

We the Children: The Infantilisation of Collective Peoples in 1818 and 2025 Frankenstein
and 1900 and 1939 *Oz*

This February, there is a wintry wonderland blanketing the campus of Phillips Academy. A few weeks ago, during a nor'easter whose magnitude was last seen in 1978, I travelled over to the outskirts of campus to sled in the eye of a blizzard against all adult advice. The snow's heaviness became inversely proportional to the onset of darkness and I soon found myself squinting for my playmates through the whip and wind of the snow. The expanse of white only grew wider and thicker. In the distance, I spotted a friend in a puffy black parka—hood up, scarf wrapped tightly around their nose and mouth, gloved hand shielding their eyes from the weather's onslaught. A few hours prior, expeditioning through the storm had sparked in us a childish fervor for exploration; now, I wondered how we had ever thought that this could be a good idea.

Does this narrative sound familiar? For readers and watchers of *Frankenstein* (including but not limited to Mary Shelley's original 1818 text and Guillermo del Toro's 2025 film), the image of an insatiably curious human stranded in a visually arctic region, regretting *in media res* a decision that they could not restrain themselves from making, likely evokes anamnesis of the original "mad scientist" character: Victor Frankenstein. It is unsurprising that at Andover, an institution that has raised and produced some of the brightest, most powerful minds of our age, many students possess a similar disposition of covetous curiosity. It is, however, a little peculiar how much Andover's student body struggles with the idea of authority in a manner highly reminiscent of Victor Frankenstein. If my companions and I's rather foolish excursion into the blizzard despite numerous Deans' emails warning of the weather proved anything, it is that we are at constant odds with the adult institution runners who have the ultimate say in the spectacles we are privy to.

Let us refocus on that word: spectacle. I think often about what it means, what it does, who creates it. Probably the most famous instance of a spectacle losing its magic in American culture is when the “Great” and “terrible” Wizard of Oz becomes the “Great and Terrible Humbug.” The moment Toto trips over the Wizard’s screen—or teeth at it until it slides away in Victor Fleming’s 1939 iteration (which I must say, for a rather savvy man who has defrauded the people of the Emerald City for so long, could he really not have devised a better veil than what is ostensibly a midi-length shower curtain?)—is the scene-ification of the classic disillusionment children encounter when realising that limits do, in fact, exist for adults too. This fact grows increasingly absurd as we ourselves evolve into adolescence and understand that *we* eventually become adults, and thus these limits apply to us, too.

How, then, do we frame our understanding of childhood and adulthood on a societal scale? As with countless other concepts, I turn to the world of the fantastical. In L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the Wizard before his exposure at the paws of Toto is understood to be omniscient, a godlike figure with unimaginable and insuperable powers. The people of the Emerald City and of the general Oz believe in the Wizard’s Greatness, but their omission of any benevolence is a point well emphasised; they are well aware that if angered, the Wizard would “destroy you all [Dorothy & Co.] in an instant,” (Baum 78). And yet, when he is at last met with the consequences of his deceptions, the Wizard becomes but a common man. When he is a sitting duck in his buffoonish balloon (perhaps I am being too harsh), he says, “I can’t come back, my dear,” and “Good-bye!” (Baum 146) and yes, of course, the balloon is sailing away *literally*, but the powerlessness he conveys extends to his fraudulence too. When he says, “I can’t come back,” he means, really, that he has been pantsed and everyone has already seen! Of course, the people still believe he is only off to visit a fellow wizard brother, but they also very quickly accept that he is gone for good (if only because he says explicitly that he “can’t come back”).

