"Have you no compassion?": Danny Boyle's and Nick Dear's Re-examination of Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*

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Abstract
When Danny Boyle directed Nick Dear's *Frankenstein* (2011), the stage adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel performed at the National Theatre in the spring of 2011, he decided to use a dramatic device unusual and provocative: he cast Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller in both the roles of Victor and the Creature in order for each actor to inhabit both the creator and the Creature, the aggressor as well as the victim. This essay examines how Boyle's production of Dear's adaptation invigorates Shelley's study of the consequences of monstrous acts. It investigates how Dear changes Shelley's novel recasting the well-known story by telling it completely through the eyes of the Creature: the play opens with the creation scene, it rewrites De Lacey's role and it creates an intelligent and daring Elizabeth. Boyle's two-part production exceeded Dear's adaptation. This essay also discusses Boyle's innovative stage design, which includes an incubator, and images from William Blake, and argues that Boyle's production allows the Doppelgänger motif to collapse.

Keywords: *Boyle, Dear, Frankenstein, Doppelgänger, monstrosity*

In Nick Dear's *Frankenstein* (2011) the angry De Lacey shouts, "Have you no compassion?" (xx.72)[1] at his son and daughter-in-law who are chasing the Creature away from their home, but there is no reply and no room for deliberation: the Creature has to run away. Dear's new stage adaptation of Mary Shelley's text has brought the question of how we should respond to monstrous acts to the fore once again. The play reaffirms the Creature and his voice. In the publicity surrounding Danny Boyle's production at the National Theatre, Shelley's popular character was always referred to as 'the

[1] In the essay, all citations from Dear's one-act *Frankenstein* will be indicated through only scene (lower case roman numeral) and line number (Arabic numeral). No page number is indicated as this information would be redundant.

Creature'. Have we, to use Anne Mellor's words, finally come round to "Shelley's persistent denomination of him as 'creature'?" (1988: 127). Should we feel compassion for a monster? Dear's Creature, after all, is not only a killer but also a rapist. This essay discusses this significant adaptation of Shelley's novel as well as its successful stage production, which ran from February to May 2011 at the Olivier Theatre (National Theatre, London).

Almost two centuries of dramatic and cinematic adaptations have accustomed audiences to the ambiguity of monstrosity first introduced by Shelley in 1818. The creation myth told in *Frankenstein* has an iconic place in contemporary popular culture; it has become part of scientific and ethical debates and is often used to frame discussions about the responsibility of the scientist. By now, 'Frankenstein' is a common appropriation of the Creature's surname, but while the early adaptations recurred to the binary opposition of Creature and creator, Boyle's production has moved the Gothic frontiers further by allowing the *Doppelgänger* motif to collapse. The production, as we will argue, pushes the *Doppelgänger* motif beyond its limits to the point where we can no longer distinguish between Creature and creator.

The *Doppelgänger* motif in *Frankenstein*, of course, can be traced back to the creation scene which, according to Fred Botting, is "the most enduring aspect of the tale's mythological dimensions" (1996: 103). Dear's adaptation transforms Shelley's scene by replacing the laboratory, described in the novel as "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 1998: 36), with a basic incubator at the beginning of the play. Its transparent structure shows the suspended frame of a body. Dear, in other words, does away with the religious context of the story and focuses on identity and the biological factors that shape it. Victor is absent, the audience witness the Creature's birth and, by the time Victor returns, the Creature has come to life. The play essentially reduces itself to the scenes that either develop the progress of the Creature or show the impact of his actions.

