Humans Versus Monsters in Frankenstein and Blade Runner: Critical Analysis

How Frankenstein and Blade Runner hint to a collapsed society in the face of a lack of compassion.

What does it really mean to be human?

With the recent outbreak of the Corona Virus, this question has absorbed me. While we have been uplifted by the large-scale efforts to combat the virus, it has also revealed the much darker side to our human nature. Here in Australia, racism and scapegoating of the Chinese community have become a sad norm. As the disease spreads like wildfire, xenophobic memes flood the internet and people of an Asian complexion are being denied services, like Uber. Are these human behaviours? While technically, yes, they are, but can we be proud of this? The truth is, we can't. The lack of care and kindness has been tearing our sense of community to the ground, causing our concept of human identity to become blurred.

Human life, as a biological and social phenomenon, is undoubtedly an impossible topic to grasp. It is a puzzle so bewildering and complex, that there is no concise definition that we can point to. Perhaps the fact that we even question humanity is what defines us as human.

But what exactly makes us who we are? What are the attributes of a human being? Is it our biological mass and intricate body systems, or rather our psychological emotions, and the ability to love and nurture?

Research from Darwin's Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals suggests that compassion is an evolved and important part of human nature, rooted in our brain and biological makeup (Keltner, 2004). That is, we are subconsciously wired as compassionate beings.

Both Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" and Scott Ridley's "Blade Runner" are famous texts that examine the complicated notion of human nature. The very apparent inhumanity of the "human" characters and the empathetic behaviours of the "monsters" draws a fine line between the two, leaving the audience wondering what it means to be an authentic human. It quickly becomes evident that the "monsters" become more human than humans, through showing compassionate behaviours. Where "monsters" are misunderstood and dismissed, solely due to their physical appearance, the texts unveil the rather ugly side of humanity. Shown by the breakdown in human relationships and prejudice faced by the "monsters", their cautionary tales warn us of a threat of a diminished society, posed by a lack of kindness. They allude that compassion is the glue that holds humanity together and is an integral part of being human, and that without it, society would crumble beneath us.

Take Dr Eldron Tyrell, from "Blade Runner", for example. Creator of the Nexus 6 replicants, Tyrell comes across as callous, with his image characterised by a confronting coldness. He shows no remorse or fatherly affection towards his creations whatsoever. "She is an experiment, nothing more", is how he refers to Rachel, a replicant who is aware of her

artificiality and has developed genuine emotions. Tyrell is so far detached that he cannot sympathise with why replicants desire a life beyond their predetermined span of four years. Roy Batty, another of Tyrell's replicants, pleads with his creator "I want more life, father". His plea of desperation is met by a chilling, "it is not something I can promise", which highlights Tyrell's lack of compassion. His apathetic personality diminishes his sense of humanity, exposing that he is just as far away from human as any of his replicants.

Much the same can be said for Victor Frankenstein. He created his monster on the basis of aesthetics and "had selected his features as beautiful". However, at the sight of the monster's grotesque appearance, Frankenstein fled and abandoned his creation. Revulsed by the monster's appearance, he neglected its needs and left it to fend for itself in the wild. Drowning in loneliness, the monster requested just one thing of Frankenstein – a female companion. But it was all in vain, as he heartlessly responded "begone! Never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness'. Towards the end of the novel, guilt overcame Frankenstein as he realised his wrongdoings, and avowed "I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer". Perhaps he had realised that by not showing compassion, he had forfeited the most important part of his humanity. But it was all to no avail, as he had already become an all too human monster.

Sadly, many parallels can be drawn between the behaviours of Tyrell and Frankenstein, and modern society. As Australians, one of our biggest social evils is passing judgement too quickly and snubbing those who are different from us. Take the mistreatment of asylum seekers in our country, for example. With many asylum seekers forcibly transferred to Nauru, they are detained in filthy conditions, denied medical care and experience a serious degradation of mental health (Amnesty International, 2016). Simply because these people are foreign and different to us, many Australians overlook this issue as they cannot sympathise with them. Through the inability to show compassion to those different from ourselves, we can become just as evil as Tyrell and Frankenstein. And by overlooking the needs of these people, our sense of humanity withers away.

The absence of compassion leading to societal breakdown is captured in "Blade Runner". Snappy remarks are thrown around between human characters all too casually throughout the film, which shows how broken down the human relationships are due to the lack of benevolence. At the beginning of the film, Harry Bryant (captain of the LAPD) prompted ex-blade runner Rick Deckard to come out of retirement to kill six replicants. He had a confrontational manner of speech and resorted to abusive threats to bully Deckard out of retirement. The damaged human relationships and disconnected society in the film warn us of the dehumanising effects of not caring for those around us. The humans in the film claim that what distinguishes themselves from replicants is empathy, but by their definition, are they even human? Is this what we want our society to become?

Frankenstein's indifference also sees his family relations deteriorate at the cause of his own hands. Despite his family's emphasis on the great pain and distress he was causing when he failed to contact them, he remained isolated. Ignoring their anxieties, Victor showed no signs of sympathy or compassion, and never reassured them of his safety. By turning a cold shoulder on his own family, Frankenstein lost such a key component to his humanity, and ultimately, destroyed himself and everything close to him. Driven by his selfish needs, he had become debased from human status.

In the case of the Nexus 6 replicants in “Blade Runner”, the combination of computerised precision is fused with human flesh – but supposedly without the development of emotions. However, as the film progresses, it becomes evident that the replicants have developed complex emotional responses. The replicants seem so inescapably human, as their creator claims “more human than human”. So, just how different are replicants to humans? Therein lies the rub.

In the film, bioengineered Roy Batty seems as human as someone could be. And in the famous “Time to die” scene at the resolution of the conflict in “Blade Runner”, his ability to show selflessness is paramount. As his 4-year lifespan comes to an end, his body goes into system shutdown. And even at the brink of his death, he shows sympathy to Deckard. He accepts his existential state and just as Deckard’s grip slips, pulls him back to safety. Passing the test for essential humanity, it seems that Batty had discovered what makes a true human – love. He genuinely valued life and understood its purpose, so much so that he preserved his own enemy’s life. For this, in his final moments, Batty was raised to human status and did good for humanity, despite his mistreatment by society.

[image: Image result for frankenstein monster]In “Frankenstein”, the monster’s observation of the De Lacey family teaches him the concept of compassion. Initially, he naively steals from the family for his survival. However, he learns that the family is poor, and shares, “I had been accustomed to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained”. Sympathising with the family’s suffering, the monster changes from a thief to a giver and begins to aid the family. At night, he secretly hauls firewood to their cottage and clears the path of snow that obstructs their house. The monster’s sympathetic nature shows that he has developed into a complex and compassionate human-like being, just with the unfortunate appearance of a monster.

We soon learn that the monster’s admirable compassion was not always appreciated by humans. While travelling to Geneva, the monster honourably rescues a young girl who had slipped into a river and was drowning. Despite his rescue, the man who accompanied the girl shot him, as he assumed he was attacking her. It was not quite the “thank you” that he deserved. The monster’s kindness is captured in his good deed, but was sadly overlooked because of his unsightly appearance. And at this point, the line that separates humans from monsters is completely blurred.

Societies that lack compassion are dangerous. However its representation in texts like “Frankenstein” and “Blade Runner” is necessary, to force us to recognise how we too could be adopting apathetic tendencies and destroying our society. The monster and replicants offered so much kindness, yet were shunned because of their differences. Sadly, we see this too in Australia, where our neglect of people with differences separates us as a society. As a result, we lose touch with the essence of humanity, devaluing us as humans. Is this acceptable? Where is our society headed?

Perhaps the most important thing to take away from “Frankenstein” and “Blade Runner” is our ability to reflect – are we being our best selves? Can we be proud of the humans we are becoming? With the crushing pressure we face in today’s society, it is hard to know what makes us who we are – what makes us human. Both texts remind us that humanity is multifaceted and complex, and that being a human is far more than just the presence of the biological. By showing that no matter how grotesque or ‘inhuman’ one may be, the ability to

show compassion will always raise them to human status, we are exposed to the real meaning of life - to show compassion. The texts warn that when we judge people by perception, rather than showing compassion, we are nothing more than the “monsters” we judge, and we are devalued as humans. They allude that society is bound to collapse if we fail to show kindness, which is a germane part of our humanity. So, can we learn from the monsters, who inevitably become more human than their human counterparts? It is time to reconsider what makes a “monster” and to question ourselves before we do others.

Because sometimes the real monsters are not the repulsive beasts before us, but the one looking back in the mirror.

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