Despite his egregious illusions, the Wizard insists to Dorothy that he is “really a very good man, but...a very bad Wizard,” (Baum 134). The contention around this infamous line and its ensuing overarching moral debates has been at the centre of innumerable fantastical conversations, but I am rather focused on the Wizard’s *concession itself* that he is a man, just a man, and a “very bad Wizard.” This concession comes after nearly three-quarters of Baum’s novel has passed for the reader, and it is not made readily until Dorothy and her friends lambast the Wizard for his fraudulence. The Wizard’s defense that he is a “good man” despite his misdeeds is a weak insistence, a childish one. But in the case of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, we immediately encounter a very opposite experience from a parallel character to the Wizard: Victor Frankenstein. Because the narrative begins *in media res*, Victor is deplorably remorseful, declaring that he has “suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes,” and that “the memory of these evils should die with [him]; but [Captain Walton had] won [him] to alter [his] determination,” (Shelley 15). I am reminded, again, of a child woefully regretful of their impulses. But the idea of an all-powerful individual who has conquered the ostensibly unconquerable—life, and death—as *childish* and exceedingly human strikes the reader off the bat rather than as a surprise three-quarters into the narrative. In del Toro’s *Frankenstein*, as we are taken through Part I (Victor’s tale from childhood to his making of the creature), we see childish tendencies from Victor external to (yet, actually, perhaps not so removed from) the scientists’ regret and contempt towards his creation. Before Herr Harlander even approaches Victor with his limitlessly funded proposition for the making of eternal life, Victor is shown as unrestrainably passionate; he does not submit to the University authorities (thought: there exists a pendulum of childishness; on one end of the spectrum is the child who blindly follows, on the other end is the child who is ignorant and righteous and a rebel), his drink of choice is *milk* for God’s sake, and he continues to sport a red cravat that he began wearing as a child after his mother’s death well into adulthood. None of these

details were readily apparent or made explicit in Shelley's novel. Why, then, does del Toro seem so bent on emphasising Victor's childish inflexibility? I return to the Wizard here: he concedes that he is a "good man" but a "very bad Wizard." In this concession, he really admits that he is only human—not a Wizard, not a god. He cannot help but be flawed. In the case of Victor Frankenstein, he, too, cannot help but be flawed. Despite the fact that we label insatiable curiosity and extreme emotion as childish traits, they are, in actuality, emblematically human ones. We are all children—children of God, to some, but in this case, children as a collective under varying institutions of governance and social power. To illustrate a creator to the magnitude that Victor Frankenstein is as literally *childish*, drinking milk in lieu of brandy and running around hair askew, is to assert that key societal adult figures—national leaders, scientists, etc.—are no less infantile than the rest of the collective. But this reckoning is not one easily realised; we are conditioned, after all, to deify institutional figureheads, or at the very least consider them minimally flawed as they have aged into adulthood and must have matured beyond the average capacity in order to reach the positions they occupy.

Before I continue further, I would like to pose the question that will guide the rest of my exploration of both the universes of *Frankenstein* and *Oz*, which is: **Must we abandon being children and become adults in order to be in operation of spectacle? Why does being in operation of spectacle even *matter*?**

We will begin first with the arc of the creature's relationship to Victor, his maker. Unlike Shelley's original *Frankenstein*, in del Toro's iteration, upon the creature's "birth" and dazed discovery of Victor in bed, Victor does not run away from his creation at first. He instead leads his man-sized baby down to the dungeons of the water tower and *chains* him. Not only does this action indicate a belief that the creature is Victor's property; it also

visually Others the creature in his newborn form.¹ I look, now to Jeffrey Jerome Cohens' seven theses of monster culture, and to Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's critique of theory four:

"The monster dwells at the gates of difference. 'The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectal Other...the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within.' Although this thesis provides insight into the construction of the monster through identity difference, again, the monster is only different from the perspective of those who have labeled the monster as monstrous...I find myself wondering how these monstrous Dark Others might have viewed the *Westerners*," (Thomas 21)

We understand, then, that the creature is a Monster because he "dwells at the gates of difference." In her critique, Thomas questions how "monstrous Dark Others," such as the creature, "might have viewed the *Westerners*." It is interesting to me that via Volume II of Shelley's novel and the Creature's Tale in del Toro's film, the monster is given a voice through which we are able to understand that the creature vies to align himself, even appearance-wise, with white humans (the dominant race and culture in both texts of *Frankenstein*). But before I continue further, I must state that it is absolutely *imperative* that we as consumers of the fantastical and its monsters acknowledge the aesthetic

¹ Editor Dominic Berry asks in footnote 38 of Vol. 1 of *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds* whether it should "be the case that merely laboring on something makes it property," (Shelley 36n38). He also meditates on the notion of ownership of children created by parents. It appears that del Toro, in having Victor physically chain the creature, answers both queries from the perspective of Victor Frankenstein as *yes*; creating the creature makes Victor the father, and fathering the creature makes Victor his owner. But del Toro will go on to challenge Victor's conceited and perverse ideas of ownership—perhaps likened to those held by slaveowners and other such (less overt) oppressors in today's day and age—as he develops the creature's self-perception and selfhood.

