


"The Fall of the House of Usher." Thompson, pp. 199-216.

"Ligeia." Thompson, pp.159-173.


"The Oval Portrait." Thompson, pp. 295-299.

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"It's me, Ana": The Nature of Monstrosity in The Spirit of the Beehive

Micah Spiece

A young girl named Ana comes into contact with James Whale's 1931 Frankenstein, and it becomes a tangible part of her waking life, influencing her development in a complex and distinctly hostile world. The Spirit of the Beehive may be the only film in existence to both directly refer to and consider—rather than comment upon—the interpretive nature of Frankenstein, making it perhaps the most faithful adaptation of the novel yet on screen. Just as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein uses framing to highlight the performative aspect of monstrosity and its effect on impressionable minds, The Spirit of the Beehive frames the original film adaptation of that work to demonstrate the performativity of Gothicism in the real world and the reasons we return to experience it anew.

In his analysis of depictions of monstrosity in a variety of Frankenstein film adaptations, James A. W. Heffernan explores a dilemma: how to turn a literary monster into a visual one. It's a fascinating consideration for the often-adapted novel, especially since critics and audiences often view these films as inferior or unfaithful to Mary Shelley’s vision. Heffernan concludes that this disconnect between media is due to the novel’s insistence on the inner lives of the characters; indeed, a lengthy middle section features notably articulate narration (filtered through multiple frames) directly from the monster himself. Films, however, provide primarily visual means of carrying the story—Heffernan laments the silencing of the monsters in so many of the non-silent films—and therefore cannot adequately explore internal dynamics of characters. Critiquing the popular idea that cinematic adaptations of Frankenstein cannot be "anything more than vulgarizations or travesties of the original" (445), Heffernan argues that such films force us to consider something the novel scarcely can: the monster’s physical horror, its corporeal monstrosity.
Jack Halberstam posits that, in carving its niche in Gothic canon, *Frankenstein* resituated the locus of horror from crumbling castles and ghostly visitations to the human body itself. He further cautions against specific readings of the monster in sociocultural terms, explaining that “essential monstrosity makes monstrosity an integral feature of very specific bodies; totalized monstrosity allows for a whole range of specific monstrosities to coalesce in the same form” (29). Following Halberstam’s logic, any cinematic vision of *Frankenstein* could be read in nearly any way justifiably. Kay Picart disagrees, noting two fundamental perspectives: people can “approach it as either the Monstrous Other they must harness or as a part of themselves they must acknowledge” (19). Framing, it would seem, determines meaning-making here, and *Frankenstein* has plenty of frames stitched together like its antagonist.

If Mary Shelley’s masterpiece works best because it makes the human body monstrous, and if that monstrosity can be read as many different monstrosities by many different viewers, how can films adequately approach the project of adaptation? In his consideration of multiple Spanish Civil War films led by a female child protagonist, Vincent Bohlinger identifies *The Spirit of the Beehive* as deliberately “withholding […] any particular political ideology,” which works to “align these films with the narratives of fairy tales” (42). He notes this unusual aesthetic while also clarifying that the film does not occur in a vacuum: rather, it does indirectly “depict a brutal reign without any nominal or even disparaging justification for its exercising of lethal force. That certainly begs the question as to whether such a government represented nothing more than mindless cruelty” (42). This sort of implicit framing—neither explicitly identified but shaping audience understanding—manifests in the atmosphere of the film, in its cinematography and mise-en-scène, providing a structural parallel between the viewer’s experience of the cinematic world and Ana’s experience with the monstrous elements of her life.

Let’s begin by considering the ways in which Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* uses framing to highlight the performative aspect of monstrosity and its effect on consumers looking for pleasure and frisson. In line with Halberstam’s thoughts, then, this area of study would consider the essence of monstrosity: what makes a monster and what effect a monster has or is meant to have. Regardless of specific approaches taken by a director or screenwriter or even the performer playing the monster, the visceral effect of the monster on impressionable minds has not yet come into critical literary focus. With this awareness, we might ask if any *Frankenstein* adaptations resist easy interpretation long enough for a consideration of the monster—as a cultural product in many media—as, simply, a monster, not bound by obvious sociocultural symbolism. We will then see how *The Spirit of the Beehive* frames Whale’s original film adaptation to demonstrate the performativity of Gothicism in the real world and the reasons we return to experience it anew.