Consisting of one act only, the play opens with the creation scene and retells the story from the Creature's perspective. The Creature's pursuit of life is shaped by his sensorial discovery of the world, his education with De Lacey and his search for his creator. As the play ends in scene thirty, the Creature and his creator are on their own in the inhospitable Arctic Circle: they are both still alive

but because of the circumstances they are in we expect resolution through their eventual death. Conversely, the ending remains open because they disappear through the opening back drop of the stage in thick fog. Thus we lose sight of them on the horizon. Whereas the novel juxtaposes the captivating but biased autobiographical narratives of Walton, Victor and the Creature, provoking eventually a shift in compassion away from Victor and towards the Creature, the play does away with prevarication and moral uncertainty to make a strong statement about equality and social responsibility. With the frame narrative gone, the question of responsibility is no longer directed at the scientist but at the society he is working in. The message seems to be that society needs to take care of the monsters it creates. While Dear's text revolves around a rather general accusation of neglect, which is perhaps best summarised by Victor's father, Monsieur Frankenstein, who admits he failed his son and "can't look at him" because "[h]e is monstrous" (xxix.232), Boyle's stage production rescues the Gothic quality of the original story with a production made up of two parts. Due to his decision to have the two actors playing Victor and the Creature alternate their roles, Boyle obtains a production which must be experienced twice: once when Benedict Cumberbatch is Victor and Jonny Lee Miller is the Creature and vice versa so that each actor is seen performing both as the Creature and the creator. In doing so, Boyle generates an ontological dimension in which Victor and the Creature can merge into one.

Shelley's Creature is unsettlingly Gothic because it has been assembled from dead body parts and is a fully-functioning body. What can be said about the Creature applies to the text as well, because in the preface to the 1831 edition Shelley called her novel a "hideous progeny" and Boyle's production has similarly been described as "a monster of a production" (Miller quoted in Masters 2011). Each performance lasted two hours and fifteen minutes and had no interval which meant that the audience, like the Creature, were becoming increasingly restless since they shared through empathy the experience of what it entails to be the living result of an experiment (dramatic, in this case) The birth scene presents an impaired body to close scrutiny but, at the same time, allows the Creature to behave more like a child abandoned at birth. Dear's play draws attention to the Creature's physiological features, his

blood, heartbeat, heat, muscles, senses and instincts, but it also preserves his innocence. Throughout, the Creature is unmistakably human though perhaps more fragile than Shelley's. Monstrosity, on the other hand, comes to be clearly identified with monstrous acts as we see that Victor mistreats the Creature who then kills those who abuse him.

In Boyle's production Victor and the Creature are ultimately merged because the leading actors play both Victor *and* the Creature. Asked to alternate the roles each day[2], Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller developed their interpretation of the two characters by understanding both perspectives and fusing their responses. In each actor's performance Victor and the Creature are indissolubly linked because one part is complemented by the other. In Boyle's words, "Frankenstein and the Creature literally create each other – every other night they reinhabit each other" (Boyle quoted in Singh 2011). The Creature, for example, has difficulties in his speech. He has a stammer and a stutter that, in the final scene, Victor develops too. The production, in other words, adds another level of connections between the Creature and his creator because Cumberbatch and Miller rehearsed together and partook in each other's experience of preparing for their dual roles. Their collaboration enhances the audience's response as the two actors bring different angles to their roles and effectively multiply interpretations, both consciously and unconsciously[3]. More than ever have the existences of Victor and the Creature become entangled through a symbiosis that has not been resolved by the end of the play: in the end they are still alive. The audience are both thrilled and disturbed by a powerful experience which, in fact, continues after the ending because the connection between Cumberbatch

[2] In an interview, Miller explains that each actor stayed with one character for a day: "[i]f we have a matinee and I'm Victor, I'll be Victor for the evening performance too. Then the following day we'll switch" (Gritten 2011).

[3] In *Creating Frankenstein*, a documentary shown before the National Theatre Live cinema screenings on 17 and 24 March 2011, Cumberbatch explains how his Creature was influenced by victims of stroke, war and car crashes in recovery while Miller describes how his two-year-old son inspired his curious, fast learning Creature. They comment on how in recital they noticed they would influence each other's performance of one role or other instinctively and have elements of Victor emerging into the Creature and vice versa.

and Miller extends beyond the production. The actors have jointly won the Best Actor Evening Standard Theatre Award in 2011 and they shared the Best Actor Olivier Award as a single winner in 2012. CBS has even cast Miller as Holmes in *Elementary*, a TV drama which readapts for the American audience the BBC's *Sherlock*, where Cumberbatch famously plays Holmes.