unconventionality and often racialisation of Dark Others; appearance, after all, has always been at the forefront of our societal perceptions of good and evil. Baum writes the Wicked Witch of the West as having one eye (Baum 99), Fleming's 1939 film depicts the Wicked Witch as entirely green and "ugly" (as Glinda asserts), and Shelley highlights the creature's unusual "yellow skin," "yellow eye," and "lustrous black" hair (Shelley 42) in relation to Victor's horror upon first animating the creature (of course, in Shelley's version, the creature has barely convulsed into life and has not even had the chance to perceive himself yet before his creator flees in disgust and terror).

These aesthetic differences are a large part of what contributes to "monster" status, and del Toro emphasises visual deformity as a factor of wretchedness when Victor goes to select suitable bodies for his project. For example: the bespectacled man awaiting capital punishment whom Victor first inspects exhibits half a face of mottled, inflamed raw flesh; Victor tuts that he is "lucky to be hanged" as he "would have died within the year," and the operator managing the hangings remarks, "Crime doesn't pay and it's a poor showing we have of it here. They're *wretches*, every one of them." *Wretch* is a descriptor that catches my eye immediately; as noted in Charles E. Robinson's introduction to Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, "wretch" is one of the most common denominations assigned to Frankenstein's creature. Is it so much of a coincidence, then, that the aesthetically unsightly prisoners and the creature are dubbed "wretches"? I think not; it seems that we are all merry children of society and of spectacle-makers until we commit social deviance, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, and then we are "wretches." Del Toro stresses this phenomenon in his visual choices and the physical abnormalities he assigns to the social deviants in his *Frankenstein*—as does Shelley, and Baum, and Fleming. We now understand that with monstrosity often comes visual difference and thus a removal from the collective that is the Children of society.

Let us return now to Thomas's query of how a Dark Other might view "the Westerners." We must venture over to Volume II of Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, in which the creature resolves to overcome the "gap in understanding" between himself and the De Laceys by learning how to communicate via language. But when he views himself in a "transparent pool," he is "terrified" and becomes "fully convinced that [he] was, in reality the monster," resulting in "the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification," (Shelley 93).

Editor Nicole Piemonte points out that the creature, in his first time self-perceiving his physicality, "experiences fear and terror because his reflection reveals that he looks much different from others whom he has encountered. In this way, his self-knowledge is informed by others—that is, he sees, knows, and understands himself as society sees, knows, and understands him," (Shelley 93n20). So the creature experiences himself in the same way the "Westerners" do: as this "monstrous Dark Other." In experiencing *himself* as the horrific sight that the dominant race and culture sees, the creature also understands that he is the "villain," "the horde," "the enemy," "the monster," (Thomas 23). These descriptions are ones that I have taken from Thomas's critique, in which she offers:

"...the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of colour receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies.*

We are the monsters.

For many readers, viewers, and fans of colour, I suspect that, at the level of consciousness, to participate in the fantastic is to watch *yourself* be slain—and justifiably so, as the story recounts," (Thomas 23).

More than two hundred years later, Shelley could not have possibly conceived that someone like me—Asian-American, seventeen, a girl—could be reading her work at a coeducational boarding school of all places. And yet I find that her text still strikes me as modern: in the process of Othering a being with “yellow skin” and “lustrous black” hair, I as a reader of colour am watching myself be “slain,” and not for the first time. You may recall the observation I had stated earlier as to the marked difference in del Toro’s *Frankenstein* versus Shelley’s: that Victor, instead of abandoning the creature immediately, elects to maintain, observe, and *chain* his creation. But the motif of chains in this film is not introduced in this scene; rather, we are first guided to the image of chains in the opening minutes of del Toro’s *Frankenstein*, in which the creature is searching for Victor as the latter is loaded onto Walton’s ship. As the creature is assailed by multiple bullets simultaneously, the impact of the shots folds him. But as he rights himself, the chains holding up the fire in the brazier in the background remain visible in-shot even as the camera zooms into the creature’s face from below and the fire in the brazier disappears from view. It is the *only* visible object in the final seconds of this zoomed-in shot. In having the chains still visible to the viewer, I am reminded of Victor’s consistent, insistent bemoaning about feeling like a “slave of [his] creature” (Shelley 130) in Volume III. Victor describes a moment of peace during his travels through the United Kingdom as an instant in which he “dared to shake off [his] chains...but the iron had eaten into [his] flesh, and [he] sank again, trembling and hopeless,” (Shelley 135); he again uses the word “chained” later on to describe his inability to reveal his secret to his family (Shelley 154). But any reader of *Frankenstein* understands that it is the creature, a Dark Other, who remains chained by his inability to dwell anywhere other than at the “gates of difference.”