“To Mrs. Saville, England,” begins Mary Shelley’s masterpiece (Shelley, 7), read in classrooms around the world by students who will likely never remember this opening sentence. Before the story has even begun, Shelley effectively frames her fiction in epistolary form, limiting the scope of her narrator Robert Walton to his own experience—a lonely, ambitious, and potentially disastrous expedition, we learn from his initial paragraph. After he records (through brief, broken entries in his correspondence) meeting Victor Frankenstein, he allows Victor’s voice to take over the narrative. That is, the section narrated by Victor is not through epistles but through apparently direct narration; however, before Robert relinquishes his own voice, he lays claim to the whole text, intending “to record, as nearly as possible in [Victor’s] own words, what he has related” (18). Can we fully trust the accuracy or even legitimacy of his subsequent words? Perhaps not, though both Shelley and, curiously, Robert anticipate this. Robert expects his sister to enjoy the story, saying, “This manuscript will doubtless afford you the greatest pleasure: but to me, who know him, and who hear it from his own lips, with what interest and sympathy shall I read it in some future day” (18).

If the goal of this story is meant to be pleasure, what are we to make of its horrific aspects? After all, Victor’s appearance and warnings of doom and death before beginning his tale would surely suggest to Robert that the tale will not be one of pleasure; rather, not pleasure of any conventional style. Perhaps the answer lies in Robert’s own technique of framing. In brief: at its most narratively complex, the novel allows the monster to narrate his adventures and literacy; the monster’s tale filtered by Victor’s selective memory and narration; Victor’s story interpreted by Robert and framed, ultimately, by Robert’s putting pen to paper. Perhaps in all these layers, we may find the key to distancing ourselves from the horrific aspects of the story so that it becomes pleasurable. We might also note that though Robert’s prediction to differ from his sister’s opinion about his own story, the “interest and sympathy” he expects is not oppositional to any idea of “pleasure,” only of a different variety.

A working definition of monster would not be amiss here, as the nature of monstrosity is our primary concern in these texts. Though scholars from Sigmund Freud to George Haggerty have theorized about the nature of the Gothic as being both attractive and repulsive, everyone seems to consider monsters differently. Are they *unheimlich*, that which alienates the familiar, or are they innate, that which is concealed and breaks forth? Applied to *Frankenstein*, the question between approaches is whether Victor or his undead creation is the real monster of the tale. In his book about the theological nature of cultural monsters, Timothy K. Beal notes that the word derives from the Latin *monstrum* which means something like a divine omen or supernatural visitation. Its related words, however, open the concept up to much broader application: “the verbs *monstrare* (‘show’ or ‘reveal’) and *monere* (‘warn’ or ‘portend’)” (6-7). Crucially, Beal goes on to consider the effect of a monster and “the experience of horror” in terms of a religious experience, our “encounters with something simultaneously awesome and
awful—a feeling captured in the older spelling, ‘aweful’, which still retains its sense of awe” (7). It is exactly this wonder and awe of both attraction and repulsion that Robert refers to, found in the appearance of monsters as well as the stories through which monsters exist.

The Spirit of the Beehive opens, as does Shelley’s novel, with complex framing devices. The film initially shows a child’s drawings, in bright multicolor, depicting some of the scenes we will see in the film. Specifically, we see the father and his apiary, the two little girls Ana and Isabel, the mother writing her letters to a mysterious someone, and ultimately the train that will bring a stranger into their lives. It also presents text, reading, “Once upon a time” followed by “Somewhere on the Castilian plain around 1940”; these place the film in a setting that is at once specific and vague while evoking fairytale style. Much like how Shelley’s novel uses letters and monologues to tell its story—forcing the reader to consider reality as filtered by its beholder—the film immediately lets us know we are about to enter a child’s perspective.

But this opening sequence is not the only frame used by director and screenwriter Victor Erice. Though The Spirit of the Beehive is not strictly an adaptation of Frankenstein’s plot, it uses themes and techniques to tell a story of Frankenstein’s effect—and the cinematic monster’s effect—on a child in crisis. To this end, the action of the film begins with a traveling cinema arriving in the village of Hoyuelos, carrying what its proprietor claims to be a “magnificent” and “wonderful” film: “The best I’ve ever shown in this town!” Ana and her sister Isabel attend—at this point, we do not know they are the protagonists and are treated visually like all the other children—and sit in the improvised theater in awe. The picture is, indeed, Whale’s Frankenstein, and before it starts a filmed message from the film’s producers voices intended concerns, almost parental in condescending tone. Dressed in a tux, the man offers “a preliminary word of caution” about the horrific tale of Frankenstein, a man who sought to create life “without recognizing that that’s something only God can do.” He tells the camera (which becomes our screen in a close-up shot), “Prepare yourselves. You may be shocked, or even horrified. Few films have had greater impact all over the world. But I would advise you not to take it too seriously.” His moralizing, however, is clearly lost on the entranced children.

