Robert Oppenheimer's reaction to the bombings: "'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds'" (Atomic Archive).

Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* at a time when galvanism, "the idea that scientists could use electricity to stimulate or restart life," stoked fantasies of human mastery (Blakemore). The presence of electricity as a force of creation was cemented by the story's 1931 film adaptation. Since then, artists and writers have continued to explore the ethics of invention. In the 21st century, where AI reigns as the dominant creation, films like *Ex Machina* (2014) echo Shelley's same concerns, portraying artificial beings who experience isolation, exploitation, and betrayal from their creators. In pairing *Frankenstein* with *Job*, we reconsider the meaning of creation, the limits of knowledge, and the ethics of power. Both texts offer haunting tales of what happens when creators abandon their creations through silence or evasion—confronting the moral cost of assuming godlike authority without godlike compassion. Yet while *Frankenstein* ends in tragedy, *Job* imagines restoration. Today, creators often look like scientists, coders, and engineers. What they bring into the world may not cry out as Job and the Creature did, but the burden of responsibility is greater than ever. *Frankenstein* and *Job* offer a strong argument in favor of accountability—reminding us that true wisdom lies not in mastery, but humility.

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code in this assignment and in all of my written assignments for this course.

Capri Wayne

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