It is interesting though: the context from which Shelley was writing was a time of great progression and change, the era of the Industrial Revolution. In Alan Smith’s ““This

Thing of Darkness:’ Racial Discourse in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” we gain insight on Shelley’s radical background:

“Mary Shelley’s youth, her education, and the creation and revision of *Frankenstein* coincided with the great wave of British antislavery agitation that resulted in the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and ultimately emancipation in 1833. Although governmental suppression of popular politics in the 1790s prevented large scale public agitations such as mass meetings and petitionings until 1814, when these re-emerged (again over slavery), it is evident that so significant and pressing an issue, with all its inherent implications for the rights of man, would profoundly register in the consciousness of one with Mary Shelley’s lineage and inclinations. So too, of course, would an awareness of violent slave insurrections, such as the Haitian rebellion of San Domingo in the 1790s. A small but telling pointer to this awareness is the refusal of Mary and [Percy Bysshe] Shelley to use sugar because it came from the West Indian plantations,” (Smith 209).

Throughout colonial and postcolonial history, infantilisation has been used as a common tactic to propagate justifications for the enslavement, brutalisation, and disenfranchisement of Black and other non-white peoples. Still today, stereotypes of infantilisation run amok in popular culture. Perhaps, then, taken into context with Mary Shelley’s progressive upbringing and background, that is why the tale of Victor Frankenstein and his creation is so radical: it establishes Victor as infantile himself, and it results in Victor’s utmost misery and subjugation to the creatures’ vengeance against his creator—his “father,” as the creature calls Victor in the final moments of del Toro’s film—despite Victor’s insistence that he is the victim of a creation of his own making. I would like to return here to

del Toro's prelude scene, in which the creature rights himself from the impact of the sailors' bullets. At this moment, the height of the camera remains the same. But since it is originally level with the creature as he is bent forwards from the impact of the bullets, as the creature stands at full height once again, we are forced to view the creature from below. With the height and angle of the camera depicting the creature as a higher figure, we are witness to a foregrounding for the "inversion of the master-slave relationship" (Shelley 141n10) that occurs when the creature tells Victor, "You are my creator, but I am your master;—obey!" (Shelley 141).

As this revelation of infantilisation and its usurpation in *Frankenstein* occurs to me, I find that I must go back to Baum's *Oz*, a text written nearly one hundred years after Shelley's yet similarly developed in a time of rapidly shifting national and global sociopolitical landscapes. Gretchen Ritter, in her analysis of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its historical memory in America, writes:

"When the members of Dorothy's party are admitted to the hall of Oz to meet the Wizard, each is confronted by a different apparition. Dorothy sees an 'Enormous Head... bigger than the head of the biggest giant.' The young woman identifies herself as merely 'Dorothy, the Small and Meek.' The girl from Kansas is reluctant to challenge the wisdom of this great head. The next into the hall is the Scarecrow. In the Wizard's chamber he sees a beautiful, bejeweled woman. Did Baum believe that farmers were being seduced by political charlatans who promised much and gave little? When it is the Tin Woodman's turn, the woman is replaced by a 'terrible Beast' who growls at him. During the great industrial conflicts of the late nineteenth century (Haymarket, Homestead, Pullman), workers faced fierce challenges from industry and its political allies. Finally, the Lion enters, determined to confront the Wizard, and

finds a great Ball of Fire awaits him. When the Lion tries to approach the flame he is singed and forced to retreat. The political reform movements of the period were also scarred by their attempts to challenge the political center,” (Ritter 182).