Importantly, at this point the film cuts to Ana’s father Fernando in his beehive suit without any interlude or explanation. The audience is not allowed to see James Whale’s famed film, but rather only the introduction; it’s an odd choice to frame the film’s reputation and delivery, but not the film itself. Erice trusts that we are familiar with Frankenstein and do not need to be reminded; rather, he seems to suggest that Fernando and his large manor—not the motion picture—will be the locus of horror before this story is over. Indeed, we flash back to the cinema for only one scene: that in which the monster, played by Boris Karloff, meets a little girl picking flowers by the river and drowns her. Whale’s film suggests that hers is an accidental death, wherein the monster wanted to see if the pretty little girl could float like her pretty little flowers. After the screening, we see a slow pan of Ana and Isabel running down the street and up the walkway to their home, yelling, “It’s Frankenstein!” and screaming or giggling. They disappear into the house and in a moment the shot switches from day to night with lights glowing ominously inside the black façade. It would appear that something terrifying will happen that very night.

A traditional Gothic story would certainly situate its horror in Ana’s home. After the initial image of Fernando in his almost frightening suit, we are slowly introduced to the household. One critic notes, “Each member of the family is introduced separately, in a different location […] Not once in the film’s ninety-nine minutes do they share the same frame” (Smith). This kind of disjointed framing isolates the characters along with our perception of them; there is no clear indication that they have any relation at all, other than what viewers read into their interactions via edited shots. Their characterizations, too, isolate them: Fernando doesn’t know if there’s food in his own house, and gets lightly scolded by a maid to eat regular meals and get his head out of the clouds. His wife, Teresa, sits alone at a desk writing letters to what is apparently an absent lover. When the two are in bed together, we see only Teresa’s wide-eyed face (fear or vigilance?) as she pretends to sleep while Fernando performs unclear action behind her, casting shadows on the wall and making awkward, mysterious sounds, possibly simulating sex. The Spirit of the Beehive subverts this expectation of Gothic domesticity much like Shelley’s novel does, making family dynamics odd, but not evil or dangerous, and houses unique but not haunted.

While the home may not host ghouls, the film codes a lot of critical information to inform the viewer that all is not well in the little town of Hoyuelos. As the children celebrate the traveling cinema, we clearly see the dirt streets and crumbling buildings that have not been kept up after what appears to be violent conflict and crushing poverty. Fernando’s home seems to have been a grand estate, but when Teresa looks out from the rooftop, she does so from behind battlements. When Fernando quietly listens to his radio, one critic notes that it is likely “the BBC, forbidden by the regime”, and that Teresa’s letters are “addressed to a Red Cross camp in France, where Spanish refugees are interned” (Smith). These details, minute enough to escape censorship, identify Ana’s family—and, likely, most of the town—as members of the newly oppressed losers in the Civil War, suddenly existing in a barren world of loss and doom. Though Erice’s film does not openly discuss Franco’s victory, its focus on “domestic distress” allows for “a much more subtle and moving take on the historical trauma suffered by Spain in the twentieth century” (Smith). This trauma, we see, exists on the land; the trauma in hearts and minds, though, we will see manifested in the children of Hoyuelos.

Ana’s home may not be the locus of horror in this film, though her family certainly would fit in well as a stand-in for monstrous intervention like the Frankensteins or DeLaccys; rather it is Ana herself who becomes a sort of otherworldly horror in her own mind. The ambiguous screaming and giggling outside become hushed whispers inside as Ana pesters Isabel to better
understand the movie. “Why did he kill the girl,” she asks with wide eyes, “and why did they kill him after?” While surely six-year-old Ana understands the basics of this kind of justice, the dialogue suggests that she only understood the images presented to her and not their connection to reality. This might make sense, if the film were a direct criticism of Francoist Spain and injustices done to impoverished citizens of, for example, Hoyuelos. But Erice steers the conversation clear of explicit political assault and into the realm of Gothic fantasy:

Isabel: “He didn’t kill her, and they didn’t kill him.”
Ana: “How do you know? How do you know they didn’t die?”
I: “Everything in the movies is fake. It’s all a trick. Besides, I’ve seen him alive.”
A: “Where?”
I: “In a place I know near the village. People can’t see him. He only comes out at night.”
A: “Is he a ghost?”
I: “No, he’s a spirit. [...] Spirits don’t have bodies. That’s why you can’t kill them.”
A: “But he had one in the movie. He had arms and feet. He had everything.”
I: “It’s a disguise they put on when they go outside.”
A: “If he only comes out at night, how can you talk to him?”
I: “I told you he’s a spirit. If you’re his friend, you can talk to him whenever you want. Just close your eyes and call him. ’It’s me, Ana. It’s me, Ana.’”