This essay will now examine the birth scene, the Creature's encounter with De Lacey and Victor's wedding night in order to analyse Dear's and Boyle's treatment of compassion. These three scenes re-examine Shelley's reworking of the classical myth and establish the originality of the production. Boyle's stage production undertakes an unconventional approach because the performance begins while the audience are still finding their seats. In the first scene, the stage directions describe the source of life as a "*sudden flash of brilliant white light*" (i.3); this flash, created by thousands of lamps suspended from the ceiling, strikes the Creature, who is already in the incubator and he starts to move in a tentative manner. He slowly comes to life while light and darkness alternate to the sound of a heartbeat: "*Now we realise what's happening: it gets light when he open his eyes*" (i.3). The Creature, like an unborn child inside the womb, is exposed to various sounds which include those made by the audience. The theatre gets transformed into a delivery room and the bond between the Creature and the audience is created through the initial, shared struggle to understand what is happening. Without being aware of it, the audience have become part of the Creature's world. We see that he is utterly helpless: "*[a]ll the parts are there, but […] the body and the brain [are] uncoordinated*" (ii.4).When Victor approaches, he cannot bear what he sees. He throws his coat over the newborn and, in a state of panic, abandons him. The newborn/neonate then turns to the audience with a plea for compassion, "*a soliloquy of grunts and wails*" (viii.8). Again, bonding is unavoidable. The Creature's words are not yet comprehensible and his attempts at understanding the world around him are both disturbing and fascinating. He has an adult body but his inquisitive attempts recall those of a toddler. When he admires a steam train, which captures the force of industrialism, he is confused. He articulates his first words, imitating the swearing of the townspeople as they abuse and reject him. The almost comical encounter with a prostitute not only

stimulates his body, which responds by reflex, but also makes the desire for a female companion believable and the rape of Elizabeth in scene twenty-nine foreseeable.

Dear's adaptation follows a clear chronological structure which covers three years. It begins with the Creature's birth and finishes with the Creature leading Victor towards the North Pole. At the end their roles are visually and psychologically reversed because the Creature looks more like Victor in terms of his clothes and manners. His clothes are dirty but still give him the look of a gentleman. Victor, on the other hand, is wrapped in furs to withstand the extreme cold. The Creature addresses the audience directly to identify himself as "[t]he son [that has become] the father, the master the slave" (xxx.7). This scene recalls their first confrontation on Mont Blanc (scene twenty-four) where, contrary to the novel, Victor is overtaken by the Creature, who "*leaps towards*" (xxiv.38) him from a greater height. It prompts Victor to proudly observe, "My God! Muscular coordination – […] – excellent tissue – perfect balance" (xxiv.3-4) and to admire the Creature's cognitive functions: "You are educated! And you have memory" (xxiv.50-1). While Victor ponders the results of his experiment, the Creature questions Victor's scientific practice and accuses him of negligence: "So you made sport with my life?" (xxiv.26). In the final scene the Creature leads the search for "the source of the magnet" (xxx.42). Now he poses as a scientist, but he is also sarcastic, worries about Victor and ironically incites him to pursue his destruction. By this stage Victor has lost everything and appears totally exhausted. When he moves again, the Creature, full of joy, exclaims: "Good boy" (xxx.69). As in scene twenty-eight when Monsieur Frankenstein came to Victor's rescue in the Orkneys, the Creature calls Victor "boy". Monsieur Frankenstein reassured Victor with "You are safe, boy" (xxviii.194) when "*Victor collapse[d] in his […] arms*" (xxviii.65). This return into the father's arms is anticipated in scene twenty-three, when the body of Victor's brother is found and "*Victor passes William into his father's arms*" (xxiii.37). The play builds suspense through repetitions and echoes between scenes which emphasise the question of social responsibility at the heart of the production. The audience have to navigate between the familiar and the unfamiliar aspects of the story while facing questions revolving around guilt and responsibility, which this play asks as much as the novel did.