Ritter places into context the circumstances under which Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and it is the last sentence of this excerpt I am most drawn to: “The political reform movements of the period were also scarred by their attempts to challenge the political center.” This almost entirely sums it up: the American people during Baum’s time lived as children do under the omnipotent thumb of their parents. There was a minority that questioned *why*, but they were, again “forced to retreat...scarred by their attempts to challenge the political center.” Everybody else was, as Dorothy the Literal Child was, “reluctant to challenge the wisdom of this great head,” (the great head in Baum’s reality being both industry and government). Baum was, as Ritter articulates, “raised as a Republican,” but, “like many disillusioned partisans...drawn to democratic reform efforts.” I am therefore unsurprised that ultimately, it is Dorothy and her companions who succeed in (inadvertently) exposing the Wizard for the common man that he really was.

The Creature and Dorothy as “Us”

You may recall how I had wondered earlier, *Must we abandon being children and become adults in order to be in operation of spectacle? Why does being in operation of*

spectacle even matter? Salman Rushdie, in an article for the New Yorker in which he analyses both Baum's and Fleming's *Oz*, says,

“Now, as I look at the movie again, I have become the fallible adult...And this is the last and most terrible lesson of the film: that there is one final, unexpected rite of passage. In the end, ceasing to be children, we all become magicians without magic, exposed conjurers, with only our simple humanity to get us through.

We are the humbugs now.”

In my ruminations on del Toro's Victor Frankenstein, I noted the various childish tendencies that the scientist retained well into adulthood. But his arrogance and belief that he was “adult” enough to handle the creation of life and the ensuing responsibility of this act was his downfall. It was only with the consequences of his actions that he understood that he was one of many “magicians without magic,” an “exposed conjurer, with only [his] simple humanity to get [him] through.” This point is emphasised by the fact that whilst chasing the creature around the continent following Elizabeth's death, Victor was constantly debilitated by his physical status as a man and not superhuman as the creature appears to be depicted as. As Rushdie admits: “‘The Wizard of Oz’ is a film whose driving force is the inadequacy of adults, even of good adults.” And I agree: adults are inadequate. That is what makes them human, and also what makes them humbugs. But if anything, I should think, then, that the most logical solution is a return to children.

In both iterations of *Oz*, Dorothy, with her doe-eyed, pigtailed, ginghamed naivete, ostensibly saves the land of Oz. She rids Oz of both “Wicked” Witches, deposes the fraud that is the Wizard (well, sends him off to retirement, really), and installs new leaders across the land who are smart, kind, and courageous. But the most important piece of all: unlike the Scarecrow or the Tin Man or the Lion, who have all “gained” their desired qualities like a

new addition to their wardrobe, Dorothy has not obtained anything from pure magic at all, save for her ruby/silver slippers. And even with those, she simply uses them to return to Kansas. Dorothy **does not abandon being a child** despite the revelation that there exists adult humbugs and that there exists various corruptions in the seemingly flawless land of Oz.

With *Frankenstein*, del Toro asserts in Sheila O'Malley's film companion that, "Victor is singular; the creature is all of us," (O'Malley 46). I am once again reminded of Thomas's declaration of the "implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of colour receive" as we journey through texts of the fantastic. Why, you may ask? Let us return one final time to del Toro's *Frankenstein*. Unlike the creature in Shelley's 1818 text, when the creature perceives his appearance for the first time in a photograph of himself taken by Herr Harlander during the creature's construction, the creature does *not* actually recoil. Yes, he struggles initially with the realisation that he is the "child of a charnel house," but after the death of his friend (the blind De Lacey patriarch), he tracks down Victor to the Frankenstein estate and asks him to create for him a companion, a being such as himself. Victor says, "In you, I have created something truly horrible." But the creature responds, "Not something. Someone," and a few moments later, "I am obscene to you, but to myself I simply am."

Perhaps it is the youthful determination in me, but I would like to settle on the idea that, infantilised as a collective people are and as patronising as that is, we do not need to abandon who we are, nor do we need to scorn spectacle entirely. We are the Children, and we are the Monsters, and perhaps we underestimate the power that lies at "the gates of difference."

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