Silly as the conversation may appear on page, it’s a profoundly moving scene for a few reasons. First, in a film so devoted to silence, this may be the most dialogue in a single scene and therefore demands attention. Second, it’s the first time we really get to know these girls. Third, it’s filmed in shots and counter-shots to create a claustrophobic sense of intimacy between the girls, cowering in their beds with wide eyes as they discuss the supernatural. And, finally, its exploration of the boundaries between bodies and spirits almost entirely ignores the fact that they’re talking about a murderous monster; indeed, Ana seems excited to be like Isabel and commune with it by night.

Ana’s preoccupation with the monster—broadly including, that is, the film, ideas of monstrosity, and of course death—seems to color her daily experiences. Much as Beal notes the “aweful” fascination we feel with the Gothic, Ana regards her common surroundings with newfound perception. At school, the children learn parts of the anatomy from Don José, the skeletal mannequin on whom they pin various organs; Don José looks like Frankenstein’s creature with its precariously placed placards. Fernando takes Isabel and Ana into the woods to hunt for mushrooms, and Ana takes particular interest in the poisonous ones; it’s a curious scene in our reading, for the presence of mushrooms suggest death and decay in a way the film does not draw attention to. Ana discovers one of her mother’s letters and reads it, only narrating to us its addressee: “To my dear misanthrope,” as if that’s the only part that matters. Later, Isabel and Ana go on long walks together. Finding a railroad, the two put their ears to the metal to feel the vibrations of the approaching train; Isabel quickly hurries away, but Ana seems entranced by the imminent danger.

Isabel is not immune to the same effects of horror, though, and she and Ana only grow in their respective fascination with the morbid and dangerous. In one scene, Isabel pulls a cat up onto her bed and irritates it, eliciting a growl. “What’s wrong with you?” she asks, and then tries to strangle the cat. At first it seems surprised, then yowls and escapes, biting or scratching her finger; first she licks the blood, then after grabbing a mirror, uses her finger to paint fresh blood on her lips like lipstick, admiring the smear of scarlet. Later, Isabel screams to attract Ana from another room and lies face down on the floor, pretending to have fallen off a chair. We only see what Ana sees, so at first Isabel’s prank works on us as well. Ana leaves for help; finding no one, she returns to an empty room. Isabel sneaks up behind her sister and frightens Ana by grabbing at her eyes.

Ana becomes more affected than Isabel, though, evidenced by the episodic events of the film that seem to happen increasingly to her exclusively. She sees kids from town burning twigs in an evening bonfire and approaches; they begin running and jumping through the flames. Though she does not join in, she watches nearby and stays long after they have all gone home until the maid comes to find her all alone. In the middle of the night, Ana gets out of bed, dresses, and goes for a stroll outside, staring up at the moon. She does not return until daylight. When Isabel asks where she was, Ana climbs into bed, remaining silent and turning away.

The exact timeline of the second half of the film is deliberately unclear, but it largely concerns Ana’s encounter with a stranger, credited only as “The Fugitive,” who arguably takes on the mantle of monster as well. Early in the film, after the Frankenstein screening, Isabel and Ana find an abandoned farmhouse with a nearby well. Isabel indicates that the monster she communes with lives there, and Ana agrees to go investigate. We do not see the inside of the building yet, but Isabel enters and quickly runs out and away; Ana enters and disappears from view before exiting and wandering over to the well, in which she throws a rock. As she prepares to leave, she sees a single large footprint in the dirt; she places her own foot in it, as if setting up the monster. Later in the film—though, again, the timeline is unclear—a man jumps from a passing train and takes shelter in the same farm building. This wounded “Fugitive” is apparently “a member of the maqui, or anti-Francoist resistance” (Smith). We don’t know exactly who he is or how long he’s been there; his adventure is intercut with the scene of Ana walking outside at night, but his scenes are shot in daylight. This bewildering sequence leaves a lot to interpretation, but the effect is clear: Ana discovers his presence alone and unafraid.

Ana treats the stranger with kindness—an expected response from a sympathetic political perspective, but perhaps not from a child to a wounded fugitive—that is almost shocking in such a bleak film. Much as Frankenstein’s monster seems inherently benevolent and curious (at least, according to his own narrative), Ana fearlessly offers the man her food while he
fearfully points a gun at her. Another time, she brings him bread and a drink as well as her father's coat before tending to his bandaged leg. These scenes offer a sense of homeliness and generosity otherwise absent from the picture; the charity is sharply contrasted in the very next shot, which is of Ana leaving before a time lapse into night, when excessive gunfire engulfs the fugitive's shelter. It would seem that Franco's soldiers have tracked their enemy down, perhaps even by tailing Ana. When she returns to visit the man, she touches the blood on the ground before fleeing her father across the plain. She learns that comfort cannot last and that her best efforts end in death.