New in the play is the rendition of the De Lacey episode. In the novel the Creature considers his identity through the De Lacy family and not through the Frankenstein dynasty by pondering what they are discussing, while learning how to speak and read through observation. It is never explained how the Creature can achieve so much in such a short time and without any practice. Dear, by comparison, gives an intimate insight into the Creature's difficulties with learning by having De Lacey teach him first how to speak. Compassion had already shifted towards the Creature in Richard Brinsley Peake's and Henry M. Milner's adaptations (respectively, in 1823 and 1826) where the Creature, as Elizabeth Nitchie (1953: 223) pointed out, is "the chief element in the spectacle". However, these plays muted the Creature and made him more destitute but also more monstrous. Dear shows us how the Creature learns to master language. He expands the education episodes and makes them interactive as he turns De Lacey into a teacher, allowing us to witness how the Creature turns into a bright pupil.

Shelley's *Frankenstein*, James O'Rouke (1989) argued, also encapsulates Shelley's response to Rousseau's natural man or noble savage. This means that for her the story is a parable of psychological oppression. The Creature makes the transition from noble savage to the social state of civilised man. So, while the Creature is initially able to cope with rejection by moving on, his growing sense of "self-worth" (O'Rourke 1989: 552), acquired through education, makes this impossible. He cannot but want to take revenge. The play makes exactly the same point as De Lacey imbues the Creature with self-worth, "Yes! A good man deserves it. You are a good man. Someone will love you, whoever you are" (xviii.74-5). The Creature later repeats this almost verbatim to Victor when demanding a female companion: "A good man deserves it!" (xxiv.140). Dear also makes it clear that revenge is a cultural construct, because when looking for an outlet for his emotions the Creature finds a solution through a text he has been studying: "What do they do when they feel like this? Heroes, Romans – what do they do? I know. They plot. They revenge" (xxi.2-6). He has learnt this from Plutarch and reflects with conviction on why humans "massacre each other" (xviii.51).

In comparison with the novel, the De Lacey scenes are less

about the Creature's attempts at self-identification than about his disastrous interaction with the family, because Dear has developed the voices of the De Laceys as well. They are displaced victims of the French Revolutionary Wars, have had to flee the city, are poor and inexperienced farmers. Felix's anger, moreover, is doubled by that of his pregnant wife Agatha (in fact the name of Felix's sister in the novel), a circumstance which makes their response to the Creature even more disproportionate. Felix and Agatha know very little about the hardships of farming, which explains how Agatha can naively misunderstand the nature of the help they are provided: "[t]here's no one there, you fool. It's just us. You see? We stick together through thick and thin, and never stop loving each other – and magical things happen!" (xvii.20-22). Even if the audience do not believe in supernatural forces, Agatha quite clearly does. And, whereas the Creature had to work hard to educate and improve himself, Felix and Agatha depend on their luck rather too much.

Perhaps the main difference between the play and the novel is that De Lacey is as much of a creator of the Creature as Victor is. When Felix and Agatha explain to him that they cannot show "compassion", because the Creature is a "monster", De Lacey exclaims: "No man is a monster!" (xx.73). Then, when Agatha points out to him that what they saw was not a man, De Lacey, realising his responsibility, quickly retorts, "What have I done? Dear God, what have I done?" (xx.75-6). He is consistent and applies what he taught the Creature on social responsibility: "when we leave the womb we are pure […] evil is the product of social forces […] God has nothing to do with how a man turns out, be it good or be it bad" (xvi.15-18).

