

## Excerpt from “The Promethean Promise of *Frankenstein’s Legacy*”

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In many ways, *Jurassic Park* [novel by Michael Crichton and film adaptation by Steven Spielberg] might be viewed as the dominant 21st century iteration of *Frankenstein*. For example, while there may be little in common between Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* at first glance, there are central aspects that are extraordinarily similar between the two. *Jurassic Park*, broadly, is about the cunning recreation and genetic manipulation of extinct animals in the modern world and subsequent attempts to control them. Set alongside a discussion of why this plan must inevitably fail, regardless of the precautions taken, it is a cautionary tale of the limits of man’s ambition and understanding of nature (particularly when commercializing it), a critique of his delusions of control and supremacy, the fallibility of his assumptions as well as false narratives of progress. *Frankenstein*, similarly, is about a young scientist’s ambition to create life, and the resultant morality tale explores how his attitude towards his experiment backfires on him.



Both stories center on the idea of achieving the impossible: re-creating life. In *Frankenstein*, Dr. Victor Frankenstein assembles his Creature as a pastiche of dead bodies, garnered from charnal houses, re-animating him with the help of lightning; In *Jurassic Park*, John Hammond and his team, including head geneticist Henry Wu, devise an ingenious method of cloning extinct dinosaurs: recovering their preserved DNA from mosquitoes frozen in amber and filling in the genetic code with extant amphibious strands.

In both stories, something monstrous is created by artificial means; and in the creation, and resultant fall-out, both texts ask if it is the created or creator which is the more dangerous and aberrant. Both feature protagonists who disregard the ethics of their scientific experiments, and a common theme is the dangers and hubris of science without conscience (as the *Jurassic Park* screenplay elegantly puts its central critique: “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could they didn’t stop to think if they should”).

Indeed, both tales reflect concerns of the day and are known for figuring science as a powerful and misused tool and playing out the devastating effects of reaching into the unknown, both critical of ambitious science and scientific curiosity without moral limits. Both *Frankenstein* and *Jurassic Park* were written at times of great technological shifts: Shelley was caught up in the Age of Enlightenment, when a burst of new scientific ideas and systems were troubling some who thought Rationalism was taking humans and the idea of ‘progress’ further away from their connection with what was truly important, like nature, God, and their own intuition and emotions. Similarly, *Jurassic Park* was written at the cusp of the internet boom and an increasing paranoia about a world too dependent on technology, as well as a rapid expansion of genetic engineering and debates about cloning and stem-cell use—Crichton even prefaces his novel with an essay charting recent scientific breakthroughs in biotechnology and pointing out, in the spirit of Shelley, potential problems. Both share the old adage that in science, as the saying goes, what is not strictly prohibited is, in principle, possible. *Jurassic Park’s* vision of hubristic scientists

determined to shape the future, damn the consequences, recalls the physicists of the Manhattan Project: when they set off the Trinity test in Alamogordo, N.M., in 1945; they were not sure that the atomic bomb would not ignite the planet's entire atmosphere, consuming Earth in a world-ending holocaust. They did it anyway. *Jurassic Park's* cataclysmic ending, in a fiery holocaust as the island preserve is bombed to smithereens, as well as Frankenstein's, in the Creature's heart-breaking promise of consigning himself to his own funeral pyre, both recall this imagery. Indeed, Crichton sees in "*Jurassic Park*" a reflection of science's delusion of control, commenting in interviews about his novel's adaptation for the silver screen: "Biotechnology and genetic engineering are very powerful...The film suggests that [science's] control of nature is elusive. And just as war is too important to leave to the generals, science is too important to leave to scientists. Everyone needs to be attentive" ("Here Come the DNAsaurs").

Of course, what was supposed to be breakthrough in science that would mean taming the powers of life and death turns out to be a perversion in *Frankenstein*, a pale and grotesque imitation of what is truly human, much as the titular doctor's obsessive pursuit of his breakthrough turns him into a similarly grotesque figure. Similarly, man's attempt to control nature using technology goes horribly awry in *Jurassic Park*, and even man's own technology, such as the park's massive computer system that controls everything, the battery-charged missiles, even the locks on the doors, fail and put many people in harm's way.

Indeed, in terms of making readers more critically aware, both novels are deliberately framed as cautionary tales. Structurally, both begin with frame stories that make clear the tragic trajectory of the adventure. In plot, both Victor Frankenstein and John Hammond (and his biologists and engineers, and even his lawyers and PR and marketing specialists) make a futile try at harnessing nature's power with man-made technology. In both novels, man and nature are shown in violent conflict. In Dr. Malcolm's memorable words, encapsulating both *Jurassic Park's* central message and recalling the age of the Romantics, "What's so great about discovery? It is a violent, penetrative act that scars what it explores. What you call discovery, I call the rape of the natural world." Ultimately, nature overpowers man, as both Crichton and Shelley's novels argue that man should not try to play god, for the power of nature is too wide and unfathomable to be understood by man, let alone predicted or controlled.

Mary Shelley emphasizes nature's power in that Victor, try as hard as he may to control nature and manipulate it to his abilities and desires, simply does not have the capability or temperament or empathy or understanding to play God. In *Jurassic Park*, this same theme is reflected mostly through Dr. Malcolm, a rough analogue of Crichton's critical voice in the novel, the "chaotician," whose mathematically-informed theories argue that one cannot predict nature, no matter how much science one has. This is why the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* start to breed even though the biologist's only engineered females: nature cannot be controlled or delineated by man. Indeed, to further underscore this essential theme, both texts make heavy Romantic use of storms and setting (as, also, does Spielberg) to signal the power of nature and man's lack of control. Similarly, *Frankenstein* and *Jurassic Park* are both essentially criticisms of Rationalist thought and explore how man's intellect is fallible. Pushing the boundaries of morality with technology causes Victor's alienation from his friends and family; likewise, science and ambition has done the same to John Hammond, who risks the lives of his own grandchildren. This is also likely why our hero in *Jurassic Park*, the paleontologist Dr. Grant, notably hates computers. As both works argue, science can alienate man from himself and his world; it is a distracting and dangerous tool interposed between himself and nature, a divide from which no good can come.