Confronted with the evils of the real world, Ana flees everything she knows, walking alone in the forest along a river. In one shot, she sees a mushroom and reaches for it; who knows if it's a poisonous one? In another, after nightfall, she looks into the water and watches as her reflection changes into that of Boris Karloff's Frankenstein monster from the movie she had previously seen. An unspoken question asks, is she the monster? Is her potential guilt in getting the fugitive killed outweighed by her increasing obsession with violence and death? Halberstam might argue that her changing, growing body is monstrous, indicated too by her loss of innocence; Picart might conditionally concur, saying that the monstrous is within Ana waiting for her reconciliation.

But as Ana views her monstrous reflection, she hears footsteps approaching her from the woods. We see the monster before she does, but when she turns, it stares at her as she stares back and we are the only witnesses. This is the kind of outside force Beal defines as monstrous, the sort of supernatural visitor who comes to reveal and warn, inspiring awe and terror to its beholder. The monster—which looks wonderfully like Boris Karloff's incarnation of the character—kneels with Ana and reaches slowly for her. She shivers but, importantly, does not move away; if anything, she leans slightly forward as if in anticipation. It touches her and her eyes close before the screen cuts to black. Whatever her experience in the woods really is, it's clear that, to Ana, she met the monster she's been obsessively wanting.

Ana's story continues, though, in a way that finally demonstrates the lasting effect of monsters on impressionable minds. Fernando finds his daughter in the morning and takes her home, where Teresa describes her condition: "She hardly sleeps. She won't speak or eat. Light bothers her. She looks our way but doesn't recognize us. It's as if we didn't exist." The doctor tries to calm her, saying, "Ana is still a very small child. She's under the effect of a powerful experience. But she'll get over it, [...] Bit by bit, she'll begin to forget." But of course rationality does not solve Gothic concerns, and when we next see Ana, it's night again. She leaves her bed and stands framed in her large windows, moonlight streaming in around her. Opening the window, she hears a voiceover of Isabel, repeating her instructions of communicating with the monster, saying, "It's me, Ana." She starts up at the moon and turns to look back defiantly at her bedroom before the film ends. The monster has clearly taught her something that she will not be forgetting, like the doctor predicted.

Ana will continue to seek out the monstrous, seeking the relief or excitement or meaning it provided to her in her time of crisis. It might have signified a sympathetic victim of war or poverty, power over life and death, an elusive family dynamic, an academic achievement, or even simple morbid curiosity. We don't know, and so the role of the monster in The Spirit of the Beehive represents not an essential monster, from Halberstam's description, limited to a single interpretation, but rather a totalizing one, whose effect is always greater than any interpretive labels or lenses. Viewed as a resistance fighter to a cruel political regime, the monstrous in this film will never fully explain Ana's fascination; nor would a viewing of monstrosity as any specific ideology or metaphor or Other. Rather, the film only cares about the effect of the monstrous—whatever that may be—on its beholder. Earlier, we saw the wonder on the faces of viewers of Whale's Frankenstein in the traveling cinema; apart from Ana and Isabel, whose responses we see in depth, it would appear that the rest of the audience found the film engaging and enjoyable. But that scene also hinges on Ana's face particularly, on which we see the importance of the rest of the film. One scholar notes, "We watch Ana's face itself becoming a screen upon which the external signs of an internal epiphany are being played out, a revelation that child will carry into the world beyond the cinema" (Darke, 153). This grounds his later observation that film, as a form, "allows you to think or to fantasize a 'beyond' of cinema, a world beyond representation which only shimmers through in certain moments of the film" (155). This might recall Beal's definition of the monster, who comes to reveal and to warn, terrifying us because it shows us dimensions to reality we do not regularly experience.

That very effect, the presence of the Gothic "aweful", will keep Ana fascinated long after the credits roll. In the same way, it keeps Victor Frankenstein and his creature struggling to constantly chase each other, even to their own deaths. It will keep Robert Walton and his sister up at nights, wondering about the horrors of the world, and possibly going out on yet another doomed expedition. And, of course, it will keep contemporary readers returning always to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and all Gothic art, to revisit that place where the veil of the world is rent, life and death hang in the balance, and mysterious beings approach us, offering fear and hope and, always, enough entertainment to last the night.
Works Cited