In the novel Shelley has the Creature try to determine if he resembles Adam or Satan both in terms of his looks and his fate through a comparison with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The Creature in the play has no ontological crisis; he projects the image of Satan onto Victor straightaway, and in response to Victor's assertion that "since then I've lived in darkness" (xxiv.36-37), the Creature recites from *Paradise Lost*:

'Is this the region, this the soil, the clime, / Said then the lost Archangel, this the seat / That we must change for Heaven, this mournful gloom / For that celestial light?' (xxiv.38-41)

This question asked by Satan is a direct commentary on Victor's life and, when Victor enquires if the Creature identifies with Adam, the Creature replies that he "should be Adam" (xxiv.46).

The play furthermore amplifies the connections to *Paradise Lost* through the use of actual projections onto the De Laceys' cottage. With the image on the roof, which is plate 31 from William Blake's *Jerusalem* (1804-c.1820), Boyle evokes not only creation, though the depiction of Eve, but also a comparison between Adam and Satan: "Then the Divine hand found the Two Limits, Satan and Adam, / In Albion's bosom: for in every Human bosom those Limits stand" (Blake 1988: 177, ll.1-2). The image on the front of the cottage, on the other hand, is a projection of plate 16 from Blake's *America* (1793). This image shows a strict-looking old woman sitting in front of a tree with a snake emerging from between her legs and supposedly instructing a young boy who is resting his arms on a pile of books. In this way Boyle connects Blake's well-known antipathy to formal schooling with the lessons the Creature is receiving from De Lacey. The anger against formal education, which Blake renders as fire-imagery, foreshadows the burning of the cottage. Whereas in the novel the torching of the cottage signifies the Creature's rage against a life he will never have, in the play the Creature turns into a murderer as he takes revenge on the cottage's inhabitants – those who had no compassion.

In both Shelley's and Dear's *Frankenstein*, physical monstrosity puts compassion to the test, because whether or not those meeting the Creature can feel for him depends on how they cope with his looks. For the sightless De Lacey, deformity is not important. In fact, the lessons begin with De Lacey examining by touch the Creature's head: "*De Lacey feels the Creature's head. The Creature flinches*" (xv.16). What follows is a moment of tenderness; as De Lacey says, "Don't be afraid. This is how I see. Please?" (xiv.21), the Creature relaxes and utters an incomprehensible, purring sound. De Lacey touches the Creature's sutures and asks: "My, you have been in the wars. What happened to you? Where are you from? Where are your mother and father?" (xiv.23-25). These questions encapsulate what is dear to De Lacey. His values recur in the Creature's encounter with Elizabeth in scene twenty-nine, because she, too, wants to offer the Creature affection and family support. Like De Lacey's, her response is convincing because it is forceful

and genuine. It is Elizabeth who shows true compassion because, unlike De Lacey, she is fully aware of what she is taking on. She accepts the Creature for who he is but tragically her compassion comes too late, because the Creature's mind is already made up: he wants revenge.

In Dear's *Frankenstein*, from her first appearance, Elizabeth embodies the voice of reason. When William is found dead in scene twenty-three, for example, while Victor implies Elizabeth's responsibility towards his little brother, she provokes him by retorting, "So you have responsibility for – what exactly?" (xxiii.37). More importantly, they seem to discuss parental responsibility as if William were their child. Elizabeth sounds far more thoughtful than Victor even when they discuss his scientific experiments. She wants to have a say in his studies, but then does not seem to need education herself. She almost ironically points out that she can create life through sexual reproduction. Both Victor and the Creature see her as a "possibility of love" (xxiv.134): Victor tells her he "found paradise" in her (xxix.109) and the Creature states that she was the "only one to show pity" (xxx.37-38). Nevertheless they both lie to her and sacrifice her to their ultimate scope and, in doing so, Victor and the Creature become equals. Scene twenty-nine develops a direct compassionate connection between Elizabeth and the Creature. On her wedding night the Creature delivers his "grievance" (xxix.128) to her and says that Victor "is a good man, but he does not keep his word" (xxix.144) as he abandoned his creation. Then the Creature asks her directly: "[i]f you had a child, and it looked like me, would you abandon it?" (xxix.145-46). Elizabeth is "*scared*" (xxix.72) but not horrified by the Creature's looks and intuitively takes on a maternal role: "I'd never abandon a child" (xxix.147). She touches the Creature's body, feeling its "[h]eat" and its "[h]eartbeat" (xxix. 137 and 139) while realising that he is alive and like herself.

Elizabeth offers friendship but the Creature pokes fun at those social conventions he has been forced to learn by apologising to her before he rapes and kills her. Significantly he takes on Victor's sexual role and proves that he is not only "a functioning man" but also "a brute of a man!" (xxix.69). As far as his body is concerned, it functions much better than his creator's. Victor has always avoided physical contact with Elizabeth and can only watch the Creature raping Elizabeth as he seeks vicarious pleasure like an impotent

lover. In this scene the Creature is turned into a parody of a creator because he too violates human beings in order to use their bodies for his own intent. The Creature rightly presumes Victor would be proud of his experiment. When Victor enters the room, he freezes and "*hangs back in appalled fascination as he watches his Creature mating*" (xxix.75). Elizabeth screams his name but scientific interest is stronger than compassion. What Victor sees is a successful experiment and, again, he fails to take responsibility. In scene twenty-five Elizabeth accused Victor of thinking of her as "a specimen" (xxv.148) and she is right as he misinterprets rape as a reproductive act, overlooking the violence. Once again Victor can only investigate the physical body by divorcing it from any kind of human emotion. The rape scene moreover leaves the audience in silence as they see Victor's bride become the Creature's bride. But the scene also appears incestuous because Elizabeth had offered the Creature maternal support, identified with him and treated him like a child. Her tragic error is to misjudge the damage Victor has already done. She falls for both Victor's and the Creature's deceit and, like the De Laceys, she pays for her mistake with her life.

Boyle's dramatisation of Shelley's novel does not dwell on Victor's careless treatment of the force of life. Victor's declamations about the rights of the scientist – "My field, you see, is human anatomy. The human body. To progress my research, I require certain materials"(xxvi.19-20) – sound hollow in comparison with the Creature's desperate search for love and companionship. The play is about the situation of those who are violated in the pursuit of knowledge. This is why the Creature's point of view has to be central. The Creature proves time and again that he is a living being who has not only a body but also a mind that reasons, remembers and dreams. He has emotional as well as physiological needs. The Creature has often been regarded as the embodiment of what we might call the dilemma of origin of the modern human being: his "self-questioning is the first real expression during the nineteenth century of the existential crisis of those who felt that they had been abandoned by God and who sought revenge for this abandonment" (Bloom 2010: 71). In the novel, the Creature presents him as an innocent corrupted by society and because his autobiographical narrative comes last, the reader is prone to side

with him. The play, by comparison, exposes all at the beginning and, once given dramatic form, the Creature's story enshrines compassion as the only correct emotional response for Victor as well as for the Creature himself.

The play suggests multiple conceptualisations of creation as it relies on the visual as well as textual memory of the audience and forces them to make new connections between compassion and social responsibility. In Dear's final scene, the Creature takes on the paternal role, and keeps Victor alive. He feeds him, watches him crawl and encourages him, thus filling in the paternal acts that are missing in the initial birth scene. Boyle's production of Dear's *Frankenstein* unites Creature and Victor indissolubly in the finale and sets them against a freezing, barren horizon. The ending is still a tour-de-force because, despite being a killer and a rapist, the Creature does something that is morally challenging: he shows compassion for his creator. The dramatic irony poses anew the old question of whether or not we should feel compassion for a monster. But in postmodern Gothic fashion, Boyle's *Frankenstein* moves away from the *Doppelgänger* motif's moral opposites popularised and oversimplified in various film adaptations to open up an imaginative space in which the layered complexity of society's responsibility to all can emerge. The Creature is introduced as an innocent who is moulded into a disillusioned victim but the pleasure he takes in raping Elizabeth as well as in torturing Victor speaks of the actively evil side of his human nature. Victor and the Creature act in unison and the play's ending suggests this further because, as we see them walking away, we know that death is afoot for both of